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Old boyo network

First Minister **Rhodri Morgan** talks to Politics about life in Cardiff Bay



Andrew Mickel

It's been seven years since the Welsh Assembly was inaugurated. Through virtually all of it, the Assembly has been headed by Rhodri Morgan, a First Minister with something of a two-sided reputation.

To his supporters there is 'clear red water' between Cardiff Bay and Westminster, a professed Welsh policy style that shows this isn't just New Labour rhetoric in action. To his detractors he's under Number Tens' thumb, running a district branch of national Labour government rather than leading a proud nation.

He certainly doesn't do himself any favours, having a reputation for sitting on the fence on the big topics – just look at his non-committal stance on supporting Blair over Iraq. It looks like the biggest issue on campus today, the lecturers' boycott, isn't going to be any different. "It would be very unwise of me to take sides," he says. "It would just be great for everyone to get around a table and thrash out a deal that is fair to everyone – employers and employees."

There's something reassuringly Old School about Rhodri Morgan. There's no attempt at a polished performance like there's been for every other politician I've interviewed. Proper Old Labour; I get the impression I might get clipped around the ear at any moment.

And this has always been the inherent tension in his administration, balancing a pragmatic plan for Wales with what being a Labour government has to mean today.

He did try and bring in top-up fees for Welsh students last year, and was only blocked when the defection of the late Peter Law meant that he didn't have the Assembly numbers to push it through.

For now it looks like Welsh top-up fees will be off the table. "We have no proposals to change the policy as we've only just brought it in," he says. But this isn't going to change the fact that his was the government that tried.

In place of top-up fees, the Government has been forced to pay the difference over and above the existing tuition fees. Still, the new policy has come under attack.

"We've heard this criticism that in some ways what we've done, with us paying the lost income to Welsh universities for not having top-up fees, is against the interests of Welsh students as they'll be financially induced to stay in Wales to do their higher education.

"But what were we supposed to do? We can't have the Welsh quote taxpayer unquote subsidising the English higher education system."

The Welsh taxpayer paying for England? It's not something that you

would ordinarily hear of (or, in this case, believe).

But it is difficult to separate whether what I'm listening to is Welsh bluster, or just a politician not answering the question. In some cases it seems clear that the question is just being avoided (see *gairrhydd* 806). A simple question on whether Mr Morgan agreed with calls to introduce a full-time scientific adviser was met with a five minute mini-speech on the virtues of IBM and Motorola. There never was an answer to the adviser question, just an admittance that they are "not fully exploiting the Welsh potential in science".

Still, there is unlikely to be any major policy pushed through in the Assembly as long as Labour goes without the absolute majority it enjoyed for six years.

Many have scoffed at the suggestion by The First Minister and Secretary of State Peter Hain that any other party would be strong enough to take over, but Mr Morgan insists that "an anti-Labour coalition would be formed with the Tories in it". Is there any chance of a return to the days when a Lib-Lab coalition ruled? "I don't think they'd be interested and I don't think we'd be interested," he says.

There has instead been some pretty underhand legislating in the form of the Government of Wales Bill. Currently passing through the UK Parliament, it is the first extension of Assembly powers since it was first set up. The current Assembly structure has been criticised by the current presiding officer as being 'horrendous time-wasting', something the First Minister says has, "nothing to do with our side of the house, really.

"We stay this side of the exhaustion, but only just. Ministers work every hour God made, and what the Assembly work is not a matter for us."

Instead, the changes will leave potential AMs forced to choose between trying to join the Assembly through only one of the two routes that they can currently take – they can either be constituency AMs (like MPs), or 'list' AMs – a top-up system to ensure a fair representation of the vote.

Morgan is convinced there's something wrong with the current system: "It's deception on the electorate really. People who've been defeated in a constituency sometimes imply that they are the representatives of that constituency." By complete coincidence, Labour will be major beneficiaries of the change in rules, which have also come under heavy fire by the Electoral Commission.

The UK Labour government has vowed to push the Bill through, despite heavy criticism from all sides.

I still can't decide whether I was on the receiving end of politicking or just a blustering personality. In fairness, I did always sense a fair contempt for being there, and a large awareness that the First Minister knew he was doing us a favour by giving us an interview – you can't say the same thing about a lot of image-conscious politicians.



RHODRI MORGAN:
Proper old Labour

PHOTO: James Perou

Story update

In issue 806 we reported that the Assembly Government had announced they 'expected' Local Health Boards to fund Herceptin on the NHS for early stage breast cancer, despite the fact it has not yet met the necessary safety standards for its intended use, nor has the costly drug been properly costed.

"I don't think it was suggested that Herceptin is dangerous, was it?"

Despite the fact the drug still has an as-yet-to-disprove link to heart disease for its intended use, and that oft-quoted study on its effectiveness was funded by the drugs company (both facts that appeared to come as a surprise to the First Minister), the Government chose not to wait for advice from the NHS body for testing such matters, but pressured health boards anyway.

Does he think this, therefore, creates a dangerous precedent for the many, similar forthcoming drugs?

