Nationalism has long been a force in Welsh politics, and since 1925 its cause has been most actively articulated by Plaid Cymru. The party’s message, however, made little impact in the wider context of British politics until its dramatic victory in the Carmarthen by-election in July 1966. From that date Plaid Cymru has maintained a vigorous public presence in Wales, but has failed to match the spectacular growth and achievements of its Scottish counterpart – the Scottish National Party.

Nationalist parties vary greatly and can be difficult to locate upon a left–right ideological spectrum. Plaid Cymru’s philosophy is an amalgam of conservatism and radicalism, the precise mixture of which has varied over its lifespan as a party. Plaid Cymru’s early development was dominated by Saunders Lewis, the Welsh littérature, who may still be regarded as the philosophical father of the party. Yet the party of Saunders Lewis in the 1920s and 1930s is very different from modern Plaid Cymru. Butt Philip notes: ‘It is clear that the Welsh Nationalist Party was at the outset essentially intellectual and moral in outlook, and socially conservative. Its principal concerns were the Welsh language, the Welsh identity, and Christianity in Wales.’

This initial outlook followed in a logical progression from that of nineteenth-century Welsh Liberalism. The great Liberal Ministries had passed a great deal of legislation designed to protect the distinc-
tive Welsh way of life, but their achievements had fallen short of the ultimate goal of Welsh radicalism - Home Rule. Plaid Cymru emerged after the First World War to continue this struggle, at a time when the experience of war had thrown into sharp relief the continuing threat to traditional Welsh values and society. Plaid Cymru’s philosophy has always reflected a basic humanitarianism, be it in protecting the Welsh language and culture, or in promoting progressive economic policies for the ailing Welsh economy. It is this strange mixture of cultural conservatism and innovative Social Democracy that gives Plaid Cymru its particular hue and its place in contemporary Welsh politics.

Electoral development

The party’s first electoral foray was in the 1929 General Election in the Caernarfonshire constituency. The Rev Lewis Valentine polled 609 votes (1.6 per cent); two years later Professor J. E. Daniel was able to increase the Plaid Cymru vote there to 1136 (3 per cent). In 1931 Plaid Cymru also contested the more ‘natural’ constituency of the University of Wales. Since the party’s inception it had been rooted in the university colleges, and within the academic community the appeal of Plaid Cymru’s nationalism might have made great inroads; but Saunders Lewis, the leading party figure, could only run second to the Liberal candidate with 914 votes (29.1 per cent). Plaid Cymru policy at this time was heavily orientated towards cultural and linguistic nationalism. The writings of Saunders Lewis indicate the specific philosophical direction of the party; and the events that led up to, and followed on from, Plaid Cymru’s most conspicuous direct action – the burning of the bombing school at Penyberth – indicate its practical implementation.

The pre-eminence of cultural concerns for Plaid Cymru was clearly out of place throughout the economic and social turmoil of the inter-war years. Writing in 1937, Professor Daniel suggested: ‘It is in the poetry of Taliesin and Dafydd Nanmor, in the ruling conceptions of the ancient laws of Wales, far more than in Special Areas Acts or Five Year programmes that the salvation of Wales is to be found.’ Amongst the unemployed of South Wales such a prescription must have appeared very inadequate. The first sign that the party could adopt a more pragmatic line came during two by-election campaigns