

A SWINGING PARTY? THE NEED FOR A HISTORY OF THE CONSERVATIVES IN WALES

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Abstract

This article discusses researching the Conservative Party in Wales after the Second World War. Although remaining seriously unpopular in many of the former industrial heartlands, the Conservatives have, for the majority of this period, been the second most popular political force in Wales, and the most popular in some areas. The article suggests that the Conservative Party, what it symbolised, and who its supporters were, represents a fundamental break with previous dominating themes. It argues that this history has been sidelined and marginalised because of an entrenched labour history tradition in Welsh historical studies. The party undoubtedly had to battle with its toxic image in Wales as a party of Englishmen, landowners and elitists. In the face of this, Conservatives in Wales developed policy, a rhetoric, and a presentational style aimed at recognising and supporting Welsh nationhood. The article will discuss how this allows various themes of Welsh history to be explored, such as changing working relations, the rise of a middle class, and the role of women in the Conservative movement. The practicalities of researching such a topic are fraught with many difficulties, and this article aims to outline these, as well as suggesting why this important and understudied history needs to be told.

Introduction

The Conservatives are the second political party of Wales. The popular image, however, is that Wales is hostile to Conservatism. This was undoubtedly reinforced by the 1997 General Election, when, in terms of seats, the party was wiped out. The 1966 General Election in Wales produced a similar result which many would think typical of Welsh politics. Thirty two parliamentary seats of thirty six were won by Labour, with the Conservatives winning only three.² Based on this impressive showing, Labour could lay claim, at that moment, to being the party of Wales, seemingly in tune with the political and cultural climate of the nation. Yet 1966 and 1997 were not trend setters, nor were they indicative of post-War political representation in Wales. It would be entirely wrong to ignore the fact that Labour almost always receives more than a fifty percent share of the vote in Wales.³ However, the Conservative Party has also garnered substantial and remarkably consistent support. In 1983, the zenith of Toryism in modern Wales, the party won fourteen of thirty six parliamentary seats, including Bridgend, Cardiff West and Newport West; while safer seats like Monmouth, Pembrokeshire, the Vale of Glamorgan, and Conwy were easily held.⁴ This is a significant feat, and yet the share of the vote received by the Conservatives in 1966 and 1983 was not remarkably different. The shift reflects the first-past-the-post voting system, the

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² <http://www.llgc.org.uk/ygyrchu/Pleidleisio/Etholiadau/1966/index-e.htm>

³ Denis Balsom and Martin Burch, *A Political and Electoral Handbook for Wales* (Kettering, 1980), p. 13

⁴ <http://www.llgc.org.uk/ygyrchu/Pleidleisio/Etholiadau/1983/index-e.htm>

advantages of which the Conservative Party enjoys in England but which often inhibits its fortunes in Wales and disguises the remarkably consistent level of support it receives.

The study of how these successes and failures occurred, what the Conservative Party in Wales looked and acted like, who they were supported by, how they portrayed and presented themselves, and who the key figures behind this were, is long overdue. My ongoing research provides oxygen for the much needed study of this vitally significant political party in Wales, its ideas, and its impact on the Welsh political process. This article suggests that analysing the Conservative Party in post-War Wales draws attention to an understudied aspect of modern politics that offers an alternative narrative to ones which have previously dominated the discourse on the subject. It suggests that in the latter half of the twentieth century the Conservative Party made significant attempts to appeal to a specific Welsh audience. Studying this opens up various avenues of analysis concerning the presence of the middle class, Anglicanism, and a sense of Britishness within Wales. The article also discusses the difficulties and the practicalities of researching this history.

Historiography

What is so peculiar about a study of the Conservative Party in Wales, considering the rather comfortable, affluent, and stable nature of the politics and the people under discussion, is that it is so unconventional. To study the Conservatism of Wales with its middle-class and Anglican support is, somewhat ironically, a radical pursuit. To do so in a Welsh academic institution makes it even more so.⁵ Particularly from the 1960s, a new generation of young historians entered academic institutions influenced by the History From Below movement. They began researching and writing labour history (with a small 'l'), which quickly became 'the most powerful trend' in Welsh historiography.⁶ This labour tradition resulted in a history dominated by strikes, trade unionism, and the working-class' various struggles, toils and resultant communal solidarity.⁷ It lent itself to Marxist terminology and subsequent discussions of a unified industrial proletariat struggling together in a display of class consciousness.⁸ Labour history which focused on the twentieth century also prioritises the study of the political representatives of the working-class: the Labour Party. Testament to the strength of this movement was the formation, in 1970, of *Llafur*, a journal designed specifically to cater for, and encourage, a swelling market of left-leaning historians writing labour history. The very existence and continued strength of *Llafur* is the best evidence of a particular 'brand' of history writing in Wales, the subject matter of which is distinctly radical and left-leaning.⁹ The establishment of the South Wales Miners' Library at Swansea in 1973 should also be seen as another physical and intellectual embodiment of this trend.

