



**RESPONSE TO**

**THE COMMISSION ON LOCAL  
GOVERNMENT ELECTORAL  
ARRANGEMENT IN WALES**

**'IMPROVING LOCAL DEMOCRACY'**

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## **IMPROVING LOCAL DEMOCRACY**

### **ABOUT THE EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE**

The Evangelical Alliance Wales is an umbrella body representing churches from different denominations from all over Wales to government and the media. It represents a wide spectrum including churches within the older denominations e.g. the Church in Wales and the Baptist Church through to the new denominations of the twentieth century, Elim, Assemblies of God and Pioneer etc.

### **PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT:**

The Evangelical Alliance Wales welcomes the creation of the 'Commission on Local Government Electoral Arrangements in Wales' and the decision to address the challenge of reinvigorating Welsh local democracy.

### **1) PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION AND DEMOCRATIC REINVIGORATION**

PR would have significant positive effects on the culture of Welsh local democracy. In the first instance, to the extent that votes do not get wasted in the context of PR, there would be a far greater incentive for people to vote. The die-hard Labour voter in a solidly Conservative ward need not feel that there is no point in his voting because his vote will count for nothing. Under PR it will count and could make a difference. In a context where there is real concern about voter turnout this must be significant. Furthermore, parties with small bases of support will have a far greater incentive to contest all seats in the context of PR thus terminating uncontested elections.

Rather than seeking to address the representative nature, or rather unrepresentative nature, of councillors through prescriptive quotas, which can become the source of much controversy, the objective must be to resist the development of a static political culture. Presiding over the development of entrenched concentrated pockets of vested interests, such cultures do not require representatives to maintain a high degree of interest in all their constituents because they know that their position is safe. To the extent that PR injects a dynamic into local government that erodes majorities creating a framework wherein councillors cannot relax into the presumption of re-election, it will provide an important means of ensuring that the diversity of constituents views are better represented.<sup>1</sup> More significantly, however, PR will make it easier for minority interests themselves to obtain representation as independents outside the main political parties.

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<sup>1</sup> This point should be qualified in the sense that there can be no doubt that those elected by PR from the top of lists find themselves in extremely safe positions. The point is, however, that the position of a party as a whole will be more responsive to changes in votes cast.

## **2) PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION AND CHECKS AND BALANCES**

Having made these points, though, there is a sense in which one can only fully appreciate the imperative for PR in local government after understanding the logic of “first past the post” and why this does not make sense in the context of local democracy today.

The rationale for “first past the post” is that its exaggeration of the majority of the winning party is helpful because it ensures that this party - favoured by more people than any other - has the power to govern effectively. It is less likely to give rise to minority administrations and the imperative for coalition building, and more importantly, coalition sustaining. Thus, whilst it does not result in a pure, proportional form of democracy, it does produce a framework that responds to the basic swings of public opinion whilst providing for stable government. It is the contention of this submission that whilst this logic is compelling in certain circumstances, this is not the case in the context of Welsh Local Government today. There are two main reasons for this that we would highlight:

### **a] THE 2000 ACT AND NEW CONCENTRATIONS OF POWER**

In the first instance the shift from the old committee system to the Cabinet system of government has resulted in the concentration of power in the hands of a tight, small group of people. The creation of many 'back-bench' councillors has strategically meant a movement from what was a more “checked and balanced” system of government towards one that involves more concentrated allocations of power. Whilst this observation is not made to criticise the move to the cabinet style - which has merits which need not concern us here - the point is that in making local government less “checked and balanced”, the 2000 Act generates a need for the creation of effective “checks and balances”. In this context the need for the ruling party to have its majority exaggerated through “first past the post” is made very much weaker. Indeed an accurate reflection of other parties through PR would provide an excellent means of re-introducing checks and balances to a system of government that has recently seen them eroded.<sup>2</sup>

### **b] EXAGGERATING NATURAL MAJORITIES**

To appreciate fully the weakness of the 'first past the post' argument at a local level, however, one must recognise that in the context of small homogenous communities there are often in any event very significant majorities. When refracted through 'first past the post' these majorities can become vast. It is helpful to look at the majorities in some Councils and then to translate these into seats in the House of Commons where we are more used to thinking about what makes for a healthy party balance.

