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COMMONWEALTH STATUS FOR WALES

**GWYNFOR
EVANS**



1/- (post free)

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TOWARDS COMMONWEALTH STATUS

FOR two generations and more the tendency to centralism has been, until the last few years, the dominant motif in politics, in Communist countries and Western democracies alike. Quite suddenly it has lost completely its place. In a few years there has been a sea-change whose effects are felt in many states of differing hues.

END OF AN IDEA

Even the Socialist whose socialism was, by definition, centralised state control of the means of production, distribution and exchange, are now in many countries decentralists and regionalists. Decentralisation is the order of the day. As Professor Leopold Kohr has pointed out, a more critical attitude to the state is the touchstone of the new radicalism. Rigid centralism in Russia as in the U.S.A., in France as in Yugoslavia, is an out-moded creed.

It would be hard to exaggerate the importance for Wales of this fundamental change. Britain, of which Wales is a part, is the most highly centralised country outside the Communist bloc and has the biggest population in the world under one unitary government. As long as its political parties remained centralist in thought any decentralisation of responsibility to Wales was taboo. Those who pleaded for a decentralist, pluralist society were voices in the wilderness.

TREND TOWARDS DEVOLUTION

Now, almost overnight, they find their language spoken by the major parties, with far-reaching effect on the prospects of Welsh self-government. Its reasonableness, so long obscured under the long reign of centralism, is generally acknowledged.

That is why today a Parliament for Wales is increasingly

regarded as desirable. It is seen, quite properly, as a rational measure of decentralisation.

The swing to decentralisation quickly extended far beyond the theorists. It has carried with it the party leaders, who have initiated policies involving some administrative devolution. This is the essence of the regional policies supported in principle by all parties, which in Wales have led, via the Conservatives' Minister for Welsh Affairs and planning section in the Welsh Office, to Labour's Secretary of State, Planning Board and advisory Economic Council.

Up to now administrative powers alone have been decentralised, leaving executive power intact in Whitehall. This is not a position that can be held for long. Its beneficial effect on the situation it is designed to help will be slight. The arguments for legislative decentralisation will be found stronger, if they are sympathetically studied, than those for decentralised administration. In Wales they are likely to be found irresistible, though no doubt a fierce rearguard action will be fought by the most conservative elements.

However small the practical effects of the measures recently taken, their significance for the future is very great. For the first time Wales has been recognised as both a political and economic entity, thus laying the basis for parliamentary self-government.

The change goes back no further than the last years of the Conservatives' tenure of office, when regional policies were initiated. Mr. Edward Heath, who had responsibility for them, recognised that Scotland and Wales were special cases and not necessarily to be confined to the kind of pattern thought best for the English regions.

A PRACTICAL ISSUE

This need not be laboured, for obviously the status of countries which are the homelands of nations will differ from the new English economic regions, which have little or no social cohesion. Yet there is mounting pressure, even in those regions, for regional councils with executive power, without which a policy of regionalism can have little value.

Legislative decentralisation involves the establishment of parliaments for Wales and Scotland. All thinking about the future order in these islands must include this. For the first time since Owain Glyndwr's years of success in the early 15th century, a parliament for Wales is an issue of practical politics. The question now is what kind of status and powers it should enjoy.

Our conclusion will be helped by considering the objections levelled at self-government in the recent past.

OBJECTIONS

There have been four main objections, apart from a pervasive fear that the Welsh are too inexperienced or are incapable of governing themselves.

First, it was said that Wales was too small to be self-governing. Few feel this to be a valid point any longer. The whole decentralist trend is based on a new scepticism of the value of hugeness, which used to be uncritically accepted as a good thing, and on a new appreciation of small units of government.

In the present climate of opinion the small size of Wales can be seen as a great advantage from the standpoint of good democratic government.