This Welsh labour history has side-lined the Conservatives. The self-confessed political leanings of many of its historians is undoubtedly a contributing factor to this. It is also undeniable that the Conservatives consistently perform worse in Wales than their counterparts in England do. From this, it is possible to understand why historians and political scientists may be less interested

⁵ Researching history at Swansea University, for example, takes place in the James Callaghan Building, which is next door to the Keir Hardie Building.

⁶ Andy Croll, 'People's Remembrancers' in a Post-Modern Age: Contemplating the non-crisis of Welsh Labour History', *Llafur*, 8, 1 (2000), p. 6

⁷ Perhaps the iconic expression of this tradition is Hywel Francis and David Smith, *The Fed: The South Wales Miners in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1980). See also David Smith (ed.), *A People and a Proletariat* (London, 1980); and Gwyn A. Williams, *The Merthyr Rising* (London, 1978)

⁸ For the best example, see Gwyn A. Williams, *When Was Wales? A History of the Welsh* (London, 1985), pp. 266-286

⁹ For an account of the formation and development of *Llafur* see Deian Hopkin, 'Llafur: Labour History Society and People's Remembrancer, 1970-2009', *Labour History Review*, 75, Supplement 1 (2010) pp. 129-146

in 'Welsh Conservatism' as a phenomenon because it is always relatively understated. I argue, however, that the most significant factor contributing to the academic side-lining of the Conservative Party is that a dominant labour history with its focus on coalminers, steelworkers, unions, protests and radical politicians sets an intellectual agenda which legitimises certain questions and closes others down. It is entirely legitimate to write history from this perspective. A historian of the south Wales coalfield, a region often dubbed 'the Valleys', will indeed be a labour historian because in the twentieth century heavy industry and class solidarity were significant features of life there. Since the mid nineteenth century the distinguishing feature of Welsh politics has been its radical tradition, first in a Liberal guise and then under the auspices of Labour Party politics.¹⁰ The south Wales coalfield typifies this, and is central to the many significant events of modern Welsh history. It is also the core of many people's sense of identity and place.

By directing much historical research at this region, however, historians have helped form some of the dominant images, and even in some cases the stereotypes, of modern Wales. By its very nature, the labour history which many historians write defines itself against what it is not.¹¹ It is guilty of invoking an 'other' which it sets itself against, and in political terms, this is Conservatism. Conservatism offers a completely different narrative: one of stability, embourgeoisement, and Anglican influences. It is also in conflict with another dominant paradigm in Welsh history writing, and that is a nationalist tradition. Studying Conservatism moves analysis away from unique and peculiar features of Wales, and contributes instead to a story about Britishness and UK-wide trends of the period. In a small but potent way, a study of the Conservative Party undermines the narrative of a significantly different nation with a separate national consciousness and specific, unique characteristics.¹² If one were to step back, and view Wales as an entire country, a far more nuanced and subtle picture emerges. Analysing the popularity and success of political parties provides one lens through which to clarify this picture.

There are precious few pieces of academic scholarship devoted to the Conservative Party in Wales. Felix Aabel's important chapter on the Conservatives in Wales from the period 1885-1935 in *The Conservatives and British Society* is an excellent analysis of the party in this period, but it is necessarily narrow in its time frame and scope.¹³ It does, however, note how the Conservatives in Wales suffered from a reputation as socially exclusive English landowners.¹⁴ The Conservative Party represented the interests of a narrow, landlord class, whilst the majority of the population were 'overwhelmingly anti-Conservative'.¹⁵ The leadership were socially exclusive, and they were opposed to popular Church disestablishment, therefore protecting the interests of the Anglican Church.¹⁶ This is a view shared by prolific Welsh historians like Kenneth O. Morgan, who believes that before the twentieth century, Tory spokesmen 'ridicule[d] the Welsh language and folk culture'.¹⁷ In his *Modern Wales: A Concise History*, Gareth Elwyn Jones comments that there was no Conservative opposition to the Liberal hegemony in the late 1880s, because Conservatism

