

WALES UNDER THREAT: A STUDY ON THE POLITICAL DISCOURSE OF PLAID CYMRU

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ABSTRACT

‘United Kingdom’ as a political union has varying degrees of effect on its four constituents. Wales as one of those constituents has constructed a peculiar style of relationship with the Union throughout the history of the UK and sought to define its existence and identity with reference to the nature of this relationship. This peculiar relationship is reflected in both the individual and organisational attitudes and approaches of the Welsh side towards the most dominant constituent England and its political centre Westminster. In this sense, how Plaid Cymru, the main deep-rooted centre left-wing political party in Wales, positions Wales within the UK and how it constructs its political discourse in relation to this positioning is an important research topic to be studied studiously.

Thus, this study aims to analyse fundamental elements of Plaid Cymru's official discourse such as the party manifesto, action plans, campaign texts, and slogans. The research method preferred in the study is discourse analysis. The study thus provides an insight into the main elements of the party's political discourse and helps us to make judgements about the political future of Wales. The study pays particular attention to perceptions of threat, anxiety and uncertainty in Plaid Cymru's political discourse towards Westminster as the political centre of the Union and towards other parties outside Wales. Such feelings of threat, anxiety and uncertainty prevent the development of harmony and cohesion between the Union and Wales and encourage regional polarisation and instability in the territory. Consequently, Plaid Cymru developed a discursive strategy based on the promise to defend Wales and to fight for the Welsh people in Westminster.

Key Words: *Welsh Politics, Plaid Cymru, Political Communication, Threat Perception*

INTRODUCTION

Peripheral parties, by their very nature, are organised merely in peripheral regions. They nominate candidates only in elections for their own territory, i.e. in their own state, regional or local government. They are usually enthusiastic about governing only their own territory, but in most cases not the whole state. Their agenda focuses mainly on centre-periphery issues and peripheral voters. Their position on the centre-periphery conflicts is always on the periphery (Alonso, Cabeza & Gómez, 2017: 241-242). Plaid Cymru, as a

political party that focuses its attention and efforts on Wales and Welsh society, is an important actor in Welsh-UK relations and makes a significant contribution to the construction of discourses in Wales towards the United Kingdom.

Plaid Cymru's importance as an actor in Welsh politics has increased at a time when pro-independence voices in Wales are on the rise, particularly in the post-Brexit era. Thousands of people, for instance, rallied for independence in Wrexham in 2022 by voicing that Westminster government does not serve the interests of the Welsh people (McSherry, 2022). Plaid Cymru and its leader Adam Price have embraced the pro-independence demands by calling for "getting rid of them (Tory rule) forever with independence by voting for Plaid Cymru" at the party's annual conference in October 2022 (Plaid Cymru, 2022b). Plaid Cymru thus has become the leading party in Wales in organising the current pro-independence demands and spreading the independence discourse. It is also likely to become the 'dominant party' in the country after possible Welsh independence in the future. As such, the party's political discourse has been crucial to Wales' relationship with the UK and other London-based political parties. Plaid Cymru's advocacy of an independent Welsh state, on the other hand, meant that the party posed both a significant threat to the UK's territorial integrity and an even more serious threat to those parties across the kingdom that went beyond simple electoral competition (McAngus, 2016: 5). Therefore, research on Plaid Cymru can make a significant contribution to understanding the future of the relationship between Wales and the UK and the attitudes of the Welsh people towards the UK in the future.

The main aim of the study is to understand the core elements of Plaid Cymru's political discourse. It examines how the party has positioned Wales in relation to the United Kingdom, Plaid Cymru in relation to British parties outside Wales, and Welsh identity in relation to Britishness. To this end, the 2015 Westminster election manifesto, the 2017 action plan, the 2019 general election manifesto and the 2022 local government manifesto formed the main source of data for the study. The method of discourse analysis was used to analyse these texts.

