

# Welsh Labour Grassroots

## *Gwreiddiau Llafur Cymru*

Welsh Labour Special Conference bulletin • July 2007

## Vote 'YES' to a red-green coalition!

This is a historic moment for Welsh Labour and for Welsh politics in general. The outcome of today's conference will set the course not only for the next four years, but for a long time to come. We in Welsh Labour Grassroots believe that delegates should vote 'yes' to the proposed coalition with Plaid Cymru. The programme presented in the *One Wales* document does not abandon **any** significant Labour policy – in fact, it strengthens and clarifies existing Labour aspirations. New commitments such as moving towards primary powers should also be supported, as a deepening of democracy and the best way to build on Welsh Labour's achievements. Delegates face a clear choice between this progressive proposition – which would keep **our** policies and **our** ministers in government – and the only realistic alternative, a 'rainbow coalition' that would include the Tories.

### Vote 'yes' for Labour policies

The main issue on which delegates should focus is the *political content* of the proposed coalition – its implications for the people we seek to represent. The *One Wales* document sets this out clearly. It omits nothing of consequence from Welsh Labour's election manifesto but incorporates some attractive, progressive elements of Plaid's manifesto as well. What does it offer?

- A clear rejection of any further PFI schemes in the NHS, along with moves to end, once and for all, the internal market and NHS use of private hospitals;
- greater public consultation on hospital reconfiguration and stronger accountability for NHS trusts;
- moves to ensure more affordable housing by suspending the right to buy council houses in areas of housing shortage and allowing councils to insist on 100% affordable housing in development schemes, as well as providing grants for first-time buyers;

- radical reductions in primary school class sizes;
- the establishment of a Climate Change Commission for Wales.

Most of this is in line with existing Welsh Labour policy – but it is now expressed in clearer, bolder language, leaving no doubt as to its radical content.

### Vote 'yes' to strengthen the Assembly

There are also policies relating to Welsh cultural identity, which some within our party find controversial. Yet our history and culture are not the property of one party - they should be celebrated by everyone in Wales, across the political spectrum. There are pledges to promote greater Welsh language provision in education and services, to boost Welsh-language print and internet media, to give Welsh joint official language status with English and to seek enhanced status for the language in Europe. These are sensible, moderate steps to help preserve key elements of our national heritage.

We also welcome the proposals to secure an extension of the Assembly's powers, which seem to have caused some Labour MPs such grief. The measures to pursue a referendum are already part of the Government of Wales Act, which Welsh Labour MPs supported. An All-Wales Convention, comprising all elements of civic society, would be established, under the aegis of a group of AMs and MPs from both parties. By monitoring the state of public opinion and the use of the framework legislative powers newly available to the Assembly, this would set a date for a referendum on full lawmaking powers sometime during the next four years. The coalition deal commits Labour to campaign for a 'Yes' vote in such a referendum.

What's wrong with this? Scottish-style parliamentary powers are an aspiration shared by many in the labour movement, including

Rhodri and most of his ministers. Welsh Labour Grassroots supports such powers, both as a democratic advance on the original weak, unstable devolution settlement and to enable Welsh Labour to deepen and extend its progressive policies. Some Welsh Labour MPs seem to regard devolved parliamentary powers as a threat to their own status and numbers. Their sniping from the sidelines, which has made Rhodri's task more difficult, suggests that they have yet to come to terms with the political reality of post-devolution Wales. They cannot be allowed to stand in the way of progress.

If there is nothing to fear in the proposed coalition programme, the only legitimate objection could be if Plaid were fundamentally beyond the pale – like the Tories – because of their character as a party. Certainly we have our differences with Plaid. In North and West Wales, they are a far more conservative party than in the South. Yet this simply reflects the fact that Plaid – like Labour – is a coalition. And within that coalition, it is the left that has increasingly set the policy agenda, as *One Wales* demonstrates. Why should we be afraid of working with a party that has endorsed, and even strengthened, our own policy agenda?

### **False alternatives**

What do the opponents of a red-green coalition advocate instead? Some say that we should continue to govern as a minority, challenging Plaid and the Lib Dems to vote with us on an issue-by-issue basis. This might sound good in theory but no-one should be under any illusion that it would happen in reality. The other three parties would simply combine to vote out a minority government at the first opportunity. Some respond that, in these circumstances, it would be more 'principled' to go into opposition than attempt to form a coalition. Others fear that

the coalition might strengthen Plaid's hand in future elections.

The implication of such arguments is that the main purpose of politics is to win elections and exercise power. If we cannot govern alone, we should simply abandon the political initiative to our opponents, allowing them to wreck all our policies if they so wish; our hands will be clean and in four years time the electorate may return to us. That is not the view of Welsh Labour Grassroots. We see politics not as a game played by competing teams, but as the attempt to build a fairer world, free from poverty and injustice. It matters whether Welsh Labour is in office because our policies can make a positive difference to people's lives. If, therefore, we can deliver a significant part of our programme by sharing power with another party, we should not be afraid to embrace that option.

There are those – including some Labour MPs – who accept the need for a coalition but push for an alternative deal with the Lib Dems – yet no such deal is available! Make no mistake: if the red-green alliance falls through, the alternative will be a 'rainbow coalition', with Tory ministers running Welsh services once again.

### **Seize this opportunity!**

Like it or not, there will be no majority Labour government in Cardiff Bay for at least four years, with no guarantee that we will be able to turn the situation around in the 2011 elections. Our objective as socialists should be to deliver a progressive agenda for Wales and in the present circumstances, the only way to do that is through a red-green coalition. If we retreat to lick our wounds, we will be abandoning the people who rely on us and we will not easily be forgiven. Welsh Labour must be bold and grasp the opportunity presented to us today.

## **NEXT WELSH LABOUR GRASSROOTS MEETING**

**Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> July 2007, Welsh Institute of Sport, Sophia Gardens, Cardiff,  
11.00 am – 1.00 pm**

**Guest speaker: CARWYN JONES AM, Assembly Minister for Education, Culture  
& the Welsh Language**

*All Labour party and affiliated trade union members welcome*