Quite apart from this tendency inside unitary states, one's judgment is affected by the fact that there are in the United Nations no fewer than 28 member-states which are smaller than Wales. Among them, some of the best governed countries in the world testify to the advantages of smaller entities of government.

In small states the problems are comparatively small; governments can give them more time and go into them in more detail. Denmark and Norway are comparable with Wales in size, but Danish and Norwegian problems get incomparably more attention from government than do Welsh problems; for the government of Wales is in Whitehall, which is preoccupied and almost overwhelmed by other matters to which it gives priority. Nor can the advice of a few ministers or advisory councils which have no executive authority do anything but ameliorate the position a little.

Secondly, it was said that Wales could not defend herself in war. Since the advent of rocket-borne nuclear missiles, this argument has lost whatever strength it may have had. Probably no country, and certainly no European country, can hope successfully, with its own strength alone, to protect its people against these new weapons. The security of all countries, large and small alike, depends on the collective prevention of war, which is a matter for loyal international co-operation. There is, therefore, little relevance to this point in our present situation.

TOO POOR ?

The main economic argument rested on the alleged poverty of Wales. This was no less effective for being an uncritical assumption which was never objectively examined by those who used it. Detailed comparisons made by the late Dr. D. J. Davies between the natural resources of Wales and those of highly prosperous countries of comparable size had long made it suspect.

For example, Switzerland, Norway and Denmark are three of the most successful countries in the world; yet they have no coal resources, and next to no heavy basic industries such as the steel and tinplate industries of Wales. Despite their comparative poverty in resources, each has developed an impressive number of light and secondary industries. Switzerland, contrary to the popular impression, is the world's most highly industrialised country, though its industries are, fortunately for those who work in them, very small compared with ours, and are widely distributed through a country which has, like Norway, far greater geographical difficulties to contend with than we have.

Reporting on a recent business visit to Switzerland, Douglas Drysdale, a Scottish engineer, said that one company director told him that their policy—typical in that country—was always to bring work to the people rather than move the people to the work. Instead of having one large factory, his company had four smaller factories, each in a different village.

WORK FOR ALL

Similarly, in his recent volume on Norway, whose production has risen 44 per cent. during the last 10 years, Alun R. Edwards writes of the success of the Government's policy in securing the wide distribution of industry, which has prevented rural depopulation.

Norwegians who leave their small hill farms can find work in their nearest village or small town. In consequence, not one Norway's 18 counties has lost population (in Wales, nine out of 13 have done so). Since 1920, Norway's population has increased, without the help of immigration, by 39 per cent. The population of Wales fell by 15,000 between 1921 and 1961, according to census figures, despite a heavy influx.

This policy of balanced development in countries so much poorer than Wales in natural resources is greatly assisted by their heavy investment in roads and railways. Norwegian road-engineering is world-famous, and there is an efficient transport board which has organised an integrated transport system for road, rail and water. Switzerland, too, has magnificent roads and has electrified the whole of its railway network.

ECONOMIC FAILURE IN WALES

In comparison with these vigorous countries, most of Wales, despite her superior wealth and easier terrain, is a stagnant backwater. A great Welsh central road has been demanded for 40 years, but not built. There is not a mile of motor road in the land and not a mile is to be built this year. The Welsh railway network, thanks to its lucrative goods traffic, makes a big profit, but the part of the system which loses money is ruthlessly destroyed. This sabotage of an essential public service is possible only because of the total lack of Welsh control.

The great water resources of Mid-Wales, which could make it a flourishing area, are unscrupulously exploited by those who have power without any substantial return to Wales. Consequently when Government policy forces small Welsh farmers out of their holdings there is no alternative employment for them near their former homes.

The explanation for the unhappy state of Wales is not lack of wealth, with which the country is richly endowed, but total lack of national responsibility. The great wealth of the country is indicated by its gross national product which, despite the fact that most of Wales is underdeveloped, now approximates to £1,100,000,000: while the taxes paid last year were about £380,000,000. The magnitude of both these figures is roughly twice their Irish equivalent.

