

# Winning for Wales:

## Remaking the Welsh Labour movement for Government

A Wales 20:20 commission by  
Huw Lewis AM



**Wales 20:20**  
Welsh politics. Done differently.

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### Introduction

It is a great privilege to be writing the first pamphlet for Wales 20:20, an organisation that I hope will prompt and produce meaningful debate under the democratic socialist umbrella for many years to come. I would like to invite readers, at this early stage, to make full use of the 'online forum' set up to collate readers' responses to all Wales 20:20 publications. It can be accessed at [www.wales2020.com](http://www.wales2020.com).

The decision to focus my contribution on the future of Welsh Labour party reform might seem prosaic to some, but the purpose here is not to grab headlines – it is how to best achieve lasting progressive change in Wales. There is only one way to do that – win elections and win them well through the creation of a long-term progressive consensus.

**I contend that the only way to do this will require the remaking of Welsh Labour from top to bottom, as presently organised it is simply not fit for the purpose of winning Assembly elections** - as evidenced by the deeply worrying and disappointing result in May. Not only did we lose seats, but we are now faced with a dozen

marginals in the 2011 elections, defending only notional majorities in former strongholds.

In no sense is this pamphlet meant to be a critique of the last Assembly election, it is a forward-looking in nature and hopefully positive in its suggestions.

The 2007 National Assembly election results prompted a number of commentators to conclude that securing a majority is the impossible dream of Welsh politics, that it may happen once every 20 years or so – more by accident than design. I think this counsel of despair is both dangerous and disingenuous; it risks becoming a self fulfilling prophecy.

It perplexes me that some should aim so low, when Labour in Wales can easily secure 30 seats with 40% of the vote. Not only is that achievable – indeed that was the result in 2003 – it should be our baseline for future campaigns. In the last three Westminster elections we have averaged 48% of Welsh votes.

It must be accepted of course that there are different dynamics at play in the two sets of elections (in addition to a different system of voting), and these will probably

become more significant over time. However, neither should we exaggerate the point. In both Westminster and Assembly elections people are being asked to put their cross against a party who best represents their ideals and values. That is a debate I think the Welsh Labour party – properly resourced – is always in the best position to win.

There are a number of challenges before us – adequate resources being high up the list – but other even more fundamental questions about our role as a distinct party in Wales. I believe that “Welsh” Labour needs to exist both in name and entity, indeed I coined the term Welsh Labour as a response to devolution. It is time to flesh out the idea of what we want that term to mean.

We do need our own organisation that can better understand and respond to our own unique set of challenges. At the moment, the party in Wales is staffed as though it were a regional office of the UK party. This arrangement fails to recognise the huge difference, and workload, devolution entails for the Welsh party.

We also need to take our friends with us – some old ones - the Trade Unions the Co-operative Party, Labour Students and the Fabians; and some new. We need to develop

further the Labour Supporters Network, recognition that party membership is anathema to some, who would nonetheless like to help shape debate on the left of Welsh politics.

A great deal has already been achieved. Rhodri Morgan has undoubtedly moved Welsh Labour forward and moulded a party in his own charismatic image. The challenge of the younger generation must now be to build on those foundations and renew the party's machinery, relationships and vision in order to create an inclusive modern organisation ready for the 2011 Assembly elections and beyond.



**Huw Lewis AM, Merthyr Tydfil & Rhymney**  
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## **The Challenge – Why we need to remake the Welsh Labour Party.**

In 2007 we lost an election in a way which betrayed the fact that **our party had become unfit for purpose in a maturing post-devolution Wales**. Yes, we won the most seats, but our share of the vote dropped 10% over two years and we now face a raft of challenges in new marginal seats in 2011. We must take this stark reality as our starting point – without significant change we will see more reversals in the coming years, none of which are inevitable.

The lack of discourse on this subject since May has been deeply shocking. In Scotland, the Labour Party is preparing for root and branch reform after losing just a fraction of its vote. Whereas the Scots could apportion blame to the cash for honours circus (which afforded the SNP blanket coverage) and stick their collective heads in the sand, they choose to grasp the thistle instead. The truth is we performed worse in Wales, without a comparable excuse and yet seem reluctant to begin the process of change that will reconnect us with people in Wales.

Now is the time to make the case for that change; not in personnel, but in party culture and organisation. Not only will it take many months, even years to develop a programme of change, Gordon Brown has already shown that it is possible to renew the Labour Party in Government – wait any longer and we will be going through this process in opposition in Wales. The national leadership tour and accompanying debates in the Deputy Leadership contest have blown a fresh wind through the party on a national level – with members rejoining the party and a wave of optimism returning to the centre-left. It is a process we need to build on in Wales.

