Has Wales developed a political elite?

An analysis of the career comings and goings of Welsh Assembly Members from 1999 – 2016

How representative are Welsh AMs as a cross section of the Welsh working world?

by Russell Deacon and Ellen McDonnell
As the fifth term of the Welsh Assembly gets under way, this report examines the trends in the careers of Assembly Members (AMs) over the past 16 years, before going into the Assembly, and after leaving. It seeks to determine if the Assembly has developed its own political elite, with respect to entry. The report examines the type of employment AMs have prior to their election and whether in fact they originate from a Welsh political elite.

The report then uncovers whether, after leaving the Assembly, AMs continue to work in the realm of public service, or whether they travel against the apparent tide of incoming AMs from private to public work and go on to work in other areas of the economy such as business and commerce. This report concludes with a summary of findings concerning the potential effects of prior Assembly employment on the effectiveness of the Welsh Assembly as a true reflection of all employment pathways available in Wales.
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A report by Gorwel

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What is Gorwel?

Gorwel is an independent Welsh think tank based in Wales that seeks to encourage innovative thinking and creativity from across the political spectrum. Originally formed to provide a platform to both centre and centre right political and business ideas, it has now expanded to include all mainstream political and business ideas. It plays a role in bringing national and international cultural, international relations, business and other assorted ideas and notions for public discussion in Wales. We also wish to promote ideas; studies and notions that will help make government and business policy and operations more effective and resource efficient in Wales.
HAS WALES DEVELOPED A POLITICAL ELITE?

The Government of Wales Act, 1988 which allowed for the creation of a National Assembly for Wales, was passed in the spirit of a more representational approach to the democratic process, in Wales. Despite this drive for a more diverse and economically reflective representation in the new Welsh Assembly, however, it seems that elected members of the Assembly continue to be primarily public sector workers and career politicians, albeit from a more diverse socio-economic background and gender/ethnic backgrounds than those Ministers from the former Welsh Office. They nonetheless still fail to provide an accurate representation of a cross section of the workforce in Wales. This study examines to what extent this problem of political elitism in devolved Welsh politics is more apparent within various political parties and whether public sector service continues to be the career path of AMs after their time in the Assembly has come to an end.

The study finds that:

• Almost half of all Assembly Members were councillors prior to being elected. This means that 44 per cent of Welsh Assembly Members (AMs) have come from a pool of just 1,264 people*. This pool forms the central Welsh political elite for Assembly Membership and has been most dominant in both Labour and Welsh Liberal Democrat representation.

• AMs give the appearance of generally coming from a public sector political elite that generally lacks business, entrepreneurial and commercial experience at a time when these skills are needed to help steer the Welsh economy in an upwards direction.

• Once elected very few AMs leave the Assembly to work in the private sector. Aside from consultancy, it appears that only a very few former Assembly Member have left office to undertake private sector employment. The majority who do leave, either continue in politics in Westminster or take a public sector post in education or public administration.

• Those politicians that have been in government in Wales, have with the rare exceptions, little direct experience of working in business and commerce. This means that they are unable to formulate or challenge economic policy from their own direct experience and must rely on the advice of others.

• Overall therefore, former private sector employees are hugely underrepresented in the Welsh Assembly amongst its membership. This means members lack the personal experience and knowledge of business and commerce. This is despite the fact that the private sector represents the largest divisions of employment in Wales.

* Figures include a handful of AMs who were town or community councillors

Summary of findings
Rationale for the study

This study was undertaken in order to provide an indication as to the working backgrounds for current and past AMs. It was undertaken for a number of reasons:

1. To illustrate how the backgrounds of AMs compare to the average backgrounds across Wales;
2. To indicate where AMs go after they leave the Welsh Assembly and continue in some form of employment;
3. To explore the business and commercial skills sets of incoming members;
4. To conclude whether elitism in Welsh politics does indeed exist and what problems it may pose to the effectiveness of the operation of the Welsh Assembly private sector policy.

Methodology of the study

The study was undertaken by first producing a database of AMs (organised by election year), then listing details such as gender, political party, most recent profession before being elected or appointed, sector of most recent profession, year of entry, year of departure, subsequent professions and sector of subsequent professions. It covers all AMs elected in Wales between 1999-2016. This data was assembled from a combination of sources. For example, starting with an individual’s official Assembly Biography/Campaign material/Members websites and Wikipedia articles and then confirming through the entries in Who’s Who? (2016). ‘Double-referencing’ this information ensured data reliability and therefore ensured that the value of the study and the legitimacy of its conclusions are not compromised by inaccuracies in the data. The study was carried out over a period of months between April and October 2016. Collecting data after the May 2016 Assembly elections allowed for the entry data for the fifth term of the Assembly to be included, once again increasing reliability and accuracy in the data by providing a larger sample size and additionally an insight into potential recent changes in data trends over the past decade and a half.
1. The working background of the Welsh population