¹⁰ Kenneth O. Morgan, 'Swansea West', in his *Modern Wales: Politics, Places and People* (Cardiff, 1995), p. 301

¹¹ Croll, 'People's Remembrancers' in a Post-Modern Age', p. 10

¹² Martin Johnes, 'Wales, History and Britishness', *Welsh History Review*, 25, 4 (2011), p. 1 and p. 8

¹³ Felix Aabel, 'The Conservatives in Wales, 1880-1935', in Martin Francis and Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska (eds), *The Conservatives and British Society, 1880-1990* (Cardiff, 1996), p. 96

¹⁴ Aabel, 'The Conservatives in Wales, 1880-1935', pp. 106-107

¹⁵ Gareth Elwyn Jones, *Modern Wales: A Concise History* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 251; and Kenneth O. Morgan, *Wales in British Politics, 1868 - 1922* (Cardiff, 1963), p. 9

¹⁶ Aabel, 'The Conservatives in Wales, 1880-1935', pp. 106-107

¹⁷ Kenneth O. Morgan, *Modern Wales: Politics, Places and People* (Cardiff, 1995), p. 11

'represented the interests...of a tiny landlord class'.¹⁸ This led the fiery Gwyn Alf Williams to pronounce that 'the baron, the bishop and the brewer' made up the 'unholy trinity of Toryism'.¹⁹ Not all authors take such a critical view, however. In his *An Anglican Aristocracy*, Matthew Cragoe attempts to debunk the notion of the Tory landowner as a hardnosed, immoral oppressor.²⁰ Cragoe argues that the Anglican elite in nineteenth century Carmarthenshire took a paternalistic role in leading local communities, engaging in a mutually advantageous relationship with their tenants., Their tenants, in turn, benefitted from the status accorded to them by landowners, and were not charged overly high rents or personally exploited.²¹ Similarly, Geraint Thomas, in an article devoted to the topic of Welsh Conservatives for the *English Historical Review* has argued that there was substantial Tory support in Wales at the beginning of the twentieth century, which was dampened by effective Liberal propaganda portraying the Conservatives as anti-Welsh.²² He suggests that there was a solid Conservative base in Wales during the inter-War period, but the party's ability to be effective was dampened by a strong Liberal and Labour presence as well.²³ Despite these rare but valiant attempts to address the subject matter of the Conservatives in Wales, the history of the party in the post-War period is, in the words of Andrew Edwards, still 'virgin territory'.²⁴

It is not simply the historiography of the Conservatives which is underdeveloped. Further research is needed on post-War politics more generally. Tanner, Williams and Hopkin's *The Labour Party in Wales, 1900-2000* made inroads towards improving this situation²⁵, but an even more comprehensive study of the post-War era, as one of the editors readily admitted, is due.²⁶ In the fifteen years since this book's publication, some work has begun to address this. Martin Johnes' *Wales Since 1939* is a particularly good example of this. His work even explores the impact of Conservative governments in Wales. He argues in the chapter 'The Tory remaking of Wales' that Mrs Thatcher's Conservatives 'took away with one hand' through economic and industrial upheaval, whilst also '[giving] back with another' by reinforcing the status of the Welsh language.²⁷ Conservative figures and policies also crop up throughout his work, but the necessarily brief attention paid to the Conservatives as part of a larger sweeping survey book means there is still much research to be undertaken. In terms of Wales' unique nationalist movement, Plaid Cymru,

¹⁸ Gareth Elwyn Jones, *Modern Wales: A Concise History* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 251

¹⁹ Williams, *When Was Wales?*, p. 217

²⁰ Matthew Cragoe, *An Anglican Aristocracy: The Moral Economy of the Landed Estate in Carmarthenshire, 1832-1895* (Oxford, 1996), p. 107

²¹ Cragoe, *An Anglican Aristocracy*, p. 26

²² Geraint Thomas, 'The Conservative Party and Welsh Politics in the Inter-War Years', *English Historical Review*, 533, 128 (2013), p. 896

²³ Thomas, 'The Conservative Party and Welsh Politics', p. 899

²⁴ Andrew Edwards, *Labour's Crisis: Plaid Cymru, the Conservatives, and the Decline of the Labour Party in North-West Wales, 1960-74* (Cardiff, 2011), P. 6 Edwards himself has made some efforts to redress this by factoring the Conservatives into his study of the Labour Party's 'crisis' in post-War north-west Wales.