WALES PAYS

Professor Edward Nevin has resumed his study of the Welsh economy, so that when his present work is completed we will again know the position with some exactitude. It was a tribute to the wealth of Wales that Dr. Nevin's two volumes of statistics for the years 1948-56 showed that Wales was financially self-supporting although there had been no balanced development. Welsh tax revenue paid entirely for all Government expenditure in and for Wales, including the amount spent on Wales on defence and national debt. If a Welsh government took over the administration of Wales it could maintain the current standards of government services even if its defence costs were on the present scale.

Financially, therefore, the Welsh people are in a position to consider any constitutional status, secure in the knowledge that their standards of government services can at least be maintained. It would not be too much to expect a Welsh government, able to give its whole time to Welsh affairs, to create conditions favourable to the fuller development of the country's moral and economic resources, thus opening a prospect of higher standards. Furthermore, a Welsh government, in developing the country's economic potential, would naturally have regard for its national character and identity.

NOT AN ENTITY ?

The fourth of the arguments against self-government countered the evidence of Welsh economic strength by contending that Wales could not be organised as an economic entity.

Whitehall itself has given the death-blow to this argument. Conservative and Labour Governments in succession have now recognised Wales as an entity for the purposes of economic planning.

This is exactly what a Welsh Government would do. It would plan the development of Wales as an entity, but it would do so with infinitely greater vigour and power. In its extreme form, this now-discredited argument maintained that the "separation" of Wales from England would plunge her people "into the Dead Sea of dire poverty." These words were used by Mr. Henry Brooke in his famous comparison between the Welsh people and the Gadarene swine.

Perhaps the most extraordinary thing in the history of this argument is that it has been used with equal assiduity against every possible kind of self-government: not only against absolute sovereign independence and Commonwealth status, but equally against federal status and devolutionary proposals. The fact is that no kind of self-government involves the kind of economic separation from England which some protagonists of the status quo have so enthusiastically pictured. Even if Wales had the status of Eire, an independent country outside the Commonwealth (to enter which British citizens require no passport), a common market arrangement with England would be negotiated.

NO TARIFFS

Before long there will be no tariff or passport between France and Germany. At a time when the economies of these ancient enemies can become as interdependent as this it is surely ridiculous to imagine tariff walls between England and Wales, whatever the constitutional status of Wales. The passage of people, goods and money between the two countries would be as free as it is today.

Years before the development of the European Common Market the experience of Luxembourg (pop. 320,000) suggested that far too much was made of the alleged evils of "separation" where there was a will to co-operate. The borders of this very small but flourishing country are only about 60 miles from Bonn and Coblenz in Germany, 40 miles

from Liege in Belgium and 30 miles from Metz in France. The short distance between Luxembourg and these big centres of population and industry strongly suggests that the proximity of Wales to Bristol, Birmingham and Liverpool could provide a great economic advantage to her if she had, as Luxembourg has, her own national administration.

THE PATTERN IN BRITAIN

If a status of complete independence, which no party has proposed, does not entail economic separation, obviously the argument can have no relevance to all the devolutionary or federal proposals.

Northern Ireland is an example of devolution. Constitutionally and economically the Six Counties are a part of the U.K. They send M.P.s to Westminster, where they are free to speak and vote on all issues—at least until Mr. Wilson may decide on a different arrangement. Although one has to cross the sea to get to this autonomous province, there are neither passports nor tariffs. This is also true of the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands, which enjoy a more extensive measure of self-government than Northern Ireland.

FEDERALISM

In the United States, each state has its government. Each is sovereign within the field allotted to it by the Constitution, and conflicts between states or between them and Washington are adjudicated by the Supreme Court, which fulfils such a vital function in a federal state. One can travel in a long journey through a score of states, each of which has extensive powers, without being conscious of any economic barriers. The existence of 50 state governments creates no economic separation.

