

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Monday 13th December 1976

[Extract from the Official Report]

SELF-GOVERNMENT FOR WALES

Speech by MR. GWYNFOR EVANS, MP.

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Mr. Gwynfor Evans (Carmarthen): The Bill would not be before the House but for the growth of Scottish and Welsh national consciousness. I hope that hon. Members realise that they are dealing with two nations, two of the oldest in Europe.

About three and a half centuries ago, in a play performed before the Council of Wales, John Milton wrote of Wales that she was

"an ancient nation, proud in arms".

At that time, the magnificent literature of Wales had an unbroken history of a thousand years. Welsh was the language of government and the law in Wales when French was the language of government and the law here. The House is dealing not with two regions, two parts of the country, two colonies, but with two old national communities.

Mr. Leo Abse (Pontypool): As half the people in industrial South Wales are descended from Englishmen and Irishmen who came there in the nineteenth century, by what presumption does the hon. Gentleman state that those people, English-speaking Welshmen as they describe themselves now, fall into the medieval category that he is now describing, so insulting more than half the people of Wales?

Mr. Evans: I hope that the House will agree that nationhood is not a medieval category but a factor that is very much alive and very important in the world today. The power of nationalism is probably the strongest moral power in the world.

Mr. Percy Grieve (Solihull): I take the hon. Gentleman's point that the Scottish and Welsh peoples are ancient peoples with

roots deep in history, but does he not appreciate that over the centuries we have created a British people, in which the blood and names of all the British races run together? We have achieved greatness as the British people and it is for the British people that many of us are here to speak.

Mr. Evans: What has been created is a British State. Whenever hon. Members speak of the nation, they mean the State. They confuse nation and State. There is not just one nation on this island; there are at least three, and Wales is one of them. Do hon. Members acknowledge Wales and Scotland to be nations? If they do, do they acknowledge that Wales and Scotland have a right to live as nations and to act as nations? That is behind our policies as national parties in both countries.

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): The hon. Gentleman has often spoken about the identification of nation and State. Will he confirm his view of the future of Wales as a self-contained State, with all the panoply of a State, including separate armed services?

Mr. Evans: I shall come later to my idea of what Wales should be.

In the two national parties we have something that does not exist in the regions of England. Those national parties are strong. In recent years the Scottish National Party has been making headway more quickly than we have. But for the leap forward in Scotland, Welsh nationhood and Welsh nationalism, as expressed through Plaid Cymru, would be seen as an important European phenomenon.

The Establishment parties had thought, as many of their members still do, that Welsh nationalism would fade

away. They must face the fact that once nationalism is as deeply rooted as it is now in Wales and Scotland it will not go away.

Mr. Ioan Evans (Aberdare) rose—

Mr. Gwynfor Evans: I have given way three times. My speech will be far too long if I keep giving way.

As the people of Wales increase in self-confidence and their sense of loyalty to their nation, in their capacity to accept responsibility, so will Welsh nationalism grow until it becomes irresistible. That is the history of nationalism, and the House must face it. No one can afford to ignore the dynamic in the power of nationalism, least of all those who do not want to repeat the mistake made in Ireland at the end of the last century.

For a generation, it was a part of the Labour Party's policy that Scotland and Wales should be self-governing nations. The policy was Home Rule all round. It was affirmed and reaffirmed more than once after Ireland had achieved self-government. Labour leaders, from Keir Hardie down to the last generation, spoke strongly in favour of a considerable measure of Welsh self-government. Some of them would have gone further than we as nationalists would do. Arthur Henderson, the most able Secretary the Labour Party had, said that if Wales had her own Government she could be a Utopia among the nations. We may think that to be exaggerated, but at least he had a sympathetic understanding of the possibilities of Wales. That is what most hon. Members lack.