²⁵ Duncan Tanner, Chris Williams and Deian Hopkin (eds), *The Labour Party in Wales, 1900-2000* (Cardiff, 2000)

²⁶ Duncan Tanner, 'Facing the New Challenge: Labour and Politics, 1970-2000', in Duncan Tanner, Chris Williams and Deian Hopkin (eds), *The Labour Party in Wales, 1900-2000* (Cardiff, 2000), p. 264

²⁷ Martin Johnes, *Wales Since 1939* (Manchester, 1939), p. 316

the historiography is considerably stronger than that on the Conservatives.²⁸ Given the nature of Plaid Cymru as a Wales-only political movement, this is hardly a surprise.

My research will add to a small but significant corpus of work on the British Conservatives which analyses the party specifically as an ideological movement and a unit that had to engage with an electorate, as well as detailing the nature of its structure and policies. Stuart Ball, Ewan Green, Anthony Seldon, Martin Pugh and Lawrence Black are particularly good examples of historians who have engaged with this perspective.²⁹ For example, in his book on the Conservative Party since 1945, Ball discusses how a combination of pragmatism, policy, legislation, and underlying principles have formed decision making processes within the post-War party.³⁰ Green's *Ideologies of Conservatism* discusses how Conservatives must have an 'ideological map' guiding their actions, adding that while the party is capable of producing multiple responses to issues, these must all be 'recognisably Conservative'.³¹ Therefore, my ongoing research into the Conservative Party in Wales, focusing on its successes and failures, presentation and rhetoric, structure, and personalities in a politically challenging region of the United Kingdom, will prove to be not just an important addition to the canon of Welsh political history, but to the study of the activities and structure of the Conservative Party in British politics. Political parties are not monolithic movements, and their tactics and attitudes invariably change from place to place. Local and regional studies of this kind illuminate continuities, inconsistencies and peculiarities within national parties, as well as the activities of those key people within political movements who are less discussed in 'elite' history such as Area Agents and party activists.³² Factoring the nature of Welsh Conservative politics into this kind of analysis will result in a richer definition of British Conservatism.

Conservatism and its effects in Wales

Something which historians and authors have paid no attention to is the specific nature of Conservatism in post-War Wales. The social survey evidence indicates that while some people were supportive of the Conservatives in Wales, many others perceived the party as elitist, unfamiliar, and somehow out of touch with the Welsh way of life.³³ A poll conducted by the Conservatives in 1966 confirmed that a considerable section of voters considered the Conservatives to be an 'alien' and 'uniquely English' party.³⁴ When the Westminster-schooled, plummy-voiced MP for Pembrokeshire, Nicholas Edwards, retained his seat in the second General Election of 1974 he faced jeers at the count of 'go back to England'.³⁵ A survey conducted throughout the early 1970s in

²⁸ See for examples John Davies, 'Plaid Cymru in Transition', in John Osmond (ed.), *The National Question Again* (Llandysul, 1985); Laura McAllister, *Plaid Cymru: The Emergence of a Political Party* (Bridgend, 2001); Rhys Evans, *Gwynfor Evans: Portrait of a Patriot* (Tal-y-bont, 2008)

²⁹ See Stuart Ball, *The Conservative Party Since 1945* (Manchester, 1998); E. H. H. Green, *Ideologies of Conservatism: Conservative Political Ideas in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 2002); Anthony Seldon and Stuart Ball (eds), *Conservative Century: The Conservative Party Since 1900* (Oxford, 1994); Martin Pugh, *The Tories and the People, 1880-1935* (Blackwell 1985); Lawrence Black, 'Tories and Hunters: Swinton College and the Landscape of Modern Conservatism', *History Workshop Journal*, 77 (2013), pp. 187-214

³⁰ Ball, *The Conservative Party*, p. 162

³¹ Green, *Ideologies of Conservatism*, p. 5 and p. 281

³² Stuart Ball, Andrew Thorpe and Matthew Worley, 'Elections, Leaflets and Whist Drives: Constituency Party Membership in Britain Between the Wars', in Matthew Worley (ed.), *Labour's Grass Roots: Essays on the Activities of Local Labour Parties and Members, 1918-45* (Aldershot, 2005), p. 27