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<sup>2</sup> We note that the 2000 Act did involve the introduction of a kind of check in the form of the standards committee with its competencies in the realm of ethics. This form of check, however, cannot compensate for the kind of check emanating from the provision of an effective opposition and therein the provision of vigorous debate.

Take Torfaen for instance where Labour hold 88.5% of the seats, independents 6.8%, Liberal Democrats 2.2% and the Conservatives 2.2%. If one translates this to the House of Commons Labour would have 584 seats instead of their already massive 409! This does not make for a healthy, “checked and balanced” democracy. It makes the holders of power feel too secure and the electorate feel that they can be taken for granted. Why bother voting in the context where the ruling party has 88.5% of the seats?

<b>TORFAEN</b>	<b>Percentages of Seats</b>	<b>HOC Seat Translation</b>
Labour	88.5%	584
Independents	6.8%,	45
Liberal Democrats	2.2%	15
Conservatives	2.2%	15
<b>NEWPORT</b>		
Labour:	83%	547
Conservatives	11%	75
Lib Dem	2%	13
Others	4%	26
<b>BLAENAU GWENT</b>		
Labour	81%	534
Ind	12%	79
Liberal Democrats	2%	13

When one places the following alongside each other:

- the concentration of power resulting from the 2000 Act and
  - the significance of majorities without the exaggeration of first past the post,
- it is clear that the introduction of PR would constitute a significant first step in restoring “checks and balances”.

### **QUALIFICATIONS**

Having made these points it is important to make two qualifications:

In the first instance the impact of PR on seats would not necessarily change the fact that parties would still continue to govern with significant majorities. Nor should it, since this is a democratic expression of the will of the people. The point is, however, that in such circumstances there is no logic in the use of “first past the post” which has the effect of exaggerating the already significant majorities and thus reducing the number of seats for other parties.

In the second instance one must point out that, whilst some Councils like Torfaen do have very significant majorities, this is not the case for all Local Authorities. There are a significant number of Councils in Wales where no party has overall control and where thus ‘party’ “checks and balances” are already in place.

### 3) CHANGING STRUCTURES OR CHANGING CULTURES?

#### FROM CITIZENSHIP TO CONSUMERSHIP

Having made all of these comments, it is important to qualify the significance of PR as the solution to the local democratic malaise. Changing the *external* structures of democracy will help to encourage change. Ultimately, however, the kind of changes that will increase voter turnout really significantly will depend on changing the *internal* structures of democracy, i.e. the socio-political voting culture.

It is the contention of this submission that our troubled socio-political voting culture is to some significant degree the result of a development that is supposed to make government better value for money and thus win the approval of tax payers: the marketisation of government and transformation of politics from a model based on **citizenship** to one based on **consumerism**. This process has involved the partial break-up of government into semi-autonomous agencies. Structurally this results in a shift from a 'centred' form of 'government' towards a 'decentred' networked form of 'governance'.<sup>3</sup> In the context of a networked structure, where relationships are mediated through the market rather than a foundational basis of moral community, the standing of the public square is weakened, becoming a 'means to an end' and not in any sense an 'end in itself'. Based on market relationships, the public square can only attract the attention of consumers (citizens) on the basis of seeking to help them realise their own (private) objectives. In such an environment notions of public service, public duty and public truth can have only very limited expression.<sup>4</sup>

Whilst it may be helpful to think of citizens as consumers in some senses, the drift of politics in this direction is extremely dangerous because moral communities cannot afford to be held together by the shallow bonds of fickle consumer relationships. Consumerism is essentially ego centric, 'the customer is always right', and makes for very bad politics in the sense that it is extremely impatient, calling into being an 'instant coffee, fast food society'. Enduring political achievements, as opposed to the 'spun images of the day', are never instant. Indeed these ends require dogged determination animated by the inspiration of a public good. If people engage with politics as consumers and form the judgement that the system as a whole is failing, rather than the current government, they won't buy the product and will express this at a basic

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<sup>3</sup> Consideration of consumer politics provides us with the opportunity for the consideration of what is effectively an ideal type which is extremely useful but which will require some qualification when concluding.

