

Wales Matters Series

Whither Wales? Routes to a stable and enhanced authority for Welsh devolution

December 10th, 2024

Speaker: David Melding

In the Chair: Sir Deian Hopkin

Whither Wales? Routes to a stable and enhanced authority for Welsh devolution

Former Conservative Welsh Assembly member and deputy presiding officer of the Senedd (as it became) David Melding is not surprisingly a Unionist, and he is concerned, as he told the latest in the Wales Matters series of talks, that it is only in Wales that an essential debate about the UK's constitutional future has even started.

The questions for the UK, and not least Wales, in the current disrupted state of world affairs are crucial. Are Welsh citizens likely to remain content with domestic autonomy within the UK? Would Scottish independence push Wales to contemplate statehood, or would Scotland's secession leave the original Tudor union (between Wales and England) as the last remnant of the United Kingdom?

The recent Commission on the Constitutional Future of Wales chaired by Dr Rowan Williams and Professor Laura McAllister broadly came down in favour of enhanced devolution among the possible solutions for resolving the unstable nature of current arrangements. This, Melding argued, while making welcome improvements to the current settlement would throw up some further problems and would probably not enthuse the many across the UK who feel the reforms of the 1990s have already created too much political disruption.

But what is the alternative if a viable settlement is to be reached that would satisfy majority English, Welsh, and Scottish aspirations? A committed federalist as well as a Unionist, Melding does not see England's vastly greater population compared with that of the other members of such a UK state as a drawback but part of the natural order in many other parts of the world where federal systems exist.

Asymmetry of the sort that would result from recognising England as the unit (as indeed most of its people do), possibly with a Parliament of its own, rather than a series of smaller regional entities more closely resembling the Celtic nations in population would not create an exceptional structure by world comparisons, he said. Essentially, however, it would be for the English to choose how to determine the shape, size of and remit of their institutions, just as Scotland and Wales already do.

Over time regional government in England is likely anyway, he argues, with regional mayors becoming increasingly common and London and possibly some bigger cities even acquiring legislative powers. Such federalism would recognise deep differences between territories of the union in terms of history, population, and geographical size.

A settlement along these lines would, Melding says, recognise the reality of the Home Nations' sovereignty over their domestic affairs, open the possibility of House of Lords reform and construct some guardrails to guide what would be a voluntary union, though ultimately with the right of secession by one or more of its constituents.

Unless the issues start of be considered – and more widely than just in Wales – Melding, as a believer in the Union, fears support for independence in Scotland will grow, putting pressure on Wales to decide its future with the danger even present levels of Welsh autonomy could then be lost in the process rather than secured.

Text of a speech given December 10th, 2024, at the London Welsh Centre, Gray's Inn Road, WC1X 8UE to members of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion, London Welsh Association and Wales in London. The Wales Matters series is a joint initiative of the three societies. The full text of the talk can be found [here](#).

*Rhys David
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