³³ P. J. Madgwick, N. Griffiths and V. Walker, *The Politics of Rural Wales: A Study of Cardiganshire* (London, 1973), p. 215

³⁴ Edwards, *Labour's Crisis*, p. 171

³⁵ 'Jeers and Cries Greet 'Cliffhanger Finish'', *Western Telegraph*, 17 October 1974, p. 6

Cardiganshire revealed that many people wanted Conservative candidates to 'show more open and empathetic sympathy towards Welsh culture'.³⁶ Proving that this theme was still important amongst Conservative opponents in the Thatcher era, the Welsh Socialist Republican Movement produced in 1980 a spoof letter from Mrs Thatcher to the Welsh people which revolved around the notion that the Conservatives were the English oppressors of the Welsh. The 'letter' begins 'Dear Subjects', before going on to praise the use of the term 'Principality' because 'it reminds us all of your country's status as England's first colony'. It finishes with an ironic jibe: 'if you irresponsible Welsh were left to your own devices you would never be blessed with common-sense Conservative governments'.³⁷

After the decision by a Conservative government in 1957 to drown the village of Capel Celyn in the Tryweryn Valley to provide water for the people of Merseyside, it is evident that Conservative politicians began to consider the effects of being perceived as a hegemonic and subjugating force, supporting English people seemingly at the expense of the Welsh.³⁸ One of the most significant strategic elements to Conservatism in Wales, particularly from the late 1950s, was that the party made high profiled and genuine attempts to shrug off their Anglican and 'alien' image, by attempting to portray themselves as more 'Welsh'. Although there was no great rise in the number of parliamentary candidates throughout the second half of the twentieth century who could lay claim to having been educated in Wales, or to being Welsh speakers³⁹, in other presentational ways the party made strides towards recognising Wales as a distinct and separate nation. Perhaps one of the most crucial and significant steps in this field was the advice given in a 1959 pamphlet authored by Geoffrey Howe and Tom Hooson called *Work For Wales*.⁴⁰ The pamphlet addressed itself to a Welsh readership, a trend which has since been continued by Welsh Conservative literature.⁴¹ One of the most significant recommendations the pamphlet made was a move to recognise the 'nationhood and uniqueness of Wales' by differentiating the Conservative Area Council of Wales from its sister Area Councils and renaming it the 'Conservative Party in Wales'.⁴² This would also serve to help the party address itself 'purposefully to a Welsh audience'.⁴³ In the same year as this pamphlet the party produced a Conservative election leaflet with a

³⁶ Madgwick, Griffiths and Walker, *The Politics of Rural Wales*, p. 215

³⁷ Richard Burton Archives, file SC 466: Anti-Tory Party Leaflets July 1980, 'A Personal Message From the Prime Minister: the Rt Hon. Margaret Thatcher MP'

³⁸ Michael Cunningham, 'Public Policy and Normative Language: Utility, Community and Nation in the Debate over the Construction of Tryweryn Reservoir', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 60, 4 (2007), p. 633 and Johnes, *Wales Since 1939*, p. 214

³⁹ By using the data provided in Ivor Thomas Rees, *Welsh Hustings, 1885-2004* (Llandybie, 2005), I have profiled the details of every Conservative parliamentary candidate who stood at a General Election in Wales since 1945. The results show that the number of candidates at each General Election who had been educated in Wales remained remarkably consistent throughout this period, although there was a small rise in the number of bilingual candidates after the 1970 General Election.

⁴⁰ Tom Hooson and Geoffrey Howe, *Work For Wales: Gwaith I Gymru* (London, 1959). At the time of publication, Tom Hooson was the Conservative parliamentary candidate for Caernarvon, and Geoffrey Howe the candidate for Aberavon. Neither won the seat they were contesting.

⁴¹ David Melding, *Have We Been Anti-Welsh? An Essay on the Conservative Party and the Welsh Nation* (Barry, 2005), p. 17; and see as an example Jonathan Evans, *The Future of Welsh Conservatism* (Cardiff, 2002), p. 1, where Evans discusses carving out 'a new agenda directly relevant to the specific needs of Wales'.