In those days, Labour did not propose to make a distinction between Wales and Scotland in the matter of status. It did not propose to give Scotland a higher status than Wales. It saw both nations as having the same rights and needs. There is no justification for denying the Welsh Assembly the legislative powers to be given to the Scottish Assembly. The justification which is attempted and repeated *ad nauseam* is that Scotland has a separate legal system. That is a notable fact of life in Scotland, and the Scots are rightly proud of their legal system. But the power to legislate is the power to make

2 decisions, to make policy decisions about, for example, housing. One house in every seven in Wales has been condemned as unfit for human habitation.

We say that we should have the right to decide such matters for ourselves, through our own legislature. Other matters such as health, transport, education, local government and roads do not require a separate legal system for the ability to legislate, as we see in any federal country. In Switzerland, for example, there are 25 canton Governments. Three of the cantons are divided into two. Each canton Government has far more legislative power than the Government now propose to give Scotland. That fact should be noted. Yet there is one common legal system in those cantons. It is dishonest to keep repeating the argument about the legal system as justification for denying the Welsh Assembly legislative power.

Sir Raymond Gower (Barry): Would the hon. Gentleman and his party be content with the sort of status within the United Kingdom that the separate cantons of Switzerland enjoy today in Switzerland?

Mr. Evans: I think that the hon. Gentleman knows what the policy of Plaid Cymru is. It is one of full national status for Wales. We have never tried to hide that.

In the kind of thing that the Government are trying to do, it is not necessary to have a separate legal system in order to have the power to legislate. When the Labour Party espoused the policy of Home Rule all around, it was a decentralist party. However, it succumbed to the attractions of centralism and its policy for the smaller nations of this island went the way of Guild Socialism.

It cannot be sincerely denied that if Wales had had in the last 50 years what the Labour Party and the Liberals were proposing in those days, the history of Wales during the last 50 years would have been happier and better. We could have avoided much of the social disruption and suffering that we have seen during that period.

It is to the credit of the Labour Party in Wales that it recovered, some 10 or

more years ago, a part of this programme —10 years before the Labour Party was in favour of any measure of self-government or self-control for Scotland, or of any elected Assembly there. The Welsh Labour Party pioneered in that way, and the Liberals, the Communists and Plaid Cymru were in favour of a Parliament. Since then, the TUC of Wales and the strongest unions in Wales have come out in favour of a Parliament with legislative power. That is a part of the background of the Bill. The Bill follows broadly the line advocated by the Welsh Regional Council of Labour for all these years.

A debate on this measure is not a debate for full self-government or against that. It is a debate on centralism or decentralism. That is the heart of the debate. It is a debate that is taking place in many countries, as we have heard—in France and Spain. Spain has not been mentioned, but the debate is taking place there very strongly. France and Spain are similar to Britain in being unitary centralist States. It is profitable to compare those centralist States with decentralist States, such as, for instance, Western Germany and Switzerland.

Western Germany is certainly the most prosperous of the countries of the EEC. Those eminent people who are in the best position to know say that much of Western Germany's prosperity can be attributed to the fact that it has been decentralised. England has much to learn from the West German experience. When power is decentralised, great advantage is gained from the creation of human scale structures in a country. They are structures that can enlist the energies of the people in tackling their problems. The problems may be just as grave, but as the structure is smaller the problems are, therefore, smaller in scale.

I do not think that Scotland and Wales have a greater advantage than their size from the standpoint of good government. They are both comparatively small countries in size, and they have a cohesion and a potential energy which their nationhood gives them. I find it extraordinary that so many people think that Scotland and Wales are best governed as peripheral regions in a huge unitary centralist structure, especially when the advantages of decentralisation are to be seen in West

3 Germany and the advantages of small size are to be seen in the five Scandinavian States, whose total combined population is only half that of England.

We have heard about the multinationals, and one sees how a very small country can control the multinationals in the recent history of Norway, whose control of the multinational oil companies has been much firmer than the control of a huge State such as Britain.

