

BRIEFING: UNION IN THE UK (WALES)

The future shape of the United Kingdom has come to the fore in the light of the major constitutional changes caused by Brexit. The question of independence has been a key factor in Scottish politics over the past decade, but in the past year it has moved up the agenda in Wales as well. As Christians we should be inspired by hopes to create a better future, but does this future reflect the values that we believe are important? Will it care for the poor and marginalised or will it increase inequality? How does our faith shape our vision of the future?



CONTEXT

Wales was conquered by military force in 1282, and in Acts of Parliament in 1535 and 1542 its distinctive legal system was abolished and replaced with English law, effectively uniting Wales with England. Use of the Welsh language in public administration was prohibited. Use of the language in the judicial system was legislated for in 1967 and its use in other aspects of public life was gradually restored. The education system also diverged from that of England with a distinctive Welsh National Curriculum from 1988.

In September 1997, a referendum in Wales resulted in a wafer-thin majority of 6,721 votes in favour of establishing the National Assembly for Wales. Initially, it had power to pass only secondary or delegated legislation, and to vary some aspects of UK Government policy in Wales. However, these powers gradually expanded, and a referendum in March 2011 produced a convincing majority in favour of the Assembly having full legislative powers in devolved policy areas from May 2011.

Support for full Welsh independence has not generally been high, although polls often show a desire for further devolution. When the SNP entered government in Scotland in 2007, Plaid Cymru entered government in Wales, but as junior partner in a coalition with Welsh Labour. This arrangement ended after the 2011 Assembly election.



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QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR CANDIDATE

What would you do to ensure that Wales, as either part of the UK or an independent Wales, is able to care for the poor and most marginalised in our society?

What will you do to ensure that respectful dialogue characterises relations between Wales and the rest of the UK whatever happens in the election?

In Scotland, a referendum in 2014 rejected the proposition of independence from the UK. However, the result of the Brexit referendum in 2016 which saw Scotland vote to remain but the UK as a whole (including Wales) vote to leave, the topic has entered public debate again. This has influenced the whole UK, and during 2019, polls in Wales have shown support for Welsh independence rising from its previous 10% to 24%, and as high as 33% should the UK leave the European Union.

The Welsh Government recently published a report on how it sees the future of the United Kingdom, with greater parity of esteem between the constituent nations, although Welsh Labour remains opposed to independence. The major changes to the constitution of the UK which will be caused by Brexit mean that these matters would remain salient. This is because so many policy areas currently heavily influenced by the EU – such as agriculture, fisheries, the environment and regional aid – are devolved to Wales and would require reshaping within a UK outside the European Union.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

People disagree for a variety of reasons on whether Wales should remain part of the United Kingdom or if it should be able to operate independently. What are the values that you believe are important to maintain in either of these scenarios?

If Scotland were to vote to become independent, how will this affect the way you see the future for Wales and the rest of the United Kingdom?

Since devolution, the powers of the National Assembly for Wales have increased over time to include agriculture, forestry and fisheries, education, environment, health and social services, some aspects of tackling poverty, housing, local government, the Welsh language, sport and the arts, tourism and economic development, many areas of transport and tax raising powers. A video talking about the devolved powers can be viewed [here](#).

