‘Beyond barbarism’

Leanne Wood

Devolution as a progressive future
In a pamphlet written in 1916, Rosa Luxembourg said: “Bourgeois society stands at a crossroads, either transition to socialism or regression to barbarism.”

Politics is at a crossroads now. Those not on the right of politics can easily feel dismay, if not despair, with jingoism and ‘supremacy’ having reached deeply concerning levels. In Wales, the devolution created in 1997 provides a path to avoid the ‘barbarism’.

Before we get to the end of that path, we must tackle the various threats we face here in Wales. The Tories in Westminster – and those who are further to the right – are already trying to take back many of the hard-won gains that it took generations to secure. Rather than wallow in collective self-pity or dish out the blame to Tory government in London or Labour government in Cardiff, I prefer to think about what we can do about those problems and threats. If we do that, there are reasons to be optimistic and hopeful.

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This year marks 20 years of devolution. Our national parliament in Wales or ‘Senedd’ gives us a starting point to do things differently. Devolution has not been a panacea – some of the problems we had 20 years ago have got worse. We all know that this can’t be as good as it gets. For me, devolution was only ever an opportunity. So far, it’s one we haven’t fully grasped. The rise in English nationalism, which has fuelled and framed the anti-EU debate, gives us in Wales a new and good opportunity to extend

1 Luxembourg R (1916) The Junius Pamphlet
that devolution so that we can do our politics differently. Our version of national liberation for Wales wants to see bridges built and cooperation with others.

It provides a collective and progressive alternative to English nationalism, which ever more appears to focus on barriers and exclusion.

To help us get to that point where looking to the future gives us more cause for hope than despair, it is worth considering how we can turn the threats we face – climate change, Brexit, poverty, automation – into opportunities. Wales is a small country with vast, untapped natural and human resources. If we could organise ourselves differently, we could better take advantage of these resources and make sure they are used for our people’s benefit. It’s worth considering what kind of economy we want when using these resources.

The Scots – or my friends in the SNP at least – see people’s despair with a rotten Westminster system as an opportunity. Like the Scots, we in Wales too could also take this opportunity to show how we could do our politics differently and how we can reduce our dependence on the British state. Of course, it would be very difficult for us to become an independent country tomorrow in one big bang. Nonetheless, it must make sense for us to be thinking about what we can do now to build up resilience; strengthen our economy; improve our self-sufficiency and upskill our people.

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These would ensure we are equipped to face the challenges ahead. Doing this would also reduce our dependence. We could aim to reduce the gap between what is spent on Welsh public services and welfare and what is raised in taxes. We could make it a stated aim to reduce our dependence. And whether you are, like me, an advocate of Welsh independence or not, surely everyone can get behind a plan to reduce our dependence on Westminster?

In my view, such a plan would contain certain elements and would be built on a set of values. In the pamphlet that I authored in 2018 called The Change We Need,2 I suggested what a set of principles and values for this project could look like.

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2 Wood L (2017) ‘The Change We Need’, Pamphlet
• Decentralisation – taking power from the centre and devolving to local communities.
• Self-sufficiency and living within our environmental means.
• The maintenance and strengthening of existing rights and protections for workers, women and minorities.
• Striving for economic equality by lifting those at the bottom and working to eliminate geographic and class inequality.
• The assumption that our public money should be spent for public good.
• Maximising democracy by increasing people’s knowledge of and participation in it.
• Openness to value and nurture all people.
• Cooperation not competition.
• Wales must be an outward looking national entity.
• No nostalgia in our politics.

We should be seeking to eliminate poverty and to move the mountains necessary to prepare for, mitigate and reduce the impacts of climate change. We should be aiming for cultural diversity – which includes protecting and promoting the Welsh language – and we should take measures to make our country and our plan for building it to be as inclusive and involve people from as many different minorities as is possible. This means also that we all must be active anti-fascists.

And it must be outward looking – giving Wales a place in the world.

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We are a great size and we have so many other positive attributes as a nation for us to be in an excellent position to do our politics differently. We could implement a vision of community decentralisation because we are small and because Wales is a community of communities.

Centralised British socialism would not be able to fully deliver for scattered and sparse communities in the same way that it may be able to help people in large towns and cities. Wales’ comparatively small population and representation in Westminster means we can only ever be an afterthought for Westminster, whatever party is in power there. This has been proven many times during the tenure of governments of various political persuasions.
So, what can we do now, to start this process of moving towards decentralised, self-sufficient communities? We can all practise ‘real independence’ by working to empower people in communities to do for themselves what austerity has taken away. Anyone can do this. Identify a problem in your community and work with others to provide a solution. This ‘practice’ has led to members of my own party, for example, setting up and running food share schemes, reopening closed park paddling pools during the summer, running libraries, organising soup and sandwich runs for homeless people, running community and social centres, ‘pay as you feel’ cafes and even setting up energy, food and other cooperatives which employ people. As we become more and more independent as communities and in attitude, bit-by-bit, community-by-community, we are ditching our dependence and growing our independence. Practically and in a ‘real’ way.

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Devolution provides smaller communities chances to define their own identities, in ways that serve rather than divide them. That is a truly progressive route away from the barbarism sweeping Britain.

Leanne Wood was elected to the National Assembly for Wales in 2003 as a regional assembly member for South Wales Central. She is now the assembly member for the Rhondda. Between 2012 and 2018 she was the Leader of Plaid Cymru, the first woman to hold that position in the party. Before becoming an assembly member, she worked as a college tutor and a probation officer.