

PRESELI. PLAID CYMRU AND WALES

John Osmond

Gyfeillion:

I this short address I want to explain why I want to be your candidate in the forthcoming National Assembly elections in May 2007. As befits a Welshman I have three reasons.

1. The first is necessarily somewhat philosophical - linked as it is to Plaid Cymru's fundamental role in building our country's institutions – but I make no apology for that.
2. The second is more instrumental. I believe that if the National Assembly – for which I have campaigned for the whole of my adult life - is to become firmly anchored in the affections of our people it is vital that the elections in 2007 bring about a change of government. And if we are to achieve that, then Preseli is a key seat which Plaid must take from the Labour Party.
3. The third reason is that of all the parts of Wales I cherish, it is Preseli I hold most dear. It is a place I first came to know as a small child and where I have constantly returned over the years and where I now bring my own children. I can think of no other place I would rather have the chance of becoming more integrated with the community and representing.

OUR MISSION

What is Plaid Cymru's task, or to use the contemporary phrase so beloved by organizations of all kinds, what is Plaid Cymru's mission? What is it that distinguishes us from all other political projects and political parties?

The answer, in one short sentence, is quite simply: our role is to build the Welsh nation. No other party has this as their priority or even anywhere laid out in their programme. This is what makes Plaid Cymru so necessary, so urgent and so indispensable.

It seems to me that any formulation of our constitutional objectives is entirely secondary to this primary task. For if we do not have a political nation in the first place how can we in any sense said to be free, or have self-government, or be able promote a role for ourselves in Europe and the world?

The need to protect and enhance the national identity of Wales has always been fundamental to Plaid Cymru's mission. This was how Saunders Lewis expressed it, in a passage from his address to the party's first Ysgol Haf in 1926, 80 years ago:

“In order to ensure the safety of the Welsh concept and culture, political authority is ... essential. Wales must be planned in a Welsh way, and her whole life made Welsh. More freedom must be given to Welsh culture to work like a leaven through the whole of Wales. Welsh education must be made Welsh in spirit and in language. Priority must be given in the schools' syllabus to Welsh literature and Welsh should be made the sole medium of education from the elementary school to the university. Thus every child in Wales, whatever his mother tongue, will inherit Welsh culture and the language which is the only key to that culture ... In a word, the whole of Welsh social life and every instrument of social life, must be constantly and unswervingly adapted towards one aim: a Welsh civilisation for Wales. Only thus will the chain of history and culture and civilized life be kept unbroken in this part of the world, linking us with the past, and giving us nobility, tradition, stability and beneficial development.”

Such a statement of our mission is much more stirring, relevant and challenging than any dry, distant constitutional formulation, whatever that may be. Of course, the objectives are intimately linked to politics and political life. That was why it was necessary to create a political party. As Saunders put it: “Society cannot exist at all without government, without a central authority.” The point was to ensure that our government was a Welsh one; as he said, “Welsh in spirit and language.”

A robust sense of national identity is important for the success of democratic government. It is fundamental to the give-and-take which makes possible the implementation of a coherent national policy programme.

As we know national identity for very many people in Wales has long been ambiguous. To varying degrees people identify themselves as Welsh and/or British, and others pride themselves on being citizens of Wales while originating from elsewhere. This diversity of self-identification is intensified - enriched, it should be said - by the increasing presence of ethnic minority groups. Plaid Cymru needs to be entirely relaxed about these diverse identities.

And we can now afford to be relaxed about them since today the presence of the National Assembly has changed the whole basis of the debate. Whatever any individual's national self-definition, that individual is a voter, is affected by the Government of Wales's decisions, and is thus a Welsh citizen in an entirely new way.

Attracting all Welsh citizens to participate fully in the life of the nation and to identify with its aspirations and interests is key to the success of the nation and its government. As I say, commitment to this task, rather than aiming for any specific constitutional status, is what is distinctive about Plaid Cymru.

And this in the first place is the reason why I wish to stand for Plaid Cymru in this constituency.

CHANGING OUR GOVERNMENT

The second reason I wish to stand is because I hope and believe that 2007 will prove a landmark election in the life of Wales. This is because it holds out the prospect of changing our government and replacing it with one led by Plaid Cymru. This is necessary because only a new and revitalized government led by our party will press ahead with building the Assembly into a proper Parliament.

To achieve this Labour must lose seats in 2007 and Plaid Cymru must win them. Preseli is a key marginal seat, one of four where Plaid has a chance of taking a seat from Labour. This is why I am interested in fighting here and for a constituency seat, rather than on the list.

Although we have our National Assembly it has yet to be firmly established. This part of the task of building the nation is only partially completed. The immediate way forward has been clearly signposted by the cross-party Richard Commission's recommendations for an 80-member legislative parliament elected by the single transferable vote proportional system. As we know this programme has been sidelined by the Labour Party. Responding to self-interest, it refuses to accept the package as a whole and is even hesitant about extending the present Assembly's legislative powers. Instead, it is more interested in defending its majority in the Assembly and the number and role of its MPs at Westminster.