⁴² Hooson and Howe, *Work For Wales*, p. 38

⁴³ Hooson and Howe, *Work For Wales*, p. 111

'Message to the People of Wales' from Harold Macmillan, which prominently called for the Welsh language, Welsh life, and culture to be 'prized and preserved'.⁴⁴

In terms of policy, also, Conservative governments made varying attempts to buttress and legitimise the uniqueness of Wales. This is most significant in the field of Welsh language policy. The Welsh Office during Mrs Thatcher's administrations, headed from 1979-1987 by Nicholas Edwards and his deputy Wyn Roberts, a first language Welsh speaker born in Anglesey, was particularly interventionist and proactive in this area. Their efforts to bolster and support the Welsh language became the cornerstone of future Welsh language policy.⁴⁵ Indeed, the party's 1979 manifesto had promised 'active Government support [for] the maintenance of the Welsh language as a living tongue'.⁴⁶ The first television channel devoted to Welsh language broadcasting, S4C, was established in 1982. The current Conservative Assembly Member David Melding has described this action as 'heaven sent' because it further distanced the Conservative Party from their anti-Welsh image.⁴⁷ Whether or not this sort of proactive and pro-Wales policy, or the notable change in style by Conservatives in Wales, benefitted the party electorally is difficult to tell. What is far more significant is that the party made notable efforts to do so. Its genuine recognition of Welsh nationhood tells us a lot about the adaptable, pragmatic, and perhaps ideological nature of Conservatism.

Studying the nature of that Conservatism allows wider themes to be explored. Conservative success in Wales is built partly off the back of a swelling middle class in Wales after the Second World War. As wealth and affluence began to reach men and women in the post-War period, the old ties that bound people to rigid social classes began to dissolve away. Social survey evidence suggests that some people saw this disintegration of previous norms as a chance to climb the social ladder. One Swansea woman described how she had moved to the more affluent Western area of Sketty which, significantly in her view, 'put us up a step'. She appeared to quite naturally identify herself, because of this social position, as 'quite definitely middle-class' whilst belonging to the Conservative Women's Association.⁴⁸ The sense of 'well-to-do' respectability and betterment which the Conservatives represented fused with this economic and social change. Voting Conservative for some was a cultural symbol of entry into the middle classes, just as owning a bigger house in a nicer part of town was a social and economic symbol of this upward shift in status. When residents of Cardiganshire were asked as part of a different social survey the open-ended question: 'Who is a Conservative voter', common replies related essentially to class. One responder said: 'a lot of social climbers'.⁴⁹

Similarly, the decline of heavy industry in Wales, and its partial replacement with light manufacturing, had particular consequences for social and industrial relationships. What was significant about the new light industries located in Wales was that - unlike the industrial relations associated with the coalfield - managers and workers were separated, with many of the new 'elite', who were often Anglicised immigrants, moving to the more prosperous coastal belt of Wales.⁵⁰ By

⁴⁴ 'New Era for Wales: A Message to the People of Wales', Conservative Election Leaflet, 1959

⁴⁵ Andrew Edwards, Duncan Tanner and Patrick Carlin, 'The Conservative Governments and the Development of Welsh Language Policy in the 1980s and 1990s', *The Historical Journal*, 54, 2 (2011), p. 535

⁴⁶ Lord Crickhowell, 'The Conservative Party and Wales', *The National Library of Wales Journal*, 34, 1 (2006), p. 70

⁴⁷ Melding, *Have We Been Anti-Welsh?*, p. 31

⁴⁸ Colin Rosser and Christopher Harries, *The Family and Social Change: A Study of Family and Kinship in a South Wales Town* (London, 1965), p. 83

⁴⁹ Madgwick, Griffiths and Walker, *The Politics of Rural Wales*, p. 203

⁵⁰ John K. Walton, *The British Seaside: Holidays and Resorts in the Twentieth Century* (Manchester, 2000), p. 169.

1981, 468,000 people living in Wales had been born in England.⁵¹ In 1958 James Morris wrote about Port Talbot's 'magnificent' new steelworks, but reported that Welsh people complained that 'all the management is English, see, there's not a bloody Welshman among the lot of them'.⁵² The members of this new professional class were not guaranteed to be Conservative voters, of course, but neither were they necessarily inclined to partake in that sense of 'Welshness' which had bound so many people to a rigid form of left leaning political culture. James Morris also described Penarth - which has also been portrayed by Kenneth Morgan as an area characterised by its 'genteel villadom'⁵³ - as like being in England, on account of the affluent English immigrants who lived there.⁵⁴ In these areas the Conservative Party began to establish itself, doing so to such great effect that some seats virtually became safe, with the MP for Barry (or the Vale of Glamorgan as it was renamed after 1983), Raymond Gower, becoming a veteran Member of Parliament. The swarm of middle class supporters and others who backed Gower and other Conservative MPs in Wales have been ignored in Welsh history.