PLAID CYMRU IN WELSH POLITICS

Plaid Cymru (or the Party of Wales) has been the leading political party of Welsh origin in Wales for almost 100 years. The party was founded in August 1925 under the name *Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru* (in English, the National Party of Wales) as an ardent advocate of autonomy and a staunch defender of the Welsh language, with nationalist political sentiments (Jones, 2014: 156). Saunders Lewis became a pioneer of the party by amalgamating *Y Mudiad Cymreig* (the Welsh Movement), his secret organisation, with *Byddin Ymreolwyr Cymru* (the Welsh Home Rule Army), a group that defended Welsh nationalism. An academic, playwright and essayist, Lewis became the party's foremost theoretician and its first president from 1926 to 1939 (Barberis, McHugh & Tyldesley, 2000: 442). It can be said that Lewis was inspired by the struggle for independence in Ireland. Concerned about the decline of the Welsh

language, which was already evident at the time, Lewis sought to unite the various disparate nationalist groups into a single and fully autonomous political party, Plaid Cymru, that could give new impetus to a much exhausted cause (Wyn Jones, 2009: 131-132).

Plaid Cymru positioned itself on the left of the political spectrum in the 1980s by advocating a decentralised socialist Welsh state. In 1984, the party's socialism took a more Marxist turn when Merioneth MP Dafydd Elis Thomas became party leader. More importantly, the party has strengthened its ties with groups such as feminists, environmentalists, trade unions, anti-nuclearists, anti-racists, and advocates of liberation theology (Barberis, McHugh & Tyldesley, 2000: 444). Today, the party has determined its position as "a community based party that's passionate about Wales and about making a difference to people's lives" (Plaid Cymru, 2022a). Therefore, it is possible to argue that Welsh nationalism is more dominant in the party ideology. Within this scope, Massetti (2018) described Plaid Cymru's ideology as left-wing regionalist populism, minority nationalism and regionalism, while Elias (2008) defined it as a 'minority nationalist party' and Van Atta (2003) as 'regional nationalist party'.

Plaid Cymru has consistently been the third or fourth party in Wales in general elections. In the 2010 general election, the party received 11.3 per cent of the total vote, making it the fourth largest party behind the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats (UK Parliament, 2010). In 2015, it maintained its fourth position with 12.1 per cent, behind the Conservatives, Labour and UKIP (UK Parliament, 2015). In 2017, it jumped to third place with 10.4 per cent, although there was a slight decline in its vote share (UK Parliament, 2017). In 2019, it fell below 10 per cent with 9.9 per cent, but maintained its third position (UK Parliament, 2019). It can therefore be argued that Plaid Cymru's political discourse construction processes have been shaped by its goal of becoming the dominant party in Wales.

PLAID CYMRU'S DISCOURSE OF "WALES UNDER THREAT"

Political discourse is a general term for all types of discourse used in the field of politics and/or for discourses expressed by politicians, etc. (Van Dijk, 1998: 196). The linguistic choices made to represent the world and the issues of textual production and action are at the centre of political discourse (Wilson, 2001: 404). Each political party determines a set of expressive means and styles among linguistic choices to create the party's official discourse, and through this set, the party constructs a truth that is expected to serve its goals. Plaid Cymru also adopted a series of linguistic choices to construct a Welsh-centred official party discourse *vis-à-vis* the political centre of the UK ('the Westminster', as defined by Plaid Cymru) and the other parties outside Wales within the UK ('the Westminster parties', as defined by Plaid Cymru).

“Plaid Cymru means „The Party of Wales” – we stand up for you, your family, your community and all of Wales. Always. We are a party for the whole of Wales – whether you live in a town or in the countryside, whatever your background or language.

We are ready and able to take on Westminster, challenging the UK parties. We refuse to let Wales be treated as second class, because we’re not tied to London party bosses, unlike ALL the UK parties.” (Plaid Cymru, 2015).