Re the marketisation of the state see:

Pierre, 'The Marketisation of the State: Citizens, Customers and the Emergence of the Public Market' in BG Peters and DJ Savoie (eds) *Governance in a Changing Environment*, Montreal and Kingston: McGill/Queens University Press, pp. 47-69.

David Osborne and Ted Gaebler, *Reinventing Government*, Penguin 1993.

<sup>4</sup> Camilleri and Falk, *The End of Sovereignty*, Basingstoke, Edward Elgar, 1992, chapter 8.

This shift has, moreover, been greatly exaggerated by the fact that the marketisation of government has coincided with the functionalisation of politics, wherein 'first principle' dogmas have been traded for pragmatism set within the broader context of the liberal capitalist system.

level by not voting. They won't be mobilised by a deeper sense of loyalty because as consumers rather than citizens, the basic reality is not a deep loyalty arising out of a sense of belonging but a shallow market relationship. In the longer term democracy can only be saved by the reinvigoration of the political community and deliberate decision to reject at least the excesses of the functional consumer model of politics.

### **CONSUMERSHIP AND THE RISE OF CIVIL SOCIETY**

In order to fully appreciate the difficulties presenting themselves in the local (and national) democratic malaise, however, it is necessary to understand the role and place of civil society in consumer politics. This requires confrontation with what at first sight is a paradox.

Some might respond to talk of 'consumership' stating that, whilst the individualist ambience attending the shift from citizenship to consumerism constitutes in some senses an accurate characterisation of our age, it sits somewhat awkwardly alongside the extension of the voluntary sector and vitality of an ever more active civil society. One cannot examine the reality of the growth of the voluntary sector and conclude that community is dying and that the demise in voting is simply a function of this development. Whilst the development of community is undeniable, however, it does not negate the shift from citizenship to consumerism. The two processes are in fact interdependent. One cannot hope to understand the cultural challenge emanating from the local democratic malaise until such a time as one properly understands this paradox.

In the age of modern *government* rather than post-modern networked *governance*, although civil society was not collapsed into government, there was a sense in which it was set within the embrace of a foundational political community which contained society and which culturally was its ultimate corporate expression. In this context there was a very intense association between government and national identity. The state was in a real sense a mouthpiece for that identity. In this sense it was easier for the state to sustain the interest and involvement of the people because it was a communal cultural end, part of their identity, rather than a service provider who might not satisfy its customers.

In the context where 'governance replaces government', and the state is consequently no longer the only actor but engages in networks with other players within civil society, the sense of government enfolding national community is made weaker. Rather than it having a *foundational* status, wherein it contains community and is thus the basic national institution, government increasingly exists *alongside* that community. From the perspective of community this has the effect of empowering civic groupings, endowing them with a new autonomy in the context of what is a networked form of participatory democracy. This new autonomy means that people are increasingly likely to live and move and have their being in the context of their own cultural identity detached from the erstwhile strongly developed sense of

political community, local or national.<sup>5</sup> Representation through another agent is symptomatic of the demise of autonomy and thus unattractive. Whilst this is an age of great communal enterprise, therefore, this community all too often is not the community of the whole but the community of a part.

In conclusion there is thus a real sense in which the shift from 'citizenship to consumership' actually is positively related to an explosion of civil society. Community is not removed as a consequence of the development of marketisation, it is privatised and in this context grows rapidly not in separation from politics or within its embrace but rather in a networked form of relationship. In the modern form the political community *underpinned* civil society, in the post-modern form it exists *alongside* civil society.