The challenges we face are not insignificant:

- Falling vote
- Low membership with many members no longer active
- Lack of resources at a national level
- Growing hostility towards traditional party politics in the Western world.

Rarely now do you hear “we’re all Labour here” when you knock on a house with more than one generation living there – assumptions can no longer be made about “Labour areas”.

The rise of single issue politics – and politicians – has also weakened the position of the main parties. As noted in a recent Fabian essay, charities and Non-Governmental Organisations are in a much better position to engage today’s citizen with a range of options on involvement – ranging from volunteering abroad to a simple £2 a month direct debit. Getting involved on a single issue, like third world debt, is an easier sell given today’s time pressured lifestyles than joining a party committed to the same aim.

There is also the issue of trust which, policy decisions and the personal conduct of politicians aside, must be necessarily eroded when a party spends a long time in government. That is true in Wales, as well as at a UK level – Welsh Labour’s polling before the 2007 election showed Rhodri Morgan and Tony Blair with remarkably similar approval ratings. Today’s media certainly plays a role in shortening the shelf-life of successful politicians, and we need to think about how we encourage a fresh intake of Assembly Members at a faster pace than we have witnessed over the last 8 years.

Calling for an overhaul of how the party is run in Wales should not be seen as an implied criticism of the current

personnel in charge – indeed this pamphlet asks that we find more of the same and give them better support and better targeted resources.

Organisationally, Welsh Labour does a miraculous job with what has effectively been reduced to a skeleton staff. The boom/bust approach to staffing which runs with the Westminster election cycle does not give the Welsh party the chance it needs to develop a conversation with voters before an Assembly campaign.

With only three full-time Welsh organisers on the staff for the 2007 Assembly elections the party was always going to be over-stretched. This low staffing also leads to an over reliance on well-meaning but under trained volunteers, who do not necessarily have the required understanding of Labour politics to develop a meaningful strategy. A professional campaign requires professional campaigners running teams of volunteers – not the other way round.

Relationships with other sections of civic society – most notably with partners in the wider Labour movement – are also falling foul of staff/time pressures. With only three full-time Welsh organisers on the staff for the 2007 Assembly elections the party was always going to be over-stretched

and find it extremely difficult to hold marginal seats – let alone put in a renewed effort in areas like Blaenau Gwent which we should be looking to win back.

The conversation with voters, Trade Unions and other key organisations is vital to winning elections – it should not be an on-off affair only reignited by the excitement of an election, it must be ongoing and it must be meaningful. We need to reach out beyond traditional party structures, and broaden and deepen our contact with local communities.

Finally, there is the role of Welsh Labour MPs and MEPs to consider. At present this wealth of talent is not being properly exploited by the party in Wales – and unless we develop a stronger link between all our elected representatives, Plaid Cymru will succeed in their clear aim of destabilising the relationship to the extent where we become totally divided. The contact group of MPs and AMs is a good idea, but there is not a clear enough set of parameters on what it should be trying to achieve. Most AM and MP constituency relationships are excellent and they work well together locally, but this must be replicated on a Welsh level where we can work together towards common goals.

This set of challenges is daunting, but not insurmountable. In order to create a party that can win elections over the next generation **we must react to the 2007 result as though it were a heavy defeat** – any other response will not be sufficient and we will sleepwalk to a very real loss in 2011 where the number of marginal seats we will be contesting will be unprecedented in modern electoral history.

The only way to successfully combat these challenges is to create a self-sufficient genuinely *Welsh* Labour Party which can properly shape this next exciting phase of devolution.

## Reshaping the Labour Movement in Wales

This, simply put, is our biggest challenge in reforming the party in Wales – Trade Unions and other affiliated bodies must have a much greater say in how to create the right policies for Wales. Daily contact with working people across Wales should put Trade Unions in the box seat as far as policy development is concerned – in the key areas of equal opportunities, workplace training, job creation, employment rights and manufacturing.

This is not about a return to beer and sandwiches, or a call for a reassessment of the Clause IV debate. Nor can it be all one way traffic, but the relationship between the Labour *Party* and the Labour *Movement* in Wales must be overhauled urgently.