"As a precedent, no I don't think it's dangerous, because Herceptin is entirely unique – well, it won't be unique for very long – but it is a unique category as far as I'm aware, as it's the first of what appears to be a family of very, very clever, smart drugs."

Confused? Despite questioning the First Minister several times on the topic, the best he could muster was "they will either bankrupt every drug administration in the world, but nevertheless they will save thousands of lives, or they will have at least a moderate benefit in saving lives."

If the clueless government don't get a better idea of what they are doing soon, all that will be left is a bankrupt NHS.

In issue 812, we reported on changes to arts funding in Wales. While the Government currently gives money to the Arts Council Wales to give out to arts institutions, under the 'Bonfire of the Quangos' the Government is going to start funding the 'Big Six' arts institutions directly. There has been a lot of criticism that it could potentially lead to censorship of the arts.

The First Minister was resolute on the idea that there is no potential conflict of interest in direct funding. "We said that we would resist any attempt to – what's the word – censorship, or restricting the freedom of the arts community to experiment and occasionally to fail in experimenting.

"Funding decisions will not be decided in that way."

But even if that was true of the current government, what guarantee is there that a future government would do the same? Isn't that exactly why there are institutional safeguards, like using the Arts Council to keep funding depoliticized?

"Whether you do it indirectly through an Arts Council or whether you do it directly because the sums are big enough in regards to the Big Six, then you might as well just get on with it."

As it is, it has proven difficult to find people willing to speak out against the changes for fear of the Assembly. The changes have, if nothing else, created a legacy of stunted pluralism.

A Recycled Revolution

Is New Conservatism just part of a Westminster on a systematic loop? Andrew Rennison writes

Political theory today is like a shark: sworn to move forward in order to survive. Progressive politics, once merely the enlightened avenue, has become the only electable path for parties to take. And at present, though stretching the aquatic analogy a little far, it is clear that David Cameron is the Jaws of Westminster.

The Tories' mutation into the champions of progression is practically old news, and has had enough admiration to make the likes of Hague and Howard blush. No less clear is Cameron's enthusiasm for such a label, with his recent speeches based on forward-thinking philosophy.

Only the freshest ingredients have been added to the Conservatives' revitalised pot. Going green on the environment, urging progressive employment practice, and stressing quality of life for every voter; these are the notions that have received the Tory limelight over the past month.

Just last week, shadow chancellor George Osborne stepped a yard further, bulldozing his party's historically rigid tax

policy with a wrecking ball of progression. Speaking in Manchester, Mr Osborne declared that immediate tax cuts, so long a cornerstone of Tory campaigning, were 'very unlikely to be on offer' under a new Conservative government.

Though this is a shift that has been steadily emerging since the leadership election, the revision of such a seasoned Tory component marks a change that goes beyond huskies and hybrid cars.

Critics have claimed that voters no longer know what the Conservatives stand for, and that Cameron lacks the policies to keep him so soundly afloat. But policy has little to do with it.

The Tories' current ascension is down to the simple public appeal of the vibrant new against the crumbling old. They may have renounced tax cuts, but no actual strategy has been unveiled; it is the sheen of dynamic change that is important.

That a party so long in the doldrums can in six months achieve pollings unseen for 14 years is in part a testament to how a socially geared agenda, founded on image and untroubled by policy, can run rings



CAMERON: Husky

around a battle-weary government.

How remarkable, then, that Cameron and co have adopted this winning formula as their own. Except that it isn't.

Here's a snippet from a speech by a current party leader: "To be modern is to be green. It is about seeking new solutions to new environmental challenges. Not just so that future generations have a planet that is still inhabitable but so that all of us going about our lives can improve our quality of life."

To the voter on the street with their head stuck firmly in 2006, this sort of progressive rationale would appear to be straight out of the Cameron textbook. In truth, it's an excerpt from an address by Tony Blair, made in 1997.

A decade ago, the government was crumbling, the opposition was fresh, their leader was young, and the 'thinking' was also forward. The flowing locks and well-moisturised skin of Cameron have hidden the simple fact that he and his New Conservatism are nothing but a recycled New Labour – an inevitable political reaction that will catch voters' hearts without

requiring their heads.

Of course there are differences between the resurgent Labour of the 90s and the rejuvenated Tories of today. But the fundamental nature of the shift is largely the same. Though it is still relatively early days for Mr Cameron, it grows more likely by the day that he will fulfill this prophetic cycle in a few years' time.

And if indeed he soon finds himself walking into Number Ten, he would be well-advised to glance over his shoulder at the party packing its bags.

Blair promised the earth, and hasn't delivered, due in no small part to how difficult the targets of his social agenda have turned out to be. Cameron is promising the earth with a windfarm, and if he continues to prophesise a Britain in harmony under Tory rule, he will doom himself and his party to the same failure we are seeing now.

Progressive politics is in danger of mutating into a system that recycles by the decade. The voting public need to wake up and realise that what we may end up with in our House of Commons is a dead shark.