Equally obvious are the advantages of decentralisation and human scale structures from the standpoint of democracy. Decentralisation is the condition of a truly participating democracy. The power of the people in Britain is small in comparison with the power of bureaucracy because in centralist States the power almost inevitably gets into the hands of the bureaucrat. What we have here is a country whose government has a bureaucratic character. Lord Hailsham was quite right when he said the other day that the powers of government are now largely in the hands of the government machine.

That is what the centralists seem to want for Wales—more power for the bureaucrats but no power for the people of Wales. There is already in existence in Wales a large genuine tier of government, but it is bureaucratic government which is centred on the Welsh Office. The centralists want to add to that, to add to bureaucracy. They say "We shall strengthen the Welsh Office. This is our alternative to this kind of devolution. We shall add more bureaucrats there who are not accountable to anyone."

The truth is that what they are opposing is not more government, as they keep saying, but more democracy, more power for the people. They want to see Whitehall maintaining its monopoly of power of decision in all Welsh national matters, but Welsh people should not be allowed any power of decision at all in any of their affairs according to what we hear from many Opposition Members and from some on the Government side.

Those who are seriously concerned for democracy and for human freedom must face the necessity of dispersing power. Despite the glaring weaknesses of the Bill—and we have been very critical—it has the very considerable virtue of proposing to decentralise some power, to

democratise an existing tier of bureaucratic government, and to give to people in Wales some measure of control, a little more initiative and power, something that will encourage them, at any rate, to develop their own sense of self-reliance and of social responsibility.

Having said that, however—that has to be said to the credit of the Government—what a great disappointment it is that the Government should not propose to decentralise more effectively control over industry and the economy. Nowhere has the centralist system failed more in Wales than in the economy. Some of us remember personally—all of us ought to know—the history of Wales during the decades between the two world wars. We should never forget it. Some 500,000 people had to leave our country to find work, most of them going to England. They were needed in English industry. There was no work for them in Wales. Even after this drain of emigration, about 30 per cent. were left unemployed in Wales. That was the failure of centralism.

That sort of thing does not happen in countries that have control of their resources. Wales is a country that is rich in resources. This sort of thing does not happen in small rich countries that have full control of their resources, and I am comparing those countries with Wales. At the time, from the centralist standpoint, those persons who left Wales to seek work were not so much persons who were rooted in the local community and the national community, as real people; they were drops in a labour pool.

Although the post-war years have not been as harsh as the pre-war years, it cannot be sincerely claimed that the centralist system has been succeeding economically in Wales. No serious attempt has been made to secure for us in Wales some balanced form of development. No adequate infrastructure has been built there. There is still no economic plan for Wales. These are things that a Welsh Assembly could see to, and we need an Assembly very much to see to them.

Because of these failures, the depopulation and migration that we have known over the last three generations have continued. Unemployment has continued. For most of this time it has been twice

4 the English level, despite the migration and depopulation; and there are today 103,000 fewer jobs for men than there were in 1964. The equivalent for Britain as a whole would be 2 million, and there would be something like a revolution.

That is our situation in Wales. The cultural and social consequences are appalling. The centralists regard unemployment and emigration from a peripheral region as a temporary distortion. The truth is that they are a permanent feature of the conflict between the centre and the periphery, and palliatives in the form of regional policies have failed to deliver the goods. Perhaps they are not meant to do so.

Only when Wales has its own centre, its own structure, its own plan that it can implement, and only when it is autonomous, can we hope to see Wales developing a strong and balanced economy. Only then will it be strong enough to sustain every aspect of Welsh life, and only then will the energies of the Welsh people be tapped as they have not been tapped in recent centuries.

For generations, we in Wales have heard that things will be different and better in future. As long as the centralist system is preserved intact, anyone who continues to declare that is simply not credible. The record of centralism convicts it as a failure.

