Welsh representation on the Labour NEC – a personal statement

By Darren Williams

There has been widespread media coverage of the decision by Labour’s National Executive Committee (NEC) on 20 September to grant additional powers (subject to conference approval) to the Scottish and Welsh parties. I have personally come in for a fair bit of criticism for voting against one aspect of this – the proposal to give Scotland and Wales seats with voting rights on the NEC – so I just wanted to explain my position.

The proposals that were agreed formed part of a wider ‘party reform’ agenda that has been overseen by the NEC over several months (for the most part, before I joined the NEC at the beginning of July). This includes sections on women’s representation, on young members, on local government, etc. The section on devolution was largely driven by Scottish Labour and the Scottish Executive Committee (SEC) carried out an extensive consultation with members and party units. By contrast, the consultation in Wales seems to have begun and ended with the Welsh Executive Committee (WEC) before I became a WEC member in February.

The WEC was told, at the first full meeting that I attended, on 14 May, that discussions with the NEC on greater devolution for the Welsh party had been taking place, with Andy Richards (Unite regional secretary) representing the WEC. There was general agreement that any increase in devolved powers offered to the Scottish party should also be offered to the Welsh party but otherwise not a lot of detail, although some examples were given, including (I believe) devolved control over selections and formalisation of the position of Welsh leader. Certainly, nothing was presented to the meeting in writing. The official minutes make reference only to the control of Westminster parliamentary selections, which the Scottish party had requested but which had not been in the original Welsh Labour submission. The minutes record that it was agreed, nevertheless, to follow Scotland’s example in this respect. The minutes do not mention the possibility of Welsh representation on the NEC and I certainly do not recall any mention of this, which I think I would have done, given its evident significance.

After I joined the NEC a few weeks later, the first meeting I attended, on 5 July, was of two sub-committees, the Disputes Panel and the Organisation Sub-Committee. The latter was presented with a progress report from the various strands of the party reform discussions. The summary for Scotland mentioned the NPF acknowledging and resolving policy differences between the devolved parties and wider UK party; clarifying SEC control of Holyrood selections and possibly adding Westminster selections; confirming Scottish Labour responsibility for local government; and formalising Scottish party’s responsibility for CLP management. The bullet-points relating to Wales were essentially the same (albeit reflecting Welsh Labour’s currently slightly weaker degree of autonomy) but add formalisation of the role of Welsh leader and establishment of the post of deputy leader. There was no reference to representation for Scotland and/or Wales on the NEC.

Nor has there been any detailed consideration of party devolution by the two subsequent WEC meetings: the meeting held on 9 July was given over entirely to a post mortem on the EU referendum campaign and the meeting on 3 September expressed concern about the cancellation of a ‘party reform’ away-day and the potential implications for the proposals for Wales, without going into any details of the latter.

I should make it clear at this point that I have always supported the principle of the Welsh party having greater control over its own affairs. In particular, Nick Davies and I commented, in our 2009 book, *Clear Red Water,* on the anomaly that, at a time when the Welsh Labour government was diverging significantly from New Labour orthodoxy, the Welsh party’s full-time staff were accountable only to the general secretary in London. Our arguments that the significant degree of political autonomy that already existed within Welsh Labour should be mirrored by a similar degree of organisational autonomy found little support within the Welsh Labour establishment – until recently.

I also supported a proposed rule change put forward by the Campaign for Labour Party Democracy a few years ago, which would have augmented the six-strong CLP section of the NEC by adding two seats, to be elected by Scottish and Welsh members, respectively (until I joined the NEC this year, there had never been a Welsh CLPs rep on the Committee, and Scotland had had only infrequent representation, since the current NEC structure was introduced in the late 1990s). Unfortunately, the rule change was not agreed.

Since Jeremy Corbyn’s original election as Labour leader in September 2015, there have been noticeable efforts by the Welsh leadership to distance the Welsh party from the wider British party. There has been an attempt to rebrand Welsh Labour – clearly to the left of the British party throughout most of the devolution period – as a bulwark of ‘moderation’. This point provides some context for the furore surrounding the proposal to give Wales and Scotland extra representation on the NEC.

