

'Continental politics' to follow Labour meltdown?

Intriguing, continental-style politics may be about to envelope Wales as the National Assembly engages in its most critical election ever. After eight years in the driving seat in Cardiff Bay, the electors may be about to decide on May 3 that they've had enough of Labour.

Rhodri Morgan may remain personally popular, but the turn of the political roundabout, impelled by disastrous Tony Blair policies at No 10, will force Labour into a Welsh melt-down. If 24 or fewer Labour members are returned, a number of them gains in the detested regional constituencies, the favoured coalition with the Liberal Democrats may not be able to deliver the four-year programme that Mr Morgan wishes to see.

That could easily happen, either because the Lib Dems fail to make the big gains they expect, and their manifesto policy demanding proportional representation in local government leads to either Labour backwoodsmen refusing a coalition link, or a special Lib Dem conference spurns Labour because of their failure to concede PR.

That is when the Welsh world will suddenly turn Continental. Admittedly, the move towards establishing a limited-term caretaker government may seem a little Italian - and that is hardly a country to learn lessons from.

But in the difficult world of turning former political enemies into coalition partners, that is one way in which the world operates.

To get Plaid, the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and sundry independents into one forward-moving administration demands new-style thinking.

According to the new Government of Wales Act, a First Minister must be appointed within 28 days of an election.

That's plenty of time if the ground for a coalition has already been well prepared.

But it's not enough to fit a rainbow coalition together. Some Labour sources are now considering the possibility that Rhodri Morgan would see that it is time for him to put Wales, rather than his party, first. In his final Assembly press conference, the First Minister made plain both his eagerness to serve in the post for another couple of years, and of his willingness to go when his 'gut feeling' told him it was time.

A Labour source in the Assembly told Cambria, 'There is the possibility that a caretaker government would be set up; Rhodri would continue as First Minister, with an agreement that he would step down in September. During that time, nothing radical would happen; it would be a case of keeping things ticking. At the same time, the other parties would be bolting together an administration that would then take over.'

The First Minister has a number of times in press briefings made clear that he feels he has a duty to Wales and to its Assembly; and such a move would fit in.

He certainly realises the problems that the opposition parties would face. While Plaid and the Lib Dems would fit easily within a single Cabinet, finding common ground with the Conservatives - despite (or because of) the high regard for both policy and personnel in which the Welsh party is held by Central Office in London - would prove difficult.

But the ideal of a Welsh administration with no place for Labour, so far Wales's seeming perpetual rulers, would be a great achievement - certainly for democracy - and one for which some far-sighted politicians would move heaven and earth.

Of course, from the seats point of view, a Labour deal with Plaid would seem easy - but for their mutual distrust. And where would personal ambition stand in all this? Plaid leader Ieuan Wyn Jones certainly fancies himself as First Minister - which was no doubt part of the reason that Dafydd Wigley was persuaded to resign due to ill-health. Mr Wigley, probably the brightest unutilised political talent in Wales, after his rapid return to the brightest of health, has, of course, no chance of returning to the Assembly from second in the North regional list - bar constituency disasters for Plaid in two of their seats, Caernarfon and Ynys Môn.

Mike German equally fancies himself as Deputy First Minister. The Lib Dem reaction after Plaid did a budget deal with Labour before Christmas - and seemed to cut them out - was a picture.

Another big gun, Lord Elis-Thomas, seems happy to continue as Presiding Officer. And former Secretary of State Ron Davies believes he will 'walk it' in Caerffili, according to the weekly Golwg - and thus forward his ambition to head a rainbow coalition.

Labour is the party dreading May 3, fearing an inability to persuade their supporters to vote. Their own people talk of returning with only 24 seats (down from 29). At his last briefing Mr Morgan surprisingly refused to cast any blame on Mr Blair; but the possible loss of six constituency seats would see (in order) the departure of minister Alun Pugh, Finance Minister Sue Essex (retiring anyway), Deputy Minister Tamsin Dunwoody, Sandy Mewies (Delyn), Business Minister Jane Hutt, and even Environment Minister Carwyn Jones - although possession of office often leads to salvation. The Conservatives are confident of increasing from 11 seats to overtake Plaid to become second party. Their own people list Cardiff North (traditional seat), Preseli (due to sustained hard work), Clwyd West (traditional) and Delyn as the most likely gains.

Plaid's future will rest around what happens to the voters who boosted the Lib Dems' poll by 5% at the 2005 Westminster election, and that party's increasing local election support. But Mike German admitted it might be difficult getting his own voters to turn out at Assembly elections - although he said nothing about them deserting to Plaid.

Mr German talks of being on target to see a rise from six to 10 seats. But that means winning Ceredigion from Plaid's Elin Jones (which seems doubtful), and hanging on to his 2005 increase (perhaps also doubtful). An extra regional seat or two won't take him as far as he wants to go.

Which brings us to the real enigma of this election. How well will Plaid do? We're far distant from Scotland, where the SNP lead Labour by 8% in the polls at the time of writing (which would be enough to create an SNP-led coalition, with an independence referendum in 2010. The election rules up there were written to make a purely SNP administration

impossible).

Environment Spokesperson Helen Mary Jones, one of Plaid's brightest sparks, is sweating hard to win the Llanelli seat she lost so narrowly. Mr Blair should secure her success.

Gareth Jones will become the oldest AM (four months older than Rhodri Morgan) when his local high profile wins back his slightly-changed seat of Aberconwy.

Plaid also expect to win Carmarthen West and South Pembroke with senior long-server John Dixon, where the challenge from the near-rival Conservatives is fading. But elsewhere constituency gaps are unbridgeable, leaving party pundits reduced to saying: "Wait for the result."