As one listens to the arguments for and against radical decentralism and political autonomy for the smaller national entities in this Island one thinks of the great debate in Wales two or three generations ago on the disestablishment in Wales of the Church of England. That was a far rougher and more bitter debate than anything that we see in our time. The defenders of the *status quo* then were prophets of doom who described the future in the most horrific terms as a calamity which would almost destroy the Church in Wales if it were disestablished and became autonomous. It was a nightmare to contemplate so small, so weak and so poor a Church standing on its own feet. The proposals were castigated in the strongest epithets as being nationalism in religious dress. Well, the Church in Wales has been standing on its own two feet for more than half a century now, and I doubt whether it has a member who thinks that it should return to the old status of dependence,

with its begging bowl mentality. There is general agreement that the Church in Wales has gained spiritually and materially from autonomy and that the Church of England has won a vigorous partner. I say that as a Non conformist.

The arguments of those who opposed with such bitterness autonomy for the Church of Wales are now being repeated in our time against any measure of autonomy for the nation of Wales. Welshmen who argue in this way have no faith in their country and in their people, no belief in the possibilities of their land and no vision of a future for their nation. But the muster of those who have faith in their fellow countrymen—and that is the meaning of "Cymry"; its literal

⁵ meaning is "fellow countrymen"—is growing. Those who see the great possibilities of their nation—a nation whose people are as gifted, as talented and as well able to govern themselves as any—are on the increase as well. They believe that their little land, which is no bigger than Israel, has all the conditions necessary to becoming a social laboratory which will have positive value for Europe and the world. They see Wales in the future as a member under the Crown of a closely knit partnership of nations in no way subordinate one to the other in any aspect of their domestic or external affairs but freely co-operating as members of a Britannic confederation.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Tuesday 18th January 1977

[Extract from the Official Report]

NECESSITY OF EFFECTIVE WELSH ASSEMBLY

Speech by Mr. GWYNFOR EVANS, MP.

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Mr. Gwynfor Evans (Carmarthon): In 1976 there was a concerted and successful effort, in which the hon. Members for Bedwellty (Mr. Kinnock) and Pontypool (Mr. Abse) took a prominent and honourable part, to persuade the Government to have a referendum on devolution. The Conservatives took a full part in that effort, and the hon. Member for Pembroke (Mr. Edwards) said at the time:

"The executive of the Conservative Party in Wales has repeatedly passed full referendum motions, and virtually every constituency association has pressed for a referendum."

He also said that he personally, as Opposition spokesman on Welsh affairs, had supported the plea in a number of speeches.

Most of those people conceded that referenda were not an integral part of the British constitution, and many people argued that they derogate from the sovereignty of Parliament. Nevertheless, they contended that this issue of devolution was of such momentous constitutional importance that, after Parliament had done what it could to improve the Bill, the people should have the final say. We agreed with this, and most people in Wales seemed to concur. I do not think that anyone questioned the sincerity of those who called for a referendum.

Now, however, it seems to transpire that, with the Conservatives at least, this was an opportunist move. This gives rise to suspicion that it was just a cynical ploy, and far from intending that the people of Wales should make the final decision their real hope all along was that Wales should be completely cut out of this measure so that the people would have nothing to decide in the end. The

purpose was not so much to have a better Bill but to have no Bill at all for Wales. Some sought to do the same for Scotland on Thursday night, and they were overwhelmingly defeated. If the Tories succeed tonight, that will leave the Scots with both a Bill and a referendum and the Welsh without either.

The Conservatives are telling the Welsh people that they cannot be trusted to decide what is best for themselves. The Tories have never denied that they know what is best for us in Wales. In this case they think they know better than any other party in Wales what is best for us. All the other parties in Wales are agreed that the Welsh people should have some power of authority and of decision in their own affairs, but the Conservatives believe that those decisions should be made entirely in Whitehall and Westminster.

Almost everyone in the House of Commons concedes that Wales is a nation. Even the Conservatives now concede that. They accept that Wales should have a Secretary of State and a considerable measure of administrative devolution, which I interpret rather differently from the right hon. Member for Down, South (Mr. Powell). They concede that it is so important that Wales should have this administrative devolution that the bureaucratic powers of the Welsh Office should be increased.