That will require new ground-breaking policy proposals from the Unions in return for a guaranteed seat at the decision making table to ensure any such policy could be delivered. In my brief tenure as Deputy Minister for Economic Development, I was shocked to discover the lack of formalised regular liaison that took place between the Welsh Assembly Government and the Unions. Whilst some fault

must rest on both sides, action must now be taken – **the priorities of working people and their member organisations should be at the heart of any progressive party of government.**

This should include a government role in increasing Trade Union membership, and crucially a massive new commitment from the entire Welsh public sector to improving the quality of life of its workers through a “career ladder” scheme. The Trade Unions must be the ones to help drive through this huge shift in the culture of the workplace. Over time this should extend to progressive elements of the private sector who would be encouraged to work with the Assembly Government and Trade Unions to emulate the career ladder model. This option is already being explored through my Child Poverty Action Plan, but it requires pressure and emphasis to expand it across the public sector and that should come from the union movement and Welsh Labour working together.

The superb work being led by the Transport and General Workers Union (and others) on rights for migrant workers for example, needs to be better understood and integrated into broader campaigns for the wider Labour Movement.

The Labour Party was created to represent the interests of progressive people organised in the workplace. In this respect little has changed – it is that group of people for whom we try to effect most change and who make up our most valuable resource in terms of members, thinkers and supporters. However, a growing dislocation between different branches of the Labour movement in Wales risks not just a weakening of these ties, but schism.

There is something profoundly disturbing about the current relationship between the Labour Party in Wales and what should be its most natural of brethren – the Trade Unions and the Co-Operative movement. The latter have become the undervalued pair in the progressive triumvirate needed to drive Wales forward. That is all the more frustrating considering the success co-ops enjoy across Wales – with countless examples of how people affect change by acting together. Despite the existence of a Labour Assembly/Co-operative Party Group and TULO (Trade Union Labour Organisation) and the regular meetings that do take place in Wales, there remains a vast untapped potential of policy ideas, best practise and organisational lessons which can only be fully exploited through more formal relationships and indeed a change in working patterns from all partners.

Elsewhere in Europe, Trade Unions are the vanguard of policy creation in areas like health & safety and work/life balance – we need the same action and support in Wales.

**Genuine social partnership must be the cornerstone of a renewed Welsh Labour.**

Historically, co-operatives and the Unions have not just helped, or followed Labour in Wales, they have led on the policy agenda, and quietly through successful stand alone projects they continue to do fantastic work, but we have stopped recognising that and no longer progress common values from a common platform. This goes for all affiliates who make up the Labour family – Young Labour and Labour Students in Wales for example should be, as it once was, the training ground for new leaders and great Trade unionists of the future – these organisations are now undervalued, underused and underfunded.

How then to turn these struggling relationships around?

Again it comes down to breaking down the election cycle mentality. Unquestionably Welsh Labour needs the financial support of the Trade Unions and the volunteer hours of members to run successful campaigns, but this support

could be better utilised and work better – both for Labour and the Trade Unions in Wales.

The Trainee Organiser Scheme developed by the UK Labour Party has been a phenomenal success, and produced some of the most talented men and women to come through Labour ranks over recent years. Their expertise and experience have been the difference between victory and defeat in many a marginal – and what is more, they have rekindled the burning embers of many local parties creating new self sufficient organisations. We need to build on this success and I believe this is where newly deployed Trade Union funding could help Welsh Labour the most; through **the creation of a trainee college and resource centre.**

The development of a bespoke course for organisers in Wales could be funded in part through donations from Trade Union partners, rather than, or even in addition to the ad hoc party campaign financing which currently takes place. The impact of such a move would be dramatic, lasting, and far-reaching. Trade Unions would benefit, not just from the likely increase in the number of Labour seats in Welsh elections, but also through practical support these trained organisers could offer the union movement. This should be

formalised through each organiser devoting a day per week to Trade union work.

Such a college would also have much wider uses, and should be seen in the context of developing the Labour movement more generally in Wales. A home for away days, policy forums, a social history library for example. With a variety of courses on offer – there is no reason why we cannot pursue the teaching of accredited courses.

Running alongside this scheme to bring more paid organisers into the party, we should further develop the “lay organisers” scheme (newly launched in England), passing on skills to volunteers at a local level who can help modernise constituency parties and introduce modern campaigning techniques. Aside from the obvious benefits of such a scheme, by having a respected local party member as an agent of change, you lose the suspicion attached to “diktats from Cardiff”.