Plaid Cymru now has the chance of becoming the main instrument for achieving the Richard Commission's recommendations. These are a moderate, mature and cross-party assessment of what is best for providing for the effective governance of Wales. Consequently, it is not the programme of any one party. Hence it is entirely appropriate that the parties should co-operate in putting the Richard Commission recommendations into effect. But it is essential as well that Plaid Cymru should be the leading party in this endeavour since, as I have argued, it is the only party that places building the nation at the heart of its programme. And that is why it is so important that we are successful in our campaign in Preseli.

Building democracy through the creation of civic institutions is a continuing historical process that the people of Wales must make and live through themselves. The 1997 referendum demonstrated this. Although the result was extremely narrow, the vote represented a dramatic shift in opinion compared with the referendum in 1979.

Equally significant was the change that took place as a result of the referendum itself. In the years leading up to the referendum polling showed a consistent 40 per cent of the electorate that were against change. The remaining 60 per cent were split between about 25 per cent that supported Labour's Assembly proposals, 25 per cent that favoured a Scottish-style Parliament, with the remaining 10 per cent or so opting for independence. Immediately following the 1997 referendum this pattern shifted fundamentally and has remained more or less constant ever since. Now only about 20 per cent are opposed to some degree of democratic self-government for Wales. About 25 per cent support the current Assembly. Around 15 per cent support independence. But 40 per cent favour moving ahead to achieve a Scottish-style parliament.

The people of Wales now need to make a step-change that will allow a parliament to happen. In the process they will create a more secure political settlement which can begin to deliver on policies that will enhance the democratic and civic character of the nation. However, before this can happen at least four processes need to be gone through:

1. In elections to the National Assembly the people of Wales sense that they have a real choice, not just between parties and candidates, but in being able to vote for an alternative government.
2. The electorate lives through the experience of exercising such a choice.
3. All four political parties unambiguously accept the existence of the National Assembly, wish it to become an effective body along the lines recommended by the Richard Commission, and are prepared to campaign for this in a referendum.
4. A further referendum has been held and approval obtained for the creation of a parliamentary Assembly.

It is likely that the third and fourth of these conditions will only apply after the first two have become operative. That is why winning in Preseli is so important. Such an historic victory would contribute to the process by which Labour would lose control of the Assembly Government, and provide Plaid Cymru with the opportunity of leading an alternative. Then the path will be cleared for creating a proper Parliament for Wales.

In leading this process Plaid Cymru will change for the better. It will find its true role as a major force in the national politics of Wales and emerge as a more normal European party, thinking in terms of the kind of alliances that are necessary to build a consensus for real, long-term improvement.

We need to project ourselves as a pragmatic as well as principled party, committed to progressive change and ready to accept the responsibility of government. If we can do that we can create the electoral credibility to ensure that we will gain significant ground in the 2007 National Assembly elections, not least here in Preseli

PRESELI

Of course, I am aware that for most voters the forthcoming election will not be fought around such complex ideas. Instead, it will be determined by the relative standing of the parties, both in a British and a Welsh context, by the character of the national campaign in Wales and its leadership, and to a great extent by local concerns, especially in a constituency like Preseli.

You will be more familiar with these than I am, and in discussions with you I look forward to learning about and engaging with them. They include:

- Long-term structural problems with affordable housing.

- Properly funding the health service, with a large deficit looming for the Pembrokeshire NHS Trust.
- Oil and gas related developments in Milford Haven, especially the coming of the new LNG terminal.
- Improving communications, in particular the debate around dualling the A40.
- Issues around the National Park, typified by the Bluestone development.

I am not going to say today what my views are on these concerns because first I want to listen in detail to what the party here in Preseli is saying about them. But what I will say is this. Our attitudes should be informed by the philosophical approach I have tried to outline. That is to say we should approach these concerns not in the spirit of a party of opposition but as a party of potential government.

In government politics is inevitably about compromise, about finding a middle way, about dealing fairly with the competing priorities of different interest groups. We should not be afraid of that.

At the same time, of course, we are concerned about our own communities in Preseli and will always do our best to defend them. This underlines the third reason why I want to stand as your candidate: my great love for this place.

I was born and raised in Abergavenny in Gwent, what has now reverted, temporarily I hope, to Monmouthshire. However, since I was three years old I have been visiting Pembrokeshire many times each year, in the early days to stay at the home of my Uncle Jimmy James in Little Haven. It is a corner of Wales I have come to treasure. Since the early 1970s, when I returned to Wales to work for the Western Mail after eight years away – first at University in Bristol and then as a cub reporter on the Yorkshire Post - I have managed to establish my own base in Little Haven. I have had successive second hand caravans on the Howelston Farm caravan site ton the cliff on the edge of the village. Every opportunity I get I walk the coastal paths, take the children surfing and wind sailing, and visit all the wonderful places from the Haven to St Davids and the Preseli Hills.