At the NEC meeting held on 20 September, and concerned primarily with business to be discussed at the forthcoming party conference, a further ‘party reform’ update was circulated, including rule changes that would need to be put to conference in order to give effect to the proposals recommended by the various working groups. The changes relating to Scotland and Wales reflected those set out in the paper circulated to the Organisation Sub-Committee in July but added two points: that the Scottish and Welsh party leaders should attend ‘Clause V’ meetings to draw up the party’s general election manifesto; and

*“The Scottish and Welsh Labour Party each to be directly represented with voting rights on the NEC by a frontbench member of the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly.”*

The Scottish and Welsh leaders can currently attend as observers and the Scottish leader, Kezia Dugdale, was at this meeting. She argued forcefully that agreeing the rule change would demonstrate the party’s acceptance of the changed realities of devolution and would undermine the SNP’s argument that Scottish Labour is merely a “branch office” of a London-dominated party. She made it clear that she would take up the Scottish seat herself if the change were agreed although it was acknowledged that Carwyn Jones, as leader of a governing party, would not be able to attend NEC meetings in person and would need to delegate this role to another representative.

I pointed out that Welsh Labour has only 29 seats out of the sixty in the Assembly and needs every vote; no Labour AM, therefore, would be able to attend NEC meetings in London on a Tuesday when the Assembly is sitting. I made this point twice in the discussion but it was largely ignored. My second objection to the proposed rule change – that Scotland and Wales should have NEC representation but that these seats should be subject to an OMOV ballot of all members in the countries in question – was also made by other NEC members. Nobody opposed additional representation for Scotland and Wales on principle but it was suggested that the proposal could be considered in more detail by a rescheduled ‘party reform’ away-day after conference, alongside other suggested changes to the NEC’s composition, and that these changes could be agreed by a special conference early in the New Year. When it was put to the vote, however, it was agreed by 16 votes to 14 to put the rule change to the Liverpool conference (the other rule changes relating to Scotland and Wales were uncontentious and it was unanimously agreed to recommend them to conference).

Much of the media coverage of the meeting has presented the vote on Scottish and Welsh NEC representation as a victory for Jeremy Corbyn’s opponents, who would supposedly be strengthened by the inclusion of ‘moderate’ Scottish and Welsh reps on the NEC. My vote against the proposal has, conversely, been portrayed as a reflection of my ‘Corbynista’ factional loyalties and readiness to disregard the interests of Wales and the Welsh party. Criticism on Twitter, led by former AM, Leighton Andrews and Stephen Doughty MP, has been particularly vitriolic: I have been described as “disgraceful” and accused of flouting the wishes of the WEC, on which I also sit, to vote against proposals to which I had failed to object when the WEC discussed them. My critics have shown little interest in my attempts to explain my position but I hope it will be clear from what I have said above that:

* I have long supported greater autonomy for the Welsh party – and was happy, like the rest of the NEC, to support all but one of the rule changes proposed to bring this about;
* I have also consistently supported the principle of NEC representation for Scotland and Wales;
* I believe, however, that the most democratic way to fill the proposed additional NEC positions would be by a ballot of all party members in Scotland and Wales, respectively;
* It is also clear to me that the proposal for Wales to represented on the NEC by a frontbench Assembly Member – or by any AM – is unworkable, as long as the NEC continues to meet in London on a Tuesday (not that a Wednesday or even a Thursday would be much better);
* In voting against this proposal being recommended to conference, I was not seeking to quash the idea of NEC representation for Scotland and Wales altogether, but to refer the matter to an NEC ‘away-day’ on party reform and subsequently a special conference;
* I was also not voting against a proposal to which I had acceded as a WEC member, as it has not been discussed by the WEC since I joined in February and, indeed, I have seen no evidence that the proposal was under serious consideration before this month, as it seems magically to have appeared on the shopping-list of devolution rule changes sometime between 5 July and 20 September.