### **CONSUMERSHIP IN CONTEXT**

Having considered the transformation of government to governance in terms of principle, it is important to be clear that this is a partial transformation. It is not the intention of this submission to argue that the reality of the basic enfolding political community has been completely displaced by a new networked form. Nor has the reality of the political community been wholly deconstructed by new political communities eagerly pursuing civic autonomy. What has taken place, however, is that the sense of the basic political community has been eroded somewhat by the development of networked governance. In this context the challenge that presents itself to local government and indeed national and UK government is the need to strengthen the reality of common political community.<sup>6</sup> If people are to vote then they must feel themselves to be part of/have an identity with, their political community in which they have both rights and responsibilities.

Some might contend that the most appropriate response to networked governance is its democratic accomplice: participatory democratic expression. Indeed a good deal has been written in praise of this approach to democracy. In our judgement, however, whilst animating parts of civil society, and thus trading upon communal imagery, participatory democracy is informed by what is essentially the individualist quest for civic autonomy. It has its place but should not be thought of as superior to representative democracy, which seals the reality of our membership of a common state/local state community and a common state/local state centre of belonging. If one is to reinvigorate representative democracy one must strengthen the underpinning political community and thus secure a homely public square. The local public square must be a significant arena wherein people are motivated out of a conviction of

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<sup>5</sup> This is seen with greatest clarity through examination of new social movements and their relationships with government.

Joseph Camilleri and Jim Falk, *The End of Sovereignty? The Politics of a Shrinking and Fragmenting World*, Edward Elgar, Aldershot, 1992, see chapter 8.

Negri and Hardt, *Empire*, p. 336.

<sup>6</sup> As noted earlier the above argument is pertinent to the UK government but even more so the National Assembly and local government because of the limitation of powers to various forms of service provision. This is especially so in the context of the Ridley legacy, the shift in local government from 'service provider' to 'service commissioner'.

their membership of a moral community rather than their standing as a consumer or passion for civic autonomy.

### **COMMUNITY QUALIFIED**

Having subjected the weakening of the relationship between the communities and government to criticism, it is of course important to be clear that a very strong identity between those communities and government is not necessarily healthy. Many have argued that the deliberate construction of national identities by governments seeking to create a 'people' in whose name government could be held was at the expense of diversity.<sup>7</sup> There have also been suggestions that, endowed with a strong sense of community, governments can become irresponsible invoking the language of nationalism.<sup>8</sup> This concern, however, need not concern us here for two reasons. In the first instance a vibrant local community does not make for nationalism. In the second a strong sense of corporate community need not result in people pursuing any agenda upheld in the name of that community. On the contrary if a government is pursuing foolish policies it should inspire those committed to the long-term interests of the community to oppose those ill-conceived policies.

In the judgement of this submission, the implementation of PR which is sensitive to diversity in the context of a reinvigoration of the local community, constitutes the best way forward. On the one hand people must be encouraged to feel a strong sense of identity with their local community and thus pride or concern about the government that is upheld in its name. Either way they will want to be involved and to vote. On the other hand as a proportional electoral system this will not reflect a monolithic community but a community that sustains the interior diversity that is in fact constitutive of that community.

The Commission cannot properly come to terms with the current malaise in local democracy without addressing this broader cultural challenge. **Evangelical Welsh churches have an important contribution to make to this debate and would welcome the opportunity to explore these issues with the Commission in greater depth.**

### **CONCLUSION**

We would contend, therefore, that the opportunity to introduce PR in local elections would be of very great benefit to Local Government in terms of the provision of checks and balances and the reinvigoration of democracy. We would qualify this, however, very seriously by stating that such changes are of less fundamental importance than strengthening the reality of the underpinning political community and associated public square. There is a need for the reinvigoration of citizen politics and development of the moral community that is Wales, that is Torfaen, Swansea, Anglesey etc rather than the market.

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<sup>7</sup> Negri and Hardt, *Empire*, p. 344.

Camilleri and Falk, *The End of Sovereignty*, chapter 8.

<sup>8</sup> Harold Laski, *The Grammar of Politics*, 1941.

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