The Conservatives accept the myriad national nominated bodies in Wales, including the Economic Development Authority and the National Sports Council. Although Wales has no separate system of law, the Conservatives accept that, for the purpose of the administration of law in Wales, Wales

must be administered as a national entity. They have quietly accepted the disestablishment of the Church of England in Wales and the establishment of an independent episcopal Church in Wales, together with the other independent national denominational bodies. They accept the National Library, the National Museum, the National University, the National Eisteddfod, the National Theatre, the National Opera, the national rugby team and other teams.

The Conservatives also accept that in the House of Commons we have Welsh Questions about six times a year, a Welsh Grand Committee that meets about four times a year and a Welsh Day once a year and that we also have the Welsh TUC—which is strong for a Parliament for Wales.

All the national institutions I have mentioned—I could have mentioned a host of others—are accepted by the Conservatives because now they accept that Wales is a nation with her own territory, her own history and her own culture. The Red Dragon is our national banner; "*Hen Wlad y Nhadau*" is our national anthem. The Conservatives' acceptance of Welsh nationhood has been an advance from the time not so long ago when Wales for the Conservatives was no more than a geographical expression. They now admit that Wales is a historic nation.

If you will permit me, Mr. Crawshaw, I should like to strengthen my point by quoting two lines from a Welsh poet:

"Gwyr a eith Gatraeth oedd fraeth eu llu
Glasfeodd eu hancwyn a gwenwyn fu."

Those lines come from a great ode written by Aneurin in the sixth century. Perhaps the last line of that stanza would not be inappropriate to the end of the marathon debate on devolution. It goes as follows:

"Ac wedi elwch tawelwch fu."

That means after the uproar there was silence.

The earliest surviving Welsh poetry has an elegance which shows that there must have been centuries of tradition behind it. There is no more treasured part of our tradition than our great Welsh literature, which has an unbroken history of 1,400 years. Today the Welsh people are more than ever conscious of the extraordinary continuity of their history and of the deep roots which give them

enviable security. They are more conscious of this than they used to be when they were taught in their schools nothing but English history. This is a factor that inspires increasing numbers of them to work for national regeneration. They feel that the character of their effort has a universal validity. They do not ask for themselves anything that they would deny to anybody else.

For some time the Conservatives have acknowledged that Wales is the kind of historic entity that we call a nation. It was they who recognised Cardiff as the capital city of Wales. What they have never done is to concede that Wales should have the power to act as a nation. That is the point at which they are sticking now. That is why they seek to wreck the Bill in relation to Wales. They are prepared to pay lip service to Welsh nationhood, but they will do everything they can to obstruct the power of Wales to act as a nation and to obstruct Wales in the exercise of choice and initiative. They have spoken often of the antiquity of Wales, and many of them are keen antiquarians, but they never speak of a national future for Wales.

What rôle do they see Wales playing in the future? One asks in vain. They give no impression that Wales has any value in herself or that her character and integrity should be defended so that she can fulfil the duty she owes to European civilisation. They appear to be content that Wales should be swallowed in the British State. That British State seems to many of us to harness the ideology of English nationalism and the techniques through which it is expressed.

Mr. Dalyell: The hon. Gentleman referred to Wales' duty to European civilisation. Does he mean by that that he would wish Wales to have a Commissioner in Brussels and a Welsh Minister on the Council of Ministers?

Mr. Evans: Of course we should have all those things. We should have a full voice in Brussels and a place in the institutions mentioned by the hon. Gentleman.

I do not think I do the Conservatives an injustice in saying that they think the State takes precedence over the Welsh nation. Theirs is an absorptionist ideal. For them there will always be an England, but the function of Wales is rather

to serve England or the British State. This contrasts with the nationalist belief that Wales has value in herself and that it is to herself that she should be true. For us Welsh nationalism is polycentric in the sense that we see our nation in the context of the European and the world community of nations. Against great concepts of freedom, democracy and more power for the people, the Conservatives reiterate the comparatively light-weight argument about the cost of the Assembly.