An emphasis on Plaid Cymru’s position of ‘being the party of Wales’ corresponded to the discourse that other political parties running in elections are not the party of Wales. Such a discourse was supported by the promises to stand up for Welsh people, for their families, for their communities, and finally for the whole country. Plaid Cymru’s claim to be the main and best representative of Wales is therefore evident in the text. The claim that Plaid Cymru, not Labour, was the real voice of Wales was even perceived by Labour as an insult to its identity as the party representing Wales in the world (Moon, 2015: 6). The attempt to prove the party’s competence to challenge the UK parties and take on Westminster could be seen as an attempt to invite the Welsh people into Plaid Cymru’s position in the conflict between Wales and the United Kingdom. The words ‘take on’ and ‘challenge’ were used to underline Plaid Cymru’s distinctive position in the conflict. The statement of ‘London party bosses’ positioned Welsh people as the labourers vis-à-vis those Londoner bosses, as being a boss is attributed a pejorative meaning. Moreover, London was positioned as the exploiter and Cardiff (or Wales) as the exploited.

“People across the British state are looking for an alternative to the broken Westminster system. Plaid Cymru wants to bring our government home to Wales so that we have the powers and levers to at least put us on a par with our neighbours. Wales must have the control over its own natural resources, criminal justice and policing system and our government must be made accountable to the people for the money it spends on their behalf. Wales must be treated as a nation and have the powers to act as a nation.” (Plaid Cymru, 2015).

In her speech in the 2015 manifesto, Leanne Wood, the former leader of the party, positioned the British state as the main culprit for the broken Westminster system. In doing so, she absolved Wales of responsibility for the problems in Westminster. Defining Wales as the ‘home’ automatically positions London or Westminster as ‘away’. The emphasis on neighbourhood also aimed to support people’s embracement of Wales as a home. The word ‘own’ in the text was used to create the sense of ownership for Welsh people. The emphasis on the nationality of the Welsh could be seen as an attempt to differentiate them from other nations in the UK and to purify Welsh identity from Britishness.

“Wales faces grave risks as we head into this election.

Our economy, our communities and even our very identity as a nation is under threat from the cruel and reckless Tories. Labour is weak and divided and are unable to offer opposition to the Tories. Plaid Cymru stands ready to defend Wales. Every Plaid Cymru MP elected will go to Westminster to do their utmost for their country, their people and their communities.

...

It remains our ambition for Wales to become an independent nation, standing on its own two feet. But this election is about an immediate threat to our nation, our economy and our people.” (Plaid Cymru, 2017: 2).

Plaid Cymru’s prominent election slogan in 2017 was “Defending Wales, Our promise to you” (Plaid Cymru, 2017), which could be seen as an element of a political campaign that targeted Welsh people's feelings of threat, anxiety and uncertainty. The text openly used the word 'threat' to draw the Welsh people's attention to the potential dangers of an election that could empower those outside Wales. The word 'threat' can be defined as “someone or something that is likely to cause harm or damage”, or “the possibility that something bad will happen” (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Oxford Academic Dictionary (n.d.) defined the word 'anxiety' as “the state of feeling nervous that something bad is going to happen; a fear about something.” And uncertainty was defined by Collins Dictionary (n.d.) as “a state of doubt about the future or about what is the right thing to do.” These feelings, therefore, lead people to seek security and a reliable actor to provide it. Therefore, Plaid Cymru presented itself as the reliable actor to defend Wales against all the dangers posed by the so-called Westminster parties.

“Defending Wales... Defending Welsh interests...

Wales is under attack. The Tory Government is hell-bent on taking us along a treacherous path where all economic ties with our closest trading partners are severed. Labour are too busy squabbling amongst themselves to stand up for Wales.

Wales needs Plaid Cymru MPs to fight for Welsh interests and to protect our nationhood.” (Plaid Cymru, 2017: 9).

Throughout the 2017 manifesto, the defence of Wales was presented as Plaid Cymru’s ultimate goal. The state of threat created a need for defence, therefore the party promised to take on the defence of Wales. “Wales is under attack” was the most striking statement in the manifesto and was intended to give the people of Wales the impression that they were under attack in the war. The phrase 'treacherous path' was deliberately chosen to create an image of a scary path in the minds of the Welsh people and to focus their attention on the dangers posed by the policies of the Tory government. Labour, on the other hand, was portrayed as an incompetent actor unable to defend Wales against a Conservative government, creating the need for Plaid Cymru to defend the Welsh nation. The words 'fight', 'protect' and 'defend'

were chosen as complementary promises to remove all threats and end the sense of fear, uncertainty and insecurity.

