

## The dragon roars

Like Scotland, Wales is seeing increasing support for independence. Even the governing Labour Party has adopted a stance of soft nationalism.

**By Julia Smirnova**

*Picture caption: Iestyn ap Ithor (42), co-founder of independence movement Yes Cymru.*

For Iestyn ap Ithor there was never any question that his homeland of Wales could exist independently of the United Kingdom. "We have all the characteristics of an independent country," he says.

When the teacher of Welsh talks about the future, he sounds resolute and uncompromising. Wales will have a seat at the UN, its own voice on the international stage and its own currency. "If Wales were independent, it would threaten the entire British imperial project," he believes. In 2014, Ithor founded the pro-independence Yes Cymru movement. He based the movement on Yes Scotland and the original aim was to demonstrate solidarity with the Scottish separatists prior to their independence referendum. Cymru is the Welsh name for Wales. For several years, the movement remained small: prior to the pandemic, it had just 2,000 members. Today that figure has risen to 19,000, making it the second largest political organisation in Wales after the Labour Party.

The twin earthquakes of Brexit and the pandemic have led to the United Kingdom becoming increasingly disunited. In Scotland, the governing Scottish National Party (SNP) is pushing for a second independence referendum. In Northern Ireland, reunification with the Republic continues to be on the agenda. And even Wales, with its population of 3.1 million, is looking increasingly restless. A March poll found 39 per cent of the country, predominantly younger people, to be in favour of independence, although that support has waned somewhat since then. Even First Minister of Wales Mark Drakeford has declared that "the Union in its current form is finished" and has demanded more rights and powers for the devolved Welsh government. Traditionally support for independence has been especially strong in North Wales where people such as Ithor grew up with Welsh as their mother tongue. It is in this region that support for the pro-independence Plaid Cymru party is at its strongest. But this close association between independence and the native tongue – which doesn't exist in Scotland – has also been the party's undoing. It was perceived by many to be the party of Welsh speakers, a perception that Nationalists such as Ithor want to change.

"Cultural nationalism belongs in the twentieth century," he says. "Wales is an inclusive country and open to all, not just to Welsh speakers." He wants the movement to include more people like Lloyd Bingham. The 31-year-old translator grew up in an English-speaking family and first learned Welsh in school. His interest in independence was first awakened by Brexit. "The Conservative party in London pursued an isolationist course and tried to separate the UK from the international community," says Bingham. "Wales and Scotland should oppose this tendency." But what is it that separates Wales from the rest of the UK, if

not just language? To answer this question, Rhobert draws on British history. Wales and Ireland were England's first colonies, and this colonial past still influences politics today, he maintains. "We want a better society and not to be part of an archaic post-colonial empire." He sees Brexit as the proof. He and his fellow campaigners refuse to describe themselves as British, as the term is so closely associated with the history of England. As a Welshman, he feels excluded by it.

Identities are collective stories, constructions that change over time. But their influence shouldn't be under-estimated, as can be seen in Wales. Wales voted for Brexit by a slim margin. A study by the University of Cardiff showed that people's affinity with the EU correlated strongly to whether people saw themselves as Welsh, English or British. 71 percent of those who saw themselves as purely Welsh voted to remain; but among those who saw themselves as Welsh and British, English and British or simply English, a majority voted Leave.

The supporters of independence want to define Welshness as something progressive and inclusive, in contrast to English nationalism, which they see as backward-looking. Welsh nationalists believe that the only reason that Wales is seen as a poverty-stricken region is that, ever since it was invaded by England 800 years ago, it has been systematically disadvantaged and exploited. This is symbolised by the history of the Tryweryn Valley. In 1965, the valley and a nearby village were flooded to make a reservoir to supply the English city of Liverpool with water. And although all 35 Welsh MPs in the Westminster Parliament voted against the project, they were outvoted by English MPs. Today in Wales, red and white graffiti reading "Cofiwch Dryweryn" (Remember Tryweryn) can be seen almost everywhere, a reminder of the strength of nationalist feeling here.

Dafydd Iwan has this graffiti on the walls of his recording studio. Everyone in Wales knows him. He is something of a folk hero, the bard of Welsh independence. Fifty years ago he painted over British street signs and replaced them with Welsh place names. As he refused to pay the fines levied against him, he spent several weeks in jail. Iwan grew up near the Tryweryn Valley. He remembers how in the 1960s his father travelled to Liverpool in order to take part in the protests against the flooding. "Over time, the significance of this event has become ever more clear. Today it's stronger than ever." For seven years, he was chairman of Plaid Cymru. But he's best known for his songs in Welsh, such as his satire on Prince Charles and *Yma O Hyd* (Still Here), a song, which sounds akin to a resistance anthem of the Welsh. Iwan understands that, for practical reasons, many Welsh people are frightened of independence. This fear won't disappear overnight, he says. "But that is definitely the direction of travel."

*Picture caption: demo for Welsh independence in Merthyr Tydfil*

Plaid Cymru's biggest political opponents are not English nationalists, but the mighty Labour Party. While in Scotland the SNP has stolen ground from Labour and adopted the social democratic agenda, in Wales Labour remains the strongest party. According to Prof. Richard Wyn Jones of the University of Cardiff, Labour's success is partly due to what he calls "soft nationalism". "It's never simply 'the Labour Party' but always 'Welsh Labour'. Everyone understands that this is not Keir Starmer's party, but Mark Drakeford's."

In Scotland, Labour has come to be seen as the representative of London, says Jones, but the Welsh First Minister has ensured that he is seen differently. "Drakeford stands up for Welsh interests in London." Nonetheless, the party cannot ignore the support for independence: half of Labour voters are sympathetic. And even though Wales doesn't expect a referendum on the issue in the foreseeable future, he compares the country to Montenegro in the former Yugoslavia. In principle, the Montenegrans had been happy with the level of autonomy they enjoyed, but when Yugoslavia broke up, they didn't want to be left alone in a union with the Serbs. "What with Brexit, the growth of Scottish nationalism and the whole situation in Northern Ireland, many people here have the suspicion that we could end up on our own in the Union with the English."

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