One of the most contentious events in recent Welsh history is useful for illuminating several features of Welsh politics. The 1984/1985 Miner's Strike, which took place in response to the pit closure programme of Mrs Thatcher's government, led Raphael Samuel to comment in *The Enemy Within* that the process undermined the 'cultural economy' of the south Wales Valleys region, turning them into 'uneconomic communities' which were 'sacrificed' and as a result entered a 'period of decline'.⁵⁵ Taken from a different perspective, what is also so remarkable about this event is that at the following General Election of 1987, with the harsh effects of the strike still very much being felt by those who were involved, the Conservatives again performed strongly in areas outside the south Wales coalfield. They retained eight of their fourteen seats won in 1983, and actually increased their share of the vote.⁵⁶ Clearly the populist Thatcherite policies of lower taxation and council housing sell-offs, and her government's intent to clamp down on union power, resulted in either support (or at very least apathy) from many people in Wales. History will naturally revolve around flashpoints of conflict, but the continued and consistent support for Conservatism in the regions where industrial strife did not take place is indicative of the diverse character that Welsh politics had developed by the mid-1980s.

The Miner's Strike also thrust into the spotlight an image of the newly politicised woman. This was the miner's wife who picketed during the long strike. Some women went on marches and also travelled further afield than many of them had ever gone, meeting men and women from other coalfields in different countries.⁵⁷ A handful of these women became Labour MPs in the long-run, and cited their political awakening as having taken place on these picket lines.⁵⁸ There is also a lesser-studied political woman in Welsh and British politics, and that is the woman - normally the housewife - who staffed the constituency branches of Conservative Associations, performing essential administration tasks during election times.⁵⁹ In 1953 the *Western Mail* reported that 'More than 1,000 women Conservatives attended the annual open air meeting of the South Wales and Monmouthshire Women's Advisory Committee of the Conservative and Unionist

⁵¹ Johnes, *Wales Since 1939*, p. 303

⁵² James Morris, 'Welshness in Wales', *Wales*, 32 (1958), p. 13

⁵³ Kenneth O. Morgan, *Callaghan: A Life* (Oxford, 1997), p. 50

⁵⁴ Morris, 'Welshness in Wales', p. 13

⁵⁵ Raphael Samuel, 'Introduction' in Raphael Samuel, Barbara Bloomfield and Guy Boanas (eds), *The Enemy Within: Pit Villages and the Miners' Strike of 1984-1985* (London, 1986), p. 37

⁵⁶ Johnes, *Wales Since 1939*, p. 273

⁵⁷ Johnes, *Wales Since 1939*, p. 263

⁵⁸ An example is the current MP for Swansea East, Siân James

⁵⁹ Pippa Norris and Joni Lovenduski, 'Gender and Party Politics in Britain', in Pippa Norris and Joni Lovenduski (eds), *Gender and Party Politics* (London, 1993), p. 40

Association[...]yesterday'.⁶⁰ Research has concluded that if women had never been given the vote, then the post-War period would have seen an unbroken rule of Labour government until 1979, such was the gender balance in voting habits and the tendency for women to vote Conservative.⁶¹ These two sorts of political women form part of two contrasting but not incompatible narratives. Comparing them demonstrates that not all political women in modern Wales were radicals from the coalfield. An analysis centred on Conservatism reveals that Welsh history is richer and more diverse than it may initially seem.

