

Political Economy

“Wales” – a brand too far?

The Assembly’s swallowing of the Welsh Development Agency (WDA), Wales Tourist Board (WTB) and Education and Learning Wales (ELWa) is a lot for one sitting. The *presentation* of the resulting body as that of a toned athlete, rather than that of Monty Python’s Mr Creosote, requires a sophisticated and considered approach. Otherwise, there may be a risk of indigestion.

The announcement by First Minister Rhodri Morgan that the Assembly was to subsume the WDA, WTB and ELWa (with more public bodies to follow) was met with shock. The shock related not so much to the policy (which had been trailed as a goal much earlier in the Assembly’s life), but with the suddenness and nature of the announcement, with a minimum of consultation and on the last day of the Assembly session. The rationale for the move has been clearly stated: the need for the organisations to be more immediately accountable to democratic structures within Wales. However, there has been far less clarity on the nature of the Welsh institutional landscape post-2006. There are a number of issues which will need careful attention if the mergers are to result in more competent, as well as more democratic, structures, not least the idea of Wales as a ‘brand’.

The presentation of a believable Welsh ‘face’ to those outside the country is clearly toward the top of the policy agenda. The idea of a Welsh ‘brand’ is initially an attractive one. Think of Volvo. *Dynamism. Technology. Quality. Flashiness*, or of BMW *Safety Durability Practicality*. Most readers would probably recognise the car makers as attached to the ‘wrong’ list, even though the modern day products probably display few (if any) differences in their actual characteristics when viewed objectively. Is a Volvo really safer than a BMW? Nevertheless, the immediate resonance of some brands with positive qualities illustrates why the First Minister is so keen to push Wales as a brand, perhaps even at the expense of established ‘brands’ such as the WDA¹. Successful brands, such as BMW, have reasons for their success. The ‘brand’ (and its development) is focussed; its attributes are complementary (and certainly non-conflicting) and are allocated to a narrow range of products. When BMW wished to launch a new front-drive hatchback, it chose to reinvigorate an old brand (MINI) rather than stretch the rear-drive BMW franchise.

The importance of a constrained focus is reaffirmed by an examination of advertising and marketing companies internet sites. Customers have limited recall; any more than half a dozen attributes associated with a brand and people simply forget². In the light of this, it is pertinent to consider what a “Wales” brand will mean to its panoply of audiences which will include (according to the First Minister) tourists, students, inward investors, and customers for Welsh food and for Welsh culture. There are two questions here. First, can a single set of brand values appeal to such disparate audiences? And secondly, what might those values *be* for Wales? Current brand values could justifiably include positives such as friendliness and warmth, peace, natural beauty and (for businesses) low costs. However, negative associations might be equally valid and include post-industrial problems, particularly ill-health and a lack of dynamism.

Before accentuating the positives in any (explicit or implicit) branding exercise, the Welsh Assembly Government will need to have to a clear vision of where it wants to ‘place’ or ‘sell’ Wales, and give consideration to how far the ‘brand’ will stretch towards its goal. There may be a strong desire to proclaim Wales as dynamic, innovative, ‘high-value’ and high-skilled. However if it continues to lag the UK on key indicators such as research and development, wages, and ‘knowledge economy’ activities, can the brand really ‘fly’ and be believable³?

Meanwhile, some effort should be made to ensure that brand values are non-conflicting. The New Zealand branding exercise is a case in point. New Zealand activity promotes its credentials in both biotechnology and natural products – indeed as part of the same wider ‘product set’. For the former, highlighted ‘successes’ include:

- *breeding of transgenic crops with virus and insect resistance*
- *clonal afforestation through the development of micropropagation techniques to select superior tree variants for large scale forestry*
- *genetic manipulation of flower colour*

This is in addition to the world’s first sheep genetically engineered for increased wool production. Whilst the website does not note whether the unfortunate animals are also in receipt of any extra legs (handy for meat exports) many might, on noting these ‘successes’, feel a little concerned when

consuming ‘natural products’ merchandise, including natural oils and bee-related products. It may be that the New Zealand brand can stretch to incorporate both a burgeoning genetics industry and the country’s environmental attributes, but it is too early for Wales’ First Minister and others to hold it up as ‘best practice’. Simply because New Zealand and Canada have *done it*, does not mean it *works*.

Clarity and unity of vision are required in order to brand nations and places effectively. The WTB was able to sell Wales as peaceful and relaxed at the same time as the WDA marketed Wales as a dynamic business environment because the audiences did not greatly overlap and the messages, whilst perhaps not complementary, could be understood as applying to different aspects of the country. This will not be at all easy to accomplish for a single body having many different voices. The message conveyed by the development of an Assembly-sponsored ‘gene park’ in Cardiff Bay may be incongruent with the desire to be seen as leaders in organic produce and countryside stewardship.

