



## **Wales: Culture and identity**

### *Labour traditions*

#### **Andrew Edwards**

My work on Labour traditions and connections in Wales I think is important because if you look at the history of the Labour Party in Wales it's normally associated with South Wales – you know. Through my work and other people as well we've started to show that tradition actually goes across those kind of geographical boundaries so we are looking at connections between north and south Wales politically culturally, socially, and we can do that through the lens of the Labour movement and the Labour Party and that Labour tradition. So I think in terms of building connections I think what we've come to understand over the last twenty years or so as that work's developed really is that there's much more to Labour than just being the part of South Wales, that actually a distinctive tradition in the north as well. We could look at maybe an English language Labour tradition and a Welsh language Labour tradition and the different kinds of politics that inspired those traditions in different places you know. – so a kind of affinity to Chapel and – and Welsh culture in one place perhaps and a more kind of Marxist perhaps tradition in another place that's less religious, less tied to Welsh culture and those kinds of things. So we can make connections. And also we can help to kind of look inside those connections and probe them and see how valid they are at certain points in time and then sort of move away from that and sort of question really the whole notion of a kind of north/south divide perhaps through the lens of the Labour movement.

The connections say with Labour and Class would be an interesting one to explore. Again we're looking myths if you like; "Labour is the Party of the working class". Therefore to understand Labour you simply look at the working class in Wales and their political identities and affiliations when obviously there's much more to Labour than that. Labour has been the party of the middle class in Wales at times you know – especially over the last decade or so – kind of middle class swing to Labour. So we can build connections in other aspects of the module - Gender would be another one. Quite clearly, where through a sort of gender lens, we can understand the Labour tradition and vice versa. So the Labour tradition connects us with several aspects of the module: place, class, gender and so on. So I think we can certainly use the Labour tradition to understand the complexities perhaps of some of those areas.

#### **Hugh Mackay**

Andrew explains how work and the changing economy have affected Labour traditions in Wales.

#### **Andrew Edwards**

The restructuring of the economy in Wales has obviously had a huge impact on the way that the Labour tradition has developed. I mean if you go back and look at the inter-war period the Labour Party is associated with the old extractive industries if you like, coal in the South especially, slate in the North. But obviously in the period after 1945 you're witnessing the decline of those old industries and new industries coming in - in their place a kind of decline of the old blue collar work and a rise of white collar worker then Labour has to adapt to that change. And if you look at the history of the Labour Party in Britain in the 1950's you know Labour fails in the 1950's largely because it doesn't respond very well to those changes. And only in the 1960's does Labour start to put together an agenda that sort of appeals to this new – emergence of a new class if you like - a new new notions of affluence and identity and – and ambition and all those sorts of things. So over the last thirty years or forty years I guess, it's quite interesting to look at Labour and how Labour has adapted to that challenge and how it's continued to be successful in Wales in the light of a new sort of industrial base, a new work place, a kind of shift in work patterns where sort of male dominated industries have been replaced with mixed perhaps or in some places female dominated sort of work places, especially the new sort of industries that came in to the M4 corridor and those kind of places.

So I think looking at the Labour tradition is an interesting insight really into how a political party or a political movement adapts to change over time and continues to be successful. I guess sort of process of reinvention in many ways to fit sort of contemporary needs, that you can't sort of survive simply by being a party of the coal mines and the old heavy industrial base. You've got to be more than that. You've got to aspire to a kind of upwardly mobile ambitious generation who view life very differently to a previous generation or two generations previously.

I think if you're looking at different case studies and how case studies can bring life into a chapter, one of the things that always interested me is personality. I've always been interested in biography, always been interested in individuals. And I think one of the things I try and do in the chapter is to bring out how by looking at certain individuals we can understand strands of a tradition and also we can understand strands of identity and place. So in this chapter we look at different personalities who've represented different aspects of that Labour tradition over the years. I mean you know the most prominent perhaps would be someone like Aneurin Bevan, who seems to represent very much this kind of working class sort of hard edged Labour tradition in the south. But there are lesser known Labour figures from the north – Cledwyn Hughes, who was Labour's MP for Anglesey, Goronwy-Roberts, Labour's MP for Caernarfon, who represented a different kind of tradition. So much closer to the Welsh language, much closer to a Welsh speaking culture and those kinds of things who – who actually tells a very different story about the Labour Party. The interesting thing of course again returning to the theme of connections is that these guys sit round the same table and fight for the same cause but they come from incredibly different backgrounds and have very, very different political motivations and ideas.

And if you take that story on to the present day you can see those traditions very much alive in the Labour Party today. I think one of the things you've noticed in the Labour Party over the last ten years or since the arrival of devolution is the way perhaps that the Welsh language has been propelled very much in Labour politics and on to the Labour agenda. If you look at the recent battle for the Welsh Labour leadership; the Welsh language played an incredibly important role in that battle. Whereas as perhaps twenty or thirty years earlier that wouldn't have been the case. So in some ways we're returning to those sort of agendas set by people like Cledwyn Hughes and Goronwy-Roberts fifty years ago that did talk up the importance of language in the Welsh political debate. And only now are we seeing the impact of those debates on current Labour politics in Wales. And similarly if you look at the personnel within the Welsh Labour movement you can still see your Nye Bevan, you can still see people inspired by the Bevan tradition, by that old working class radicalism; by the notions of the valleys and solidarity and all that kind of thing. So both those traditions that I try and bring out in the 1940's, 1950's I think are very much alive today. And again I think that's an important sort of means of understanding contemporary Wales as well as historical Wales.

### **Hugh Mackay**

How useful are maps as resources or research methods?

### **Andrew Edwards**

Using maps in research and also in teaching is a really good way of mapping change over time. Maps and looking at maps really gives you a really good impression of how in this particular instance Labour grows in Wales from 1918 onwards. You can see it very clearly on a map that in the south Wales industrial belt Labour establishes itself very, very quickly in the inter-war period but then slowly how that grows and spreads slowly to begin with but then quickly across the whole of Wales. So it gives you a very clear picture of how that influence grows. The problem with the maps I guess one of the things we have to go beyond, is that the map doesn't tell the story. We need to probe. We need to understand how and why Labour has grown. So the map gives us a very simple illustration of growth but it doesn't explain growth. So if we look at and pick out individual constituencies on that map and try and understand how that Labour tradition grew in that particular constituency over time and indeed why it then fails, perhaps why we move away from it, then we need to do more research. We need to understand a little bit more. So maps are a fantastic starting point and to see it very clearly, very graphically. But they are also a kind of means of motivating us to

try and understand why in this sort of bizarre constituency somewhere in Wales did we see Labour establish itself in this particular point in time. And then why that sort of domination was lost.

One of the questions I guess in politics is do political parties win elections or do other political parties lose them? So one of the pitfalls for example in the maps I've used is we see a Labour domination growing and establishing itself. What we don't see through those maps is the way that other political parties are withering and failing at the same time. So maps that show sort of implantation fail to show failure and fail to show the reasons for failure. Maps tend to illustrate success somehow although they also illustrate failure if you know what I mean. And we need to probe perhaps why those maps can be misleading in the first past the post political system you know. A split vote can allow a party to be successful in the constituency when actually their strength and their implantation isn't that great at all. It's just that they've won the majority of votes. But actually there's no great tradition; there's no great implantation in that particular constituency.