

# Wales and Westminster

Dr. Alys Thomas

## How will the relationship between Wales and Westminster develop in the Fourth Assembly?

Although there is a formal machinery of intergovernmental relations between Wales and Westminster, it is only part of the story. The actual process is dynamic and reflective of relationships both within political parties at different ends of the M4 or between Governments of a different political hue.

### Intergovernmental machinery

Since the advent of devolution in 1999 there have been formal mechanisms in place to facilitate relations between the devolved administrations in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland with the UK Government. These take the form of an overarching Memorandum of Understanding (MoU); concordats agreed between UK departments and the devolved administrations and Devolution Guidance Notes.

The MoU also provides for the Joint Ministerial Committee (JMC), a forum which brings together UK Cabinet Ministers, including territorial Secretaries of State, with the First Ministers and Ministers of the devolved administrations.

*The formal machinery of intergovernmental relations is only part of the story*

The JMC fell into abeyance and did not meet in plenary between 2001 and 2008. Gordon Brown tasked the then Secretary of State for Wales, Paul Murphy with its revival. Arguably, the impetus for the JMC meeting was absent with Labour in power at Westminster and dominant at Holyrood and in Cardiff. That changed in 2007 when the SNP formed a minority Government in

Scotland bringing a fresh dynamic to intergovernmental relations, with the new First Minister, Alex Salmond, welcoming the opportunity for structured relationships between the UK Government and the devolved administrations.

### The 'Respect Agenda'?

The dynamic was transformed once again in May 2010 as the Conservative / Liberal Democrat coalition came to power at Westminster. The new UK Government has sought to cast its approach to relationships with the devolved institutions as the 'Respect Agenda' and undertaken to treat the JMC with a 'new seriousness'. The Prime Minister signalled his intent with early visits to the devolved legislatures. However, the 'Respect Agenda' has not been without controversy as critics point out that decisions such as holding the AV referendum on the same day as devolved elections and affecting a clash of elections in 2015 demonstrated a lack of respect to the devolved bodies. This raises the question of whether the JMC can provide a robust forum for managing devolution with different parties in power.

Furthermore, a new phenomenon has emerged in this novel political climate – a collective approach by the devolved administrations. In October 2010, the First Ministers of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland put their names to a joint declaration opposing the UK Government's approach to the economy. A further declaration on the economy was issued in advance of the JMC meeting in February 2010. It remains to be seen whether this approach by devolved administrations will pay dividends in

the medium term and will be sustained into the future.

## **A Secretary of State for nations and regions?**

The idea of doing away with territorial ministers and replacing them with a single minister for nations and regions has been around for some years. However, the Yes vote in the March 2011 referendum seems to have injected new life into the debate and the House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee recently recommended that the posts should be reviewed. The main argument in favour is that the territorial Secretaries of State do not have enough to do. The role of the Wales Office regarding Legislative Competence Orders will not exist in the Fourth Assembly. Unsurprisingly Secretaries of State past and present have mounted a stout defence of their role as a key element of the intergovernmental infrastructure.

***Secretaries of State past and present have mounted a stout defence of their role as a key element of the intergovernmental infrastructure***

Should the post of Secretary of State for Wales cease to exist questions would be raised about the future of the Welsh Affairs Select Committee, its terms of reference being to examine matters within the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Wales (including relations with the National Assembly for Wales). Would a new select committee be established in order to scrutinise the newly combined Secretary of State?

The number of Welsh MPs will also fall from 40 to 30. Looking beyond the next Westminster

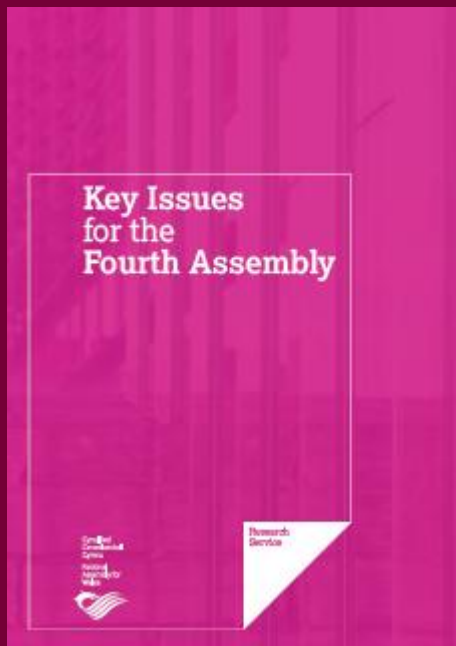
election, if the Welsh Affairs Select Committee is retained, populating it with Welsh members could be problematic. Currently the membership is twelve and must reflect party balance and it has two members who sit for English seats. This raises questions about the consequences of fewer Welsh MPs and whether this will impact on the Assembly.

### **The Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011**

*The Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011* will reduce the number of MPs in the House of Commons from 650 to 600 by the date of the next UK General Election.

The number of Welsh MPs will fall from 40 to 30. This will not however affect the number of Assembly Members which will remain at 60.

# Article taken from Research Service publication



## Key Issues for the Fourth Assembly

This document has been specially prepared for Assembly Members by the Research Service. It sets out some of the key issues likely to matter to Members during the Fourth Assembly.

[Key Issues for the Fourth Assembly](#)

For more publications from the Research Service, see **our pages on the Assembly website:**  
[www.assemblywales.org/bus-assembly-publications-research.htm](http://www.assemblywales.org/bus-assembly-publications-research.htm)

Research Service  
National Assembly for Wales  
Cardiff Bay  
CF99 1NA

Email: [Research.Service@wales.gov.uk](mailto:Research.Service@wales.gov.uk)

Twitter: [@NAWResearch](https://twitter.com/NAWResearch)