Meanwhile, the rationale for the new Exxon terminal to import Qatari gas energy at Milford Haven appears to centre on access to cheap energy for business, as employment levels on site will in the longer term be low. The announcement is also provoking in the context of an Assembly embracing ‘sustainability’ while at the same time appearing not to consider just how attractive a genuine source of cheap fuel will be to fuel-hungry (and thus CO₂ intensive) industries. The decision not to examine the proposals also seems at odds with the image of a scrutinising Assembly looking after the welfare of its population. The ongoing debate on genetic modification of crops in Wales further demonstrates the need to address these inconsistencies immediately if Wales is to develop brand values which do not immediately disintegrate when compared to reality.

Re-branding needs a strong visual identity (although we should not, as the Chief Executive of the WDA notes elsewhere in this *Review*, confuse the style with the content). It is an interesting exercise to visit the unifying “New Zealand Way” front-door website, which proudly bears the Silver Fern and is held up by the First Minister as a potential model for Wales. Of the three links accessed via <http://www.nzway.co.nz>,

two (information about *products and services* and *food and beverages*) lead to the same webpage, www.marketnewzealand.com and the last to the "100% PURE NEW ZEALAND" tourism site – a completely distinct (and recently developed) brand, notably lacking a Silver Fern. There is no common font or design style across these two websites. This is a common front-door, but each room has been decorated in clashing styles. Viewed from the internet, New Zealand's re-branding appears either superficial or perhaps incomplete. Meanwhile, www.canada.gc.ca fronts a far more coherent, though rather unexciting, set of web pages.

Both the above are far in advance of www.wales.gov.uk. Indeed, it might be argued that improving this site should be a pressing concern, being the obvious 'front-door' for outsiders wishing to find out more (or anything) about Wales. The current website focuses on Assembly structures, committee reports, Welsh Assembly Government press releases and other detail which is undoubtedly of interest to many in Wales. The first thing those from outside learn about Wales is that *'The National Assembly for Wales consists of 60 Members elected throughout Wales. The Assembly has delegated many of its powers to the First Minister, who leads the Welsh Assembly Government'*. There is no direct link to tourism, investment opportunities or available products, and no images of this beautiful country. Indeed, the structure and content of the website are more reminiscent of a government *department* than a government. The site strongly conveys the civil service influence in its design,

where administrative structures appear to be more important than their functions. Meanwhile, the WDA and WTB do have competent and well developed sites, which is fine if you know the relevant web-site addresses and/or the names of the relevant organisations. The websites suit the needs of the organisations, but have no unifying visual design or structural approach⁴. It is to be hoped that the development of a more useful and coherent web presence is on the agenda well in advance of March 2006.

The First Minister has made it clear that he sees both accountability and efficiency benefits in the merger of WDA, WTB and ELWa with the Assembly civil service⁵. However, the move from *Team Wales* to *Brand Wales* will not be an easy one. It has not been the best start. Staff departures may have been avoided with a measure of prior consultation, as would the upheaval of an unnecessary (and now reversed) WDA restructuring and re-branding (the latter alone at a cost of £150,000)⁶. A major challenge will, of course, be to integrate four very disparate organisational cultures whilst managing the related rationalisation of staff. However, at the same time, the consultation process must focus not only upon administrative structures but also upon the strategic strengths that Wales wishes to promote through its new singular and centralised economic development body and associated 'brand'. This is not an impossible task, but it will require detailed thought and sophisticated application.

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Endnotes

- 1 Western Mail, 12th October 2004 "Our Brand is Wales says Rhodri"
- 2 see www.brandguardians.com for just one example
- 3 Numerous commentators have noted the difficulty of building a 'knowledge economy' in Wales, including Professor Phil Cooke; Western Mail 25th Jun 2004 'Assembly's kick-start failing'. Also the Department for Trade's regional statistics suggest that business R&D expenditure as percentage of turnover in Wales is 4 times lower than in England. The statistics also suggest that Wales has a much higher proportion of employees in 'high and medium technology industries' than any other UK regions apart from the North East and West Midlands. These findings might be interpreted as either showing that industrial structure is not a good measure of productivity or wealth, or the difficulties inherent in measuring intangibles such as technology and research.
<http://www.dtstats.net/sd/rci/>.
- 4 www.wda.co.uk
www.visitwales.com
- 5 Others, including Professor Kevin Morgan are not so sure that increased accountability follows automatically; Western Mail, July 23rd 2004 'Quango Decision: Debate Needed'.
- 6 Gareth Hall, Western Mail, October 7th 2004 'Will new WDA be good for business?'