Before examining where AMs come from it would be beneficial to explore how the Welsh workforce itself is apportioned with respect to the various employment sectors. Looking at Chart 1 overleaf, you can see the individual types of jobs that the Welsh population were in as of 2014 [1]. In this chart, it shows that the largest single portion of the workforce in Wales work in the plurality of public administration, defence, education and health. At the other end of the scale, agriculture, forestry and fishing provide the smallest portion of the workforce. It should be noted in light of the rationale of this study, however, that the public sector’s proportion of the workforce is not a majority, nor is it the largest portion by any clear margin. Wholesale, retail, transport, hotels and food provide an additional 24 per cent of the workforce, with finance and business contributing a further 17 per cent. Significantly, the private sector accounts for a total 68 per cent of the overall workforce, and so it should be emphasised that though the public sector makes up the largest single portion of the workforce, the division of various industries under this categorisation distorts the fact that the private sector is nonetheless Wales’s largest source of employment by a margin of over two to one in relation to the public sector.
Chart 1 – Division of Employment in Wales
Source: ONS 2016
2. The working background of the Welsh Assembly Members

With this distribution of Welsh workforce in mind, the data for the previous careers of AMs since 1999 proves particularly interesting in comparison. In Chart 2, which shows the most recent jobs AMs had, the largest entry point was through political roles, mainly council positions. There were very few individuals that came from third sector jobs and lobbying/consultancy. Agriculture also had a low portion along with trade union and ‘other’. This suggests that individuals of a political background have an advantage when it comes to being elected to the Welsh Assembly, though it is arguable that this should be expected of a political role it does suggest a prior political experience.

While the private sector provides a majority of the workforce in the Welsh populace, it is the public sector, and in particular political roles, which provide the majority of entry points for AMs specifically. It should be noted that a culture of political
exclusivity in the Assembly and a visible absence of private sector experience in the legislature can be seen as a disadvantage for both democracy and economic output.

Chart 3 highlights the clear trend in the party origins of career politicians who enter the Assembly. By a large majority, most AMs with a background in politics and the public sector are Labour AMs. More than half of all Labour AMs who have entered the Assembly were previously politicians or other public sector workers, a statistic that carries more weight when you consider the fact that since the inception of the National Assembly for Wales in 1999, the Labour party has always been in government. In the two sessions of the National Assembly where Labour shared the governing role, between 2001-2003, 2007 and 2011, the parties with members who it was in coalition, the Welsh Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru, also struggled to effectively represent the private sector in government, with a disproportionately large share of their elected representatives also coming from politics/local government and the public sector.

The implications of this bias towards the public sector in government, over the past 17 years, provides us with some concerns about a lack of private sector experience. Greater private sector experience could be said to have helped ministers use their own experience to help formulate business policy and rely less on the advice of outside advisors without effective experiential challenge.

Limited engagement among political parties with the private sector fails to bring forward this diversity in employment in the legislature, which was one of the driving principles behind devolution to begin with. Furthermore, an absence of business expertise and limited experience in industry poses the risk of lethargy for innovation and an inefficiency of policies to encourage private sector growth due to a lack of experience.
### Chart 3 – Entry Points for individual parties

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<th>Sector</th>
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It should be noted that ‘politics and the public sector’ is a broad and inclusive term, and therefore we should be made to examine exactly what roles this title may include. On evidence, the most prominent of these is that of an elected councillor in a local authority. Looking at Chart 4, it shows that almost a half of AMs (44 per cent) were formerly councillors before joining the Assembly. On one hand, this trend can be deemed a positive statistic, which may limit the apparent problem of public sector over-dominance in the law making process. Councillors generally fulfil their role on a part-time basis, and so it can be assumed that most councillors will fulfil their role alongside another job, potentially one in the private sector. In reality few do and according to their own biographies most AMs who were councillors ‘other jobs’ were also in the trade union, public or third sector sectors (such as teachers, lecturers, charity officer, civil servant, trade union official).

From this data, we can conclude that elitism in selection in Welsh politics generally trends towards a preference towards councillors specifically, rather than the public sector as a whole. Some 44 per cent of AMs have been councillors. For the general population this figure is just 0.04 per cent. Therefore councillors or former councillors are over a thousand times more represented in the Welsh Assembly than in the general Welsh population as a whole. Of course there are many potential reasons for this fluidity in movement between local authorities and the National Assembly other than a culture of electoral favouritism for which this data cannot account. However, this does not cloud the fact that individuals with a background in politics, local authority in particular, are vastly over-represented in the Assembly as a proportion of the Welsh workforce as a whole. The pool of Welsh local government councillors therefore forms what can be called a political elite within Welsh politics. This means that in reality being a local government member is a key gateway needed for successful Welsh Assembly election. It is the most ‘central occupation’ by far to gaining elected Assembly Membership.
3. The working destination of Welsh Assembly Members

As is shown in Chart 5, the portion of AMs entering into the private sector after stepping down from the Welsh Assembly is rather small, just 4 per cent if you exclude ‘lobbying/consultancy’. It is only 13 per cent of those who go on to another elected or appointed political position. Thus AMs are eight times more likely to go back into politics than work in the private sector after leaving the Assembly, and six times more likely to go into the public sector. In fact there is a greater chance of AMs dying than working in the private sector after leaving the Welsh Assembly.
Chart 6 – Exit points for individual parties

Chart 6 shows the type of jobs AMs went into from individual parties. There were mostly Labour and Conservative AMs that went into political jobs (Westminster – Commons and Lords) after leaving the Assembly.