This type of government is found in as small a country as Switzerland, which Lord Bryce nominated the finest democracy in the world. Its population has grown by one-and-a-half millions since 1921 but is still no greater than Scotland's. Yet there are 22 Swiss governments apart from the central

government at Berne. Each canton, however small its population, has a sovereign parliament and government, though none has a separate national identity. There is, of course, some discontinuity of economic relations at their borders, but it is so slight that one can travel through the country without ever being conscious of it.

AN ECONOMIC NECESSITY

The economic advantage of this extreme form of decentralism can be judged from the fact that, per head of the population, the Swiss have the greatest wealth in the world outside the United States. If Wales had canton status, the economic relationship between England and Wales would be comparable with the relationship between the Swiss cantons.

Surprised by this absence of economic separation, people sometimes ask, "What, then, is the point of having a government?" The answer is "Ask those who live in the Swiss cantons or the American states, or the French and Germans, between whom there is a common market.

They would all reply that a government is for them an economic and social necessity. My contention is that a Welsh government is an economic and social necessity for Wales.

THE INVASION OF WALES

Up to now I have concentrated on the economic aspect of self-government in order to make the point that for Wales, as for every nation, the political institutions of nationhood are an economic as well as a social necessity. When they become aware of this the Welsh people are unlikely to tolerate for long their present lack of status.

The need for a Welsh government is given new urgency by the drive amongst neighbouring English conurbations to absorb parts of Wales.

Professor R. C. Trees, chairman of the newly-appointed South-West Economic Planning Council, expressed the hope of the Bristol area on April 14, 1965, when the names of his council members were announced: "South Wales and Bristol," he said, "are going to be one area."

In the North, the proposed barrage over the Dee estuary is designed to assist the extension of Liverpool into Flintshire. Discussing the proposed new town in Mid-Wales, Mr. James Griffiths said in a recent meeting of the Welsh Grand Committee, "Now great conurbations would have to move out. In the Midlands they would have to move West, and this was where the hope for the future lay as far as Wales is concerned."

Each of these three areas has more power, further enhanced by the new regionalism, and more resources than the parts of Wales they hope to assimilate. Only a powerful administration on Welsh soil can withstand their pressures and turn them to good account. Their ambitions challenge Wales with the choice between assimilation and national survival.

But we must keep our eyes steadily on the truth that economic organisation should be subordinated to social purpose. Economic development is no more an end in itself in Wales than anywhere else. Its purpose is to create conditions for a fuller life for individual persons who are members of a national community. The stronger the traditional life of the nation, the more fully will they realise their possibilities.

STATE MUST SERVE NATION

Therefore, both the state and the economy must serve the nation. If the nation is not stronger as a result of the state's activity, then the state has failed to fulfil its function. It needs no keen perception to see that a Welsh state is urgently needed to create conditions favourable to the full development of the nation's traditional life.

One reason why a Welsh government would make a far better job of governing Wales is that it would involve the Welsh people in the work. A parliament for Wales would harness the immense energy which can be generated by a nation.

The importance of this moral factor in national affairs can hardly be exaggerated, as the astonishing success of Israel illustrates. Looked at objectively, making Israel a viable state was at the outset a sheer impossibility, as many declared it to be. These failed to take the great imponderables into account. Even a region within a nation can accomplish more when its people are communally involved.

How much more true is this of a nation, whose people share a deep sense of community which may have persisted for many centuries. It is not a baseless hope, therefore, that given self-government the Welsh people could transform their situation in a short time.

No part of the case for a Parliament is more important than this. The lethargy and malaise prevalent in Wales today are due to frustration. Because there is no sense of national purpose there is no sense of direction. Europeans have thought they detected amongst our great neighbours what they called "the English malaise," and this was attributed to their reduced position in the world. "England has lost an Empire," said Mr. Acheson, "without finding a role." Do the Welsh people feel that their submerged country has a role in the world?