The third reason I want to stand as your candidate in Preseli is because I want to try and give something back to the place that has given me so much.

What kind of campaign will we run? Again, this is something which I will want to discuss in detail with you who have so much recent experience in fighting elections in this constituency. My instinct is to fight an old-fashioned campaign. That is to say, there is no substitute for knocking doors and meeting people. I want to do as much as possible of that in the coming 18 months. We also need to take to opportunity of building the party into a stronger organization in Preseli, with regular activities linking political education and social activity with fund raising.

What qualifications do I bring to this task? Again – three things. My background in journalism and television give me, I believe, the contacts and communication skills to

help in getting our message across. As Chairman of the cross-party Parliament for Wales Campaign in the 1980s and 1990s I have a record of political campaigning. Finally, as Director of the Institute of Welsh Affairs for the past ten years or so I have developed a wide-ranging knowledge of the policy issues and problems facing our fledgling National Assembly.

THE CHALLENGE

Building the Institute of Welsh Affairs as a broad-based membership organisation, with people involved from all political persuasions, and from all parts of Wales and beyond, has been I believe an essential part of building the institutional infrastructure of our country in this critical time in our country's history.

However, I have no doubt that far and away the most important institution in our political life is Plaid Cymru itself. For without Plaid Cymru, and its work and leadership over the past three generations, we would have no political nation to work with today. All of us stand on the shoulders of our forbears in the party in the task we have in hand today. Here in Preseli, we think especially of D.J. Williams, Abergwaun, and the great Waldo Williams who I once glimpsed in Little Haven, campaigning in the general election of 1970.

Looking back at the history of our party and how intimately its fortunes have been intertwined with those of Wales itself, Dafydd Wigley has recently remarked that we seem to go in twenty year cycles. The party was formed in 1926, in part as a reaction to the horrors and dead-end of the First World War. The following twenty years were a period when the foundations were laid.

1946 saw a turning point when, emerging from the Second World War, and under Gwynfor Evans' remarkable leadership, Plaid Cymru began the task of turning itself from a pressure group into a political party. Twenty years later these efforts culminated in Gwynfor's breakthrough in the Carmarthen by-election, in 1966.

During the next 20 years Plaid Cymru began the task of engaging with the Welsh people and persuading them that it was not only possible, but essential that, if we were to survive as a people we had to become a political as well as a cultural nation and establish our own institutions.

The next turning point was 1986. In the wake of the 1979 referendum setback and the economic onslaught of the 1980s, especially the 1984-85 Miners' Strike, Plaid Cymru finally matured as a serious political party, seeing the future for Wales as being essentially within a European milieu. At that point the notion of Wales in Europe was seen as a radical departure. Today it is commonsense. Success came in the European and general elections of 1987, in the general election of 1992, and of course, in the first elections to the National Assembly in 1999.

I believe that in 2006, we are at another turning point - twenty years on from 1986. Our challenge now is to turn Plaid Cymru into a party of government and lead the Welsh people in establishing the National Assembly as a proper legislative Parliament.

At the outset I quoted our first leader Saunders Lewis who, in his 1926 lecture provided us with the route map which we have more or less followed over the past 80 years. His 1937 play *Buchedd Garmon* (The Life of Saint Germanus) dealt with the time of the Palagian heresy in early Wales which objected to the notion of original sin. While not to be seen as a direct political allegory of modern Wales, certain passages strike a contemporary note. One will be familiar to many here since it has become famous as a kind of declaration on behalf of the whole national movement in Wales. As projected by Saunders Lewis the movement came into being, not to assert political ambition but to defend a human and precious heritage. Emrys the King asks Bishop Garmon to accompany him into battle, with these words, as translated by Ned Thomas:

A certain man planted on a fruitful hillside
A vineyard in which he set the best vines;
He built a wall around it, raised a tower in the centre
And gave it to his son as an inheritance
To bear his name from generation to generation.
But a herd of pigs broke down the wall of the vineyard,
Rushed in to trample and eat up the vines.
Is it not right that the son should stand in the
breach now,
And call his friends to him, and protect his inheritance?
My country of Wales is a vineyard, given into
my keeping,
To be handed down to my children and my
children's children
As an inheritance for all time.
And look, the pigs are rushing in to despoil it.
Therefore I now call upon all my friends,
The common man and the scholar,
Coime to me now, stand with me in the breach
That the beauty of the past be kept for the times
that shall come.

Friends, to pursue the analogy, I think by today we have secured the perimeter. Our task now is tend our vineyard. We have to ensure our country grows, to become strong, sturdy, confident, innovative and outward looking so we can make the contribution to the world that our special civilization deserves. This is why our coming campaign in Preseli is so important: challenging to be sure, but exciting and exhilarating as well.