“Wales, it’s us” was a prominent Plaid Cymru slogan in the 2019 election campaign (Plaid Cymru, 2019). It reflected an attempt to position Wales as an active subject capable of determining its own destiny, rather than a passive object determined by the so-called Westminster parties.

In this third general election in just four years we are offered a poisoned chalice between two divided Westminster parties. ... So rather than being about them, let’s make this election about us, about our ambition for Wales. We can break the pattern of a century of elections in which Wales has overwhelmingly backed Westminster parties. (Plaid Cymru, 2019: 9).

...

Our MPs are known for punching above their weight. They have tirelessly stood up to the Westminster establishment– and put Wales first. ... We’re ready to take this fight to Westminster.” (Plaid Cymru, 2019: 10).

In his 2019 manifesto speech, Price described both the Conservative and Labour parties as Westminster parties that form ‘a poisoned chalice’ for the people of Wales. Such an expression was used to heighten the sense of danger and thus the perception of threat and anxiety, since poison causes death and symbolises the end of life. Price also created a ‘them-us’ dichotomy to gather the people of Wales under the umbrella of ‘us’. Westminster was once again portrayed as being outside Wales and against Wales. The phrase ‘taking the fight to Westminster’ was intended to portray the British parliament as a battlefield. Plaid Cymru MPs thus become the soldiers of Wales fighting on such a front.

The Brexit crisis has demonstrated that Westminster is broken, and the people of Wales are paying the price. We are best served by our own National Parliament – the Senedd which is more inclusive and more representative than Westminster. (Plaid Cymru, 2019: 80).

The dichotomy between Westminster and the Senedd was a prominent discourse in the 2019 manifesto. This discourse positioned Westminster as the institution that had inflicted a terrible price on the Welsh nation, and the Senedd as the institution that defended the interests of that nation. A broken Westminster proved incapable of serving the interests of the Welsh people. That is why Plaid Cymru emerged as an actor to protect the interests of Wales in the Brexit process.

In the face of the pandemic, a cost of living crisis and a hostile Conservative government in Westminster - determined to do everything it can to undermine our national institutions – it is in our nation’s interests for parties to work together for Wales. (Plaid Cymru, 2022a: 7).

In 2022 Local Government Manifesto, Westminster once again was depicted as ‘the outside of Wales’ and positioned as ‘against the Welsh interests’. The location of the Conservative government was highlighted as ‘Westminster’ to emphasise its outsider status. The words ‘crisis’, ‘hostile’ and ‘undermine’ were deliberately used to reinforce the negative connotations of Westminster. The word ‘hostile’ corresponds directly to the bad intentions that make positive action by Westminster impossible for Welsh people.

CONCLUSION

Plaid Cymru is a political party that focuses its policies and activities on Wales and the people of Wales. It usually comes third or fourth in general elections behind the UK's two main parties, the Conservative Party and the Labour Party. The main aim of this study was to understand the key components of Plaid Cymru's political discourse towards the United Kingdom and the political parties outside Wales within the United Kingdom. For this purpose, Plaid Cymru's official documents such as election manifestos, action plans and chairperson's speeches were analysed. According to the findings of the research, Plaid Cymru has built its political discourse mainly on the Wales - United Kingdom dichotomy. This discourse is particularly evident in its positioning of Westminster, the political centre of the United Kingdom, against Wales and Cardiff, the Welsh capital.

The central argument in Plaid Cymru's political discourse is that Westminster does not serve the interests of the people of Wales. The 'out of Wales' discourse embodied in Westminster extends to other parties within the UK. In this way, the other parties also focus on the London-centred location in which they are based, rather than on the interests of Wales. To reinforce this argument, Westminster and London-based parties are often portrayed as a threat to Wales, creating a sense of anxiety, uncertainty and insecurity in the Welsh public.

Plaid Cymru's most prominent promises are therefore to defend Wales, to fight for Wales in Westminster, and to save Wales from being dependent on London-based political parties. It promises to move the country's government from London to Cardiff (or home, as the party defines it) with a Wales-centred approach. Plaid Cymru's promises are underpinned by a desire to be more favourable in the eyes of the Welsh public than the London-based parties.

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