FROM TORPOR TO VIGOUR

If they have no sense of purpose it is because they have no power of action as a nation. The state is the machinery through which a nation acts communally. Wales has no state. I would gladly wager everything I have that if our resourceful people were endowed with the power of action and initiative, they would quickly throw off their torpor and a new vigour would run through their intellectual, artistic and cultural life as well as their social and economic order. This is a phenomenon which commonly follows the achievement of national freedom.

The little Baltic countries, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, had enjoyed only 20 years' freedom in their whole history before they were seized and liquidated at the beginning of the last war by Russia. Yet Hampden Jackson could write that during these 20 short years "on the shores of the Baltic were accomplished some of the greatest social experiments of our generation." Is there a Welshman with soul so dead that he would acquiesce in the denial of equal opportunity to his own people?

A FOCAL POINT

Another deficiency which has diminished Welsh life is the lack of a centre around which her energies can revolve. Cardiff, it is true, has been given capital status, but until it is the seat

of a Welsh legislature (which would bring the city immense economic and social benefit) that title has little content. Normally a government provides this unity by the fact of its existence. There are few countries in the world whose national cohesion would persist if their government disappeared. Wales is not exceptional. A parliament, whose activities would be closely followed from day to day, could not fail to induce a richer sense of unity.

This much would be done, in varying measures, by the type of devolutionary legislature found in Northern Ireland or by the federal type which is so prolific in Switzerland and elsewhere. Certainly, the establishment of either type here would be a great advance which would notably improve the Welsh situation.

If, however, one postulates that full nationhood should be our aim for Wales, these are not the best solutions; and if one believes that the internationally-minded Welsh people have a duty to play a part in international affairs, one has to face the fact that neither devolutionary nor federal status permits them to do so.

I think these are sufficient reasons for rejecting both types, at least as the final solution.

FULL FREEDOM

The Ulster government's powers, even in domestic affairs, are very limited. This is not to deny their value. For instance, it collects only about one-tenth of its total revenue. Yet it was possible to raise industrial production in Northern Ireland by over 50 per cent. between 1952 and 1962, compared with 37 per cent. in the U.K. as a whole. The Stormont government has now embarked on a programme of building hundreds of miles of motor-roads, and this in a country half the size of Wales.

On a first approach to this problem one would naturally assume that to grant a limited status is a simple matter, far easier than establishing an independent or Commonwealth state. However, one meets a surprising paradox. In the circumstances of these islands the more limited type of legislature would in practice cause complex difficulties which do not arise with Commonwealth status, or even with complete indepen-

dence outside the Commonwealth. The more ambitious solutions prove to be far the simpler to execute in practice.

UNPRACTICAL

When a devolutionary parliament was established in Northern Ireland it was possible, because it was so small and alone in its status, to allow Northern Irish representatives to attend the Westminster Parliament and to vote there on all issues. Nevertheless, this creates a serious difficulty for the present British Government.

If Wales and Scotland also had this type of Parliament, it would not be politically possible to allow the Welsh and Scots the same representation and rights at Westminster. In such circumstances England could find herself controlled by the Celtic countries in whose domestic affairs the English people would have no voice. Yet as long as Westminster continued to govern Scotland and Wales, Welsh and Scottish representation there would be necessary.

Faced with this dilemma some have suggested that work at Westminster could be divided into two categories, English domestic affairs, on which the Celtic representatives would neither speak nor vote, and "imperial" affairs or those reserved for decision by the representatives of the four countries sitting together. But this division has been found to be impracticable. It was precisely on this point that the Speaker's Conference broke down in 1920.

FEDERALISM NO ANSWER

One is driven, then, to consider the federal pattern, which not only makes a clearcut division between matters in which the state governments have sovereign powers and those reserved to the central government, but would also establish a separate parliament for England as well.