The Co-operative movement should also have a voice right at the heart of government. There are over 29,000 people who are members of the some 600 co-operatives across Wales – the very embodiment of sustainable social and economic solidarity on a local scale. It is a network that

deserves more support and a stronger voice inside the party. Any future Labour administration should therefore commit to having **a Minister with direct responsibility for Co-operative and social enterprise development.**

Like trade unionists, the daily experiences of co-op members make them immediately qualified to add to the policy debate inside Welsh Labour. We should recognise this through the creation of a professorial chair of Co-operative Studies at a University in Wales, funded in part by a Labour administration.

Local Labour Parties should also be encouraged to do more with their local co-ops and credit unions. The spirit of co-operation is a deep and vital element in Welsh communities, and co-ops offer us a route into people’s daily struggles and experiences – helping us to broaden and deepen our base and develop new ideas for progressive social change.

## Democracy at the heart of change

Gordon Brown has recently, quite rightly, looked to overhaul the national party's policy making machine, in order to democratise the process. This will give a greater role to individual members, but also aim to bring in interested people from outside the party. We should use this consultation as a base for our own discussion on policy creation in Wales – not least on the subject of devolution. Contrary to popular belief, I do not have a firm view of what devolution should look like – which powers we should have and which we shouldn't; or if and when we should have a Scots-style Parliament. As a subscriber to John Smith's opinion on devolution – that it should be a mechanism to bring power and decision making closer to communities, essentially a socialist vision – I think we should be worrying more about what devolution *delivers* and not what our standing orders say.

To that end, I think we should aim to tighten our links with social partners in Wales, and creating a more long-term approach through the creation of a Party Programme which extends beyond the lifetime of just one Assembly term. Following the example set by social democrats elsewhere in

Europe **we should consider a 10 year Party Programme** with the idea of articulating our broad aims and values relating to the issues of the day – a long-term manifesto that sets out our vision for the foreseeable future, including what we want to make of devolution. Again, this is a process that will help develop Welsh Labour as a party better able to take responsibility for its own problems, develop its own potential and which is more in tune with the challenges of modern Wales.

Certainly, we have made great strides forward in democratising our policy agenda over recent years, and the policy forums and the special conference which helped develop Labour's 2007 election manifesto provided a crucible of genuine, informed debate. However, the radical set of priorities which were agreed – and that set pulses racing amongst members and media alike – were sadly lost in the final document which relied too much on lists of pledges which did little to convey the exciting programme of change the members voted to instigate. When we receive the mandate of the Labour movement to put an issue like Child Poverty front and centre of the political stage, we must be bold enough to pursue that aim.

We need to guard against this happening again through a discussion about the Clause V arrangement giving party chiefs the final say on the content of future Welsh manifestos. The idea that we have to present surprise policy commitments a few weeks before an election in order to grab the news agenda for the day is unhealthy and as we have already seen can lead to undeliverable commitments and gimmickry. A stable, lengthy process involving more open discussion with more members and different elements of civic society might seem less exciting – but it would be more democratic, produce better results and would encourage participation from new or previously disenfranchised groups. These steps would fit well with Brown's proposals for a more inclusive approach to policy nationally, with individual members being given more of a say – ultimately through an OMOV (One Member One Vote) ballot on final policy papers.

Currently, party members and other community groups are not afforded a strong enough voice in policy development - neither are our MPs; this is a fundamental weakness that must be addressed. It is criminal to ignore the experience and specialist knowledge at our disposal. I would hope that we could build on the elements of policy development that did prove successful last time around, but adding some real

teeth to cluster meetings and policy forums; developing these into a formal Regional Policy Network, based on the five electoral regions in Wales. Regular reviews of the policy recommendations coming out of the Regional Networks would give a genuinely substantial role to the AM/MP Contact Group and utilise the legislative experience of both sets of politicians in a proactive and constructive way. Currently, the Contact Group functions as an informal arrangement and has no constitutional status – a 'tightening up' of this arrangement could be beneficial to MPS and AMs alike.

Policy which is rigorously tested through the filters of CLPs, five Regional Policy Networks, the Welsh Labour Policy team and the AM/MP Policy Contact Group would make for serious and robust proposals that could be presented at Conference for debate. In the interests of widening our base we should also consider opening the proposed Regional Policy meetings to the Labour Supporters Network and to other community organisations and interest groups – we should not get bogged down in talking to ourselves and we should utilise the knowledge and expertise of our friends and neighbours.