Compared to their entry points, however, Labour AMs are less likely to exit on to another political job than they were to enter from one. Conversely, however, Conservative AMs were more likely to exit into political jobs than they were to enter from one.
Box 1 In Defence of Councillors

Although this study notes that as a cross section of the Welsh population there is an over representation of councillors – former and current – in the Welsh Assembly, it is still a clearly recognised and important route to becoming an Assembly Member. In part because the skills learned whilst being a councillor such as: constituency casework, scrutiny, governance and development of policy and its implementation are also central roles in being an Assembly Member. It also develops skills such as party discipline and election campaigning. All of this experience benefits the operations of political parties, the Welsh Government and Welsh Assembly.

4. The comparison between AMs and the general Welsh population on employment categories

If we examine charts 7 and 8, there is a clear pattern appearing in which jobs AMs enter from and exit to. In the case of their jobs before entering the Assembly, it is apparent they were less involved in jobs in the private sector and agriculture, while the Welsh population had a majority involvement in the private sector, but roughly equal involvement in agriculture.

On the other hand, AMs were mostly involved in the “other” category, which included mainly politics (MPs, MEPs, Lords and councillors), volunteering, paid charity employees and lobbying/consultancy. This only makes up a very small percentage of the overall Welsh population involvement in all categories of employment.
Looking at the jobs AMs went into after their period in the Assembly had ended, the pattern mirrors prior Assembly employment, with a slightly lower involvement in both the private and public sectors being evident. This may be due to more AMs moving into third sector jobs.

Chart 8 - AM exit points compared to the Welsh population

*Note: Chart 8 excludes AMs that either passed away, retired, or became unemployed.*
The notion of a political elite as determined in political science dates back to Pareto and Mosca. It was they who considered an elite rule as simply being a part of society, whereas modern elitists such as C. Wright Mills focus more on the structure of elite power and seek to challenge its authority. With reference to this report the new elite in Welsh politics can be classed as those who enter the Assembly from mainly political and public sector based roles. This seems to be compounded by the findings of this study, which highlights that vast majority of AM’s from the parties that have been in government since 1999 in Wales were previously politicians, third sector or other public sector workers. Those from the private sector have been a small minority.

The dominance of former or current councillors in the Assembly in turn demonstrates a form of elitism that is prevalent in Welsh politics. The underrepresentation of a true cross-section of the Welsh workforce is an important issue that needs to be addressed if the Assembly is to more genuinely reflect the Welsh nation as whole. The dominance of the public sector experience therefore undoubtedly weakens policymaking on business and the economy. Whereas it is true that councillors are mainly not full time employees and have other occupations as well as being a councillor it is also true that this other employment tend to overwhelmingly be from the public/third sector. We should perhaps note that if the 47 per cent of AMs, who have previously been or are still councillors, had instead came from one school or university in Wales there would probably be a public and political outcry over this educational elitism.

It would appear that the representation of a political elite that comes mainly from local government and public sector employment has now become entrenched in the make up of the Welsh Assembly. This background must also surely influence the operation and culture of the Welsh Assembly. There is also a central question that needs addressing as to whether the advantages of entry into the political system of this elite also deters entry into Welsh politics from those in wider spectrum of the Welsh population?

The findings in this report highlight the dominance of the public sector as an employer before and after many AM’s political career. It outlines the need for greater private sector representation in the Assembly, which if addressed could help to increase the knowledge gap and interaction between the Welsh Government and Assembly and the Welsh world of business.
Recommendations

The report recommends that:

1. The political parties seek to review their selection procedures to encourage wider entry from the private sector. This will help make the Assembly more balanced in its representation, with respect to the overall population, as well as increasing its own business skill sets.

2. Whereas being a councillor brings many benefits to being an effective Assembly Member it should not also be the main pre-requisite of selection. If the skills sets of being a local a councillor are deemed so important to gaining office there should also be alternative routes made available to gain these skills, for those unable to follow the councillor entry route. Elected unitary authority membership often excludes those from the private sector, whose employers may deter their employees becoming elected members).

3. The Welsh Assembly seeks to provide former Assembly Members with the opportunity to retrain or reskill in business in order to encourage AMs to share their elected experience and skills with the world of business and commerce. Perhaps, even later on returning to the Assembly to bring their new skills in there. A business sabbatical could perhaps be encouraged or provided for after leaving office.

4. The Welsh Assembly seeks to provide current members who have not experienced business and commerce directly with ‘work experience’ to help familiarise themselves with the private sector more fully. This would also help in business policy formulation and scrutiny.
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ONS statistics
Wales Online
Wales Yearbook, ITV – various years
Wikipedia and Welsh Assembly biographies
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