Constitutionally this is a more practicable solution than the devolutionary one. It is the political difficulties which are very great in the British Isles: though it is right to emphasise that they are mainly English difficulties. They arise from the

extreme discrepancy in the size of the units involved. England is so much bigger than the others combined. Whereas the combined population of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland is only nine million, England's is 43 million.

Federalism, in the form it has taken throughout the world, would require the establishment in London of a federal parliament common to the 52 million people of the four countries for matters such as defence, foreign policy, over-all economic planning, post, customs and excise. But there would also be in London another parliament for the 43 million people of England, complete with separate M.P.s, separate elections, separate taxes and a separate civil service.

The flexible, unwritten constitution of England, so long its glory, would have to be totally scrapped in favour of a rigid, written constitution, with a powerful Supreme Court to interpret it. This upheaval would be no hardship to the Welsh and Scots, who would gain greatly from it; but will the English people so violently change their traditional pattern of life for the benefit of the small nations to the north and west which have for centuries been absorbed in the English state?

COMMONWEALTH STATUS

These considerations explain the paradox that Commonwealth status for Wales and Scotland is the simpler solution as well as the more appropriate. Economic complexities which might have arisen in the past are now avoided by the device of the common market. No two Commonwealth countries have precisely the same relationship with Britain, and if Wales and Scotland had this status they would naturally have a tighter relationship with England than she has with far distant members of the Commonwealth.

Geographical proximity governs this, just as it explains why Ireland's relationship with Britain is so close, although Ireland is outside the Commonwealth. In a recent issue of the *Irish Leader* one reads this: "Economically and financially we sink or swim with Britain. It is not only that we have their currency, though we could make some alterations in the unchecked flow. It is not only that they are our best customer and we are their eighth best in the world list. It is that we have invested in Britain one million Irish lives."

COMMON MARKET

The point here is not that such arrangements as a common currency are necessarily desirable but rather that they are possible with a country outside the Commonwealth and that the movement of people between them is unimpeded, and even encouraged, by a common citizenship.

This close relationship between neighbouring countries is not uncommon. In Europe the Scandinavian countries illustrate it, and the countries of the Common Market are expected to develop a common political framework. If the countries of these islands co-operated closely on a basis of equality, which is what Commonwealth status involves, in addition to a common market they would wish to share standing ministerial conferences to devise and control common commercial and fiscal policies among others.

The common market device has transformed the prospect for such nations as those of Britain by enabling them to develop their national character and institutions while sharing the advantage of large markets. In the new situation it would not be unrealistic to expect Ireland to return to active membership of the British society of nations, which would not be a federation but a confederation enjoying the advantage of friendly emulation.

GIVES BETTER BALANCE

Once the possibilities of the common market idea between associated states are grasped the rest follows logically. Whereas the political integration of Wales in England has led to a wretchedly unbalanced economy and a debilitated society, a government in Wales would create the climate for diversification and balanced development.

Before Liechtenstein united in a common market with Switzerland, says Professor Kohr, its economy was wholly agricultural. Since entering the customs union "the combination of a vigorous small-state government relying on the facilities of a large market has produced the most extraordinary industrial development, turning an unbalanced into a balanced economy in less than 20 years.

It now has a highly developed machine, chemical, optical, textile, ceramic, steel-tool, dental equipment industry, exporting far beyond the limits of the customs union and raising the local standard of living to a previously unknown level.

HOPE FOR FUTURE

The bonds uniting members of the Commonwealth, including the Crown, are voluntarily accepted, so that each is fully free. According to Balfour's 1926 definition, they are "a community of free and equal nations in no way subordinate one to the other in any aspect of their internal or external affairs but are united by a common allegiance.

The establishment of this status for Wales and Scotland would avoid any complex constitutional changes in England, which would carry on as she does now, with the difference that the fringe provinces in the North and West would be equal partners with her in a closely-knit international community. Two bright new stars would have swum into the firmament of free nations.

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