The newly proposed formal role inside the policy process for MPs is critical. The Welsh Labour Party cannot be successfully renewed without first addressing the widening gulf between elected representatives in Cardiff and Westminster. MPs are currently, unfairly, portrayed in the Welsh media as outsiders or pariahs in comparison to “mainstream” Welsh Assembly politics – this notion cannot be allowed to take hold. My hope is that by adding a meaningful role to the Contact Group this will foster closer links between the Assembly and the Parliamentary Labour Party.

There should be some give and take however. Whereas MPs remain in the electoral college for the choice of Welsh Labour leader, the AMs (and indeed MSPs) are not members of the national electoral college – despite this being the election of outright Labour Party leader in the UK. As a party we should consider revisiting both this issue and requiring a designated Welsh Labour National Assembly for Wales representative on the National Policy Forum. This would provide us with a critical out-looking link to the broader policy making agenda.

The Welsh Labour Policy Forum is also in need of much more support and resources to allow it to function properly,

otherwise the goodwill and talents on that body will not be fully utilised. Without being able to make visits to pilot projects, meet with National Policy Forum members and members across Wales, the WPF will not make the impact it should. Neither should we lose sight of the fact that as members in Wales, we have a say on UK Labour Party policy too on crucial non-devolved matters like Welfare; we should not shy away from our broader responsibilities.

The final and most fundamental point we must address in making our party more open and democratic is discovering new ways to reach out to new people and organisations. I cannot pretend to be technologically savvy, but I manage to maintain a decent enough blog and internet site which plays a small part in stimulating political debate in Wales – which is more than can be said for the Welsh Labour internet output during the May election. The homepage and the accompanying blog was not up to scratch, below the standard even of the last Assembly election site in 2003.

In a world where campaigns and information exchanges are increasingly digitalised, we must up our game here. Labour bloggers acting independently do a good job for party debate, but it requires a more robust and co-ordinated approach to genuinely start shaping public debate online.

The creative use of the internet, email and accompanying technologies allows you to converse quickly – and cheaply – with thousands of interested parties. We are exploring these options encouragingly through Labour's mpurl network, but we must also be thinking about broadening our online conversations. IT, properly used, is a low cost high-speed connection to half the households in Wales.

## **Conclusion**

I recognised at the beginning of this pamphlet that it would require an ambitious set of proposals to properly turn Welsh Labour into a party fit for winning a majority in future elections – I hope this submission is nothing short of that. Clearly I do not think each suggestion will be welcomed unanimously and immediately implemented, this should be seen as a discussion paper. I am sure that there are some who will react angrily to the very suggestion that dramatic change is needed. That is always the case, but I would hope this pamphlet is used to spark a genuine debate on the future of the Welsh party.

Those who doubt the need for change need only look again at the results of the last few elections in Wales, and think too about the declining number of paid, trained staff at Welsh Labour. Blaming outside influences will not get us anywhere, nor will it win us any new friends in Wales.

### **We must become masters of our own destiny.**

There is nothing inevitable about our decline as a party in Wales, nothing inevitable about 30 Assembly seats

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becoming a generational high water mark, nothing inevitable about the stagnating relationships with partners in the Labour movement. However, it will require help from those outside the party – the Trade Unions and the Co-operative Movement – who have the ability, the resources and the experience to play a much fuller role in Welsh politics.

I have always felt that in Wales we could go further, faster on the road to a democratic socialist consensus on the subjects that matter most to Labour members – equality of opportunity, freedom from poverty and the development of strong safe communities. **For Labour to make that lasting change in Wales, we must first change ourselves.** That is our first challenge, and one which we must undertake urgently before it becomes our first task in opposition.

## Wales 20:20 Welsh politics. Done differently.

### About the author

Huw Lewis was first elected as Assembly Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney in 1999.

Born in Merthyr Tydfil in 1964, he was educated at Edinburgh University. A former chemistry teacher, his interests include education and the challenges facing the South Wales valleys.

Huw was Assistant General Secretary of the Welsh Labour Party prior to his election to the National Assembly in May 1999, during which time he first coined the term 'Welsh Labour'.

Re-elected to the National Assembly in May 2007 with a majority of 4,581 Huw was appointed Deputy Minister for the Economy & Transport with special responsibility for Regeneration before losing his post in the coalition reshuffle.

He has reviewed the Assembly Government's flagship anti-poverty programme, Communities First and wrote the Welsh Assembly Government's Action Plan to eliminate child poverty.

Huw is married to Lynne Neagle (Labour Assembly Member for Torfaen) and their first child, James, was born in June 2002.