Answers to Questions I have asked in Parliament show that every year about twice as much is spent on maintaining the fabric of the Palace of Westminster as will be spent on the capital cost of establishing an Assembly in Cardiff. The running costs are calculated to be about £5 million a year to begin with, rising to £12 million. Even when they have risen to £12 million, they must be seen in proper perspective. For instance, this year £52.5 million is being spent by the British Council on furthering the English language in some parts of the world.

From the point of view of Wales, it is important that the costs of the Welsh Assembly are spent in Wales, thus giving employment in Wales to Welsh people. That has not been true of prestige projects such as Concorde, in which the costs were almost entirely spent outside Wales, mostly in England.

Mr. Kinnock: Does the hon. Gentleman concede that if the Assembly costs only what he says it will cost, which is a fraction of the cost of maintaining the fabric of this place, it will still be an additional cost because, presumably, this place will be maintained in the manner to which it has been accustomed, although that is pretty inadequate? Secondly, does the hon. Gentleman agree that the whole cost will in justice have to be borne by the Welsh people, which means that it will have to be taken from moneys that would have been available for other expenditure—for example, hospitals and schools? Thirdly, does he agree that if we had had the referendum, for which I know the hon. Gentleman is as enthusiastic as I am, before we reached this stage we could have saved ourselves a great deal of money in any case?

Mr. Evans: I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman should make so much

about costs. Of course £10 million is a large amount, but it must be considered on the basis of being averaged out over the whole of the United Kingdom and in relation to the costs that this Parliament votes each year. For instance, this Parliament has decided that we are to order 385 aeroplanes called the Tornado, which will cost about £10 million each. I may say that in Western Germany it is estimated that the cost will increase to £15 million each. The cost of each aircraft will equal the total running costs of the Welsh Assembly in one year. The costs must be seen in perspective.

I turn to another argument which has so often been repeated by the Conservatives—namely, that the Assembly is not wanted by the people of Wales. Let us consider some of the polls which the Conservatives have been making great use of in recent weeks. It must be admitted that the polls can be interpreted in different ways. For instance, the most recent poll, from which the hon. Member for Bedwellty quoted, showed not only that a certain number favoured the Assembly or opposed it but that 68 per cent. of the people interviewed were either satisfied with the powers of the Assembly or wanted more powers. In fact, the majority of them wanted more powers.

The previous poll indicated that 70 per cent. of the people wanted equality with Scotland. We must take facts such as these into account. In any case, the issue of whether the people want the Assembly will be decided by the referendum. We are obviously looking forward to the referendum.

Mr. Kinnock: Hear, hear.

Mr. Evans: I am glad to hear that there is some agreement about that on the Labour Benches.

When the Conservatives proclaim that they want to take Wales out of the Bill, to plough Wales, as it were, into the ground and harrow it, I am reminded of what Cromwell said—I believe at the Battle of Dunbar—about the Lord having delivered them into his hands. This is something that the Welsh people do not understand. It is something that the Welsh people will not accept. They believe that they will have this final power of decision. They will be extremely angry if they do not get it.

The Bill is not the measure that Plaid Cymru wished to see before the House but we shall do our best to improve it. If at the end of our proceedings in Committee it is found to decentralise some power to Wales, to strengthen Welsh democracy to some extent by making the bureaucratic tier answerable to the people's elected representatives; if it genuinely brings some power of government closer to the people of Wales; if it encourages in them some more self-reliance and more responsibility for managing the small and manageable patch that they have in Wales; if it does

something to increase their freedom of action as a community and releases some more of their energies as a people—if it does some of those things, as I think it can, thus giving an old people a new chance and, as it were, a new start in life, it will be a measure well worth putting before the people of Wales in a referendum. In that event it may prove to be the beginning of accepting the challenging task of rebuilding in an ancient nation a community in which the best of its national traditions and values will flourish.

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