Sources and research

Engaging with this history, however, results in many complexities. As is so often the case with researching modern history, the sheer quantity and yet the elusive nature of the source material provides the first challenge. We are faced as historians of modern British politics with what Stuart Ball has called 'an embarrassment of riches'.⁶² There are dozens of archives which are brimming with information which may be useful for anyone wishing to study modern Wales, but not everything is relevant. In terms of useful material, there is far more chaff than wheat. This is not to say that much of the material is not fascinating; the fact that it is so can often make it a tempting distraction. Finding the best sources is a challenge, and when swamped with material, the ever looming feeling that there will never be enough time to see everything, and that there is so much potential to miss things, is a pressing one.⁶³

In the process of research, one quickly begins to question the very nature of facts and historical accuracy. All that one will ever find in an archive is fragments of information that have been selected and placed there, deliberately or not. Many events, records and names will never have survived, and of those that did, it is never guaranteed that they will be available in an archive for scrutiny by a historian. In the case of this research on Conservatism, one of the most readily available sources are the minute books of local Association meetings. If these books have survived, then by their very nature they are selective, and tell us only what the record keeper decided to include as 'facts', or what they perceived as the most important elements to record. No one had it as right as E. H. Carr, who knew that historical 'facts' 'are really not at all like fish on the fishmonger's slab. They are like fish swimming about in a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean; and what the historian catches will depend, partly on chance, but mainly on what part of the ocean he chooses to fish in and what tackle he chooses to use...[history is a] hard core of interpretation surrounded by a pulp of disputable facts'.⁶⁴

In the case of the Conservative Party in Wales, much material with which to build up a reservoir of 'facts' has survived, albeit patchily. The Bodleian Library in Oxford contains the Conservative Party Archives, which includes useful reports and information about party strategy in Wales. Local Record Offices and particularly the National Library of Wales have many constituency Association files which have survived. These contain minute and record books, letters to and from constituents, accounts of day-to-day activity on the ground, and details about the structure of the Conservative Party. Various leaflets and political ephemera have also been preserved, as have deposited personal papers from Welsh Conservative politicians such as Lord Crickhowell, Tom Hooson and Keith Best. The material which has been recorded comes almost exclusively from areas where the Conservative Party were strong, with the notable exception of the Rhondda Conservative and Unionist Association Records. The richest records survive from Cardiff, Pembrokeshire, Monmouth and Denbigh. On the whole, therefore, just as history is supposedly written by the

⁶⁰ '1,000 Women Conservatives at Open-Air Meeting', *Western Mail*, 3 July 1953

⁶¹ Norris and Lovenduski, 'Gender and Party Politics', p. 38

⁶² Stuart Ball, 'National Politics and Local History: The Regional and Local Archives of the Conservative Party 1867-1945', *Archives*, 22, 94 (1996), p. 27

⁶³ Carolyn Steedman, *Dust* (Manchester, 2001), p. 29

⁶⁴ E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (Middlesex, 1964), p. 23

victors, the history of Conservatism is going to be based on these sorts of records. The analysis will of course be leavened and made more well-rounded by other methods: newspaper archives give a sense of contemporary political perceptions; speeches and addresses highlight what politicians perceived to be important at the time; and oral interviews with a range of participants stretching from former senior politicians to grass-root activists can open doors to a variety of new information. It is based on this multitude of sources that the history of the Conservatives in Wales will be told.

Conclusion

Conservatism is not incompatible with Wales. The voting system in the United Kingdom disguises just how strong a foothold the Conservatives had in twentieth century Wales. However, the party has struggled – and will almost certainly continue to do so – in the former industrial heartlands. In the post-War period, the Conservative Party, and their personnel in Wales, have made significant efforts to detoxify the Tory brand both in presentational and policy terms. Particularly since the late 1950s, Conservatives have made greater efforts to shrug off the elitist image that had dogged them for so long. The party's proactive support for the Welsh language in the 1980s was a particularly clear sign that Conservative politicians believed in supporting Wales as a nation. Despite this, however, much hostility still remains. Where there were enclaves of middle-class, or white-collared, or Anglican support, the party in the latter half of the twentieth century performed well. Rising standards of living and the changing structures of industry in post-War Wales appear to have been compatible with Conservative politics. As the strong notion of 'Welshness' was weakened to an extent, a party who, above all, represent Britishness proved that it was a political alternative for voters. For those in Wales who felt less tied to bonds of class, the Conservatives represented betterment and wealth. Women were particularly attracted to the party in greater numbers than men, highlighting that there is an understudied story of gender at the heart of Welsh politics. The fact that all strains and strands of this political entity have been so scarcely researched in Welsh history is lamentable. I aim to redress the balance. Doing so involves all the difficulties and potential pitfalls a historian of modern Britain faces. The patchy survival rate of sources pertaining to Conservatism adds a particular challenge. Armed with various sources and method, the story will be told. The result will be a richer and better-rounded Welsh, and indeed British, history.