

Post-Election Commentary

Preface to: A Framework for Welsh Constitutional Development — Strategic Priorities for the 2026-2030 Senedd Term

Drew Griffiths, May 2026

This framework was substantially complete before the 8 May 2026 Senedd election. It was developed across the early months of 2026 as an independent contribution to Welsh constitutional thinking, drawing on the Independent Commission on the Constitutional Future of Wales (2024) and the broader academic literature on Welsh devolution. Its core argument — that constitutional durability follows institutional capability rather than preceding it — was established before any election result was known, and remains its central thesis.

The 8 May result has changed the political environment within which the framework will be read, but not the analytical substance of what it proposes. This brief preface notes how the result maps onto the framework's assumptions, where the political environment now strengthens or complicates particular sections, and which dimension of the result matters most for how the framework's recommendations should be sequenced through the 2026-2030 term.

The result and the framework

The 8 May result produced Plaid Cymru as the largest party with 43 seats, Reform UK with 34, Welsh Labour with 9, the Conservatives with 7, the Welsh Greens with 2, and the Liberal Democrats with 1. Turnout reached 51.72% — the first time Senedd turnout has crossed the 50% threshold. Welsh Labour's then First Minister and party leader, Eluned Morgan, lost her Senedd seat in Ceredigion Penfro, becoming the first sitting head of a UK government to be unseated while in office, and resigned the Welsh Labour leadership the same day. On 12 May, the Senedd elected Plaid Cymru leader Rhun ap Iorwerth as First Minister, supported by Plaid's 43 seats and the Welsh Greens' 2 seats, with Welsh Labour and the Liberal Democrats abstaining. This is the first time since devolution began in 1999 that the First Minister is not from Welsh Labour. Plaid forms a minority government with a working arithmetic of 45 against 41 opposition seats, dependent on continued Green support and Labour-Lib Dem abstention or active support for individual measures.

Three features of this result are particularly significant for the framework.

First, the historic turnout above 50% is the most encouraging signal in the result for the framework's longer-term thesis. The framework argues that Welsh democratic deepening is a precondition for sustainable constitutional development. A Senedd election that engages a majority of the eligible electorate for the first time is the kind of incremental democratic strengthening the framework treats as foundational. The 2026 result is not a constitutional mandate, but it is a clearer democratic basis for the constitutional work the framework describes than any previous Senedd election has provided.

Second, the absence of a coalition majority means the 2026-2030 term begins with minority government and the political constraints that produces. The framework

was developed without assuming any particular electoral outcome and the substance of what it proposes within current devolved powers does not depend on a legislative majority. But the pacing assumed in Sections 4 and 6 — substantive devolution referendum within the term, cross-party constitutional dialogue, Senedd electoral system review — becomes harder rather than easier under minority arithmetic. These remain achievable but on slower timelines than a majority government would permit.

Third, the entry of Reform UK as the second-largest Senedd party with 34 seats changes the cross-party dialogue environment described in Section 6. The framework's discussion of cross-party constitutional dialogue assumed engagement primarily with Welsh Labour and the Welsh Greens. Reform UK's substantial Senedd presence requires the framework's cross-party arguments to be tested against a different political opposition than the one anticipated. The 12 May First Minister vote provides early signal on the shape of that cross-party environment: the Welsh Greens supported the Plaid nominee actively, Welsh Labour and the Liberal Democrats abstained rather than opposing, and Reform and the Conservatives provided the formal opposition. This pattern — constructive engagement from the Greens, neither support nor opposition from Welsh Labour, formal opposition from Reform and the Conservatives — is the working configuration the framework's cross-party arguments will need to navigate. The framework's neutrality on constitutional outcomes and its emphasis on institutional capability within current devolved powers travel reasonably well across this configuration, though the operational reality of cross-party engagement in the 2026 Senedd will be more complex than the framework's Section 6 treatment originally anticipated.

Sections that gain urgency

Several sections of the framework gain particular urgency given the political environment.

Section 3 — institutional capability development — is the framework's most immediately executable content. The Welsh Treasury Management Office, the Welsh Green Bank, the expanded Welsh Revenue Authority, the development of Welsh external engagement capacity, and Welsh public service capability are all within Welsh Government executive authority and do not depend on legislative majorities for their initiation. They are also the substantive work most likely to demonstrate the governance competence Section 2 identifies as the foundation for any longer-term constitutional development. In a minority government environment, institutional development work that proceeds through executive authority becomes more rather than less important.

Section 4.1 — implementation of the Independent Commission's Recommendation 1 on democratic innovation — gains particular significance given the historic turnout. The Commission's citizens' engagement work documented widespread Welsh public appetite for participatory and deliberative mechanisms beyond electoral participation. The 2026 turnout suggests that appetite is real and that mechanisms designed to deepen Welsh democratic engagement would land well in the current environment.

Section 8 — Welsh national life — is the framework's longest-horizon work and the dimension most independent of immediate political arithmetic. Welsh language confidence in public administration, accumulated Welsh institutional competence,

and supported Welsh cultural production are work that proceeds across electoral cycles and Senedd terms. The 2026 result does not change the framework's Section 8 substance but does provide a more democratically grounded foundation for it.

Sections requiring recalibration

Two sections require recalibration given the result.

Section 4.3 — substantive devolution referendum within the term — was framed as plausible during the 2026-2030 period without specifying timing within the term. Under minority government, the political conditions for a substantive devolution referendum become more uncertain. The referendum tool remains available but its timing now depends on the development of cross-party consensus, the resolution of Welsh Labour's leadership succession (see below), and the practical legislative timetable a minority government can sustain. A referendum within the term remains possible; a referendum in the first half of the term has become less likely.

Section 6 — cross-party constitutional dialogue — was developed with a particular configuration of Welsh political parties in mind. With Reform UK as the second-largest party and Welsh Labour reduced to nine seats, the cross-party dialogue environment is materially different from the one the framework's drafting anticipated. The framework's underlying logic — that durable Welsh constitutional development requires broader Welsh ownership than any single party can provide — remains correct. The practical implementation under the actual 2026 Senedd configuration is the work of the parties, civil society, and the Independent Commission's ongoing engagement structures rather than of this framework directly.

The determining variable: Welsh Labour leadership contest

The single political variable most determinative of how the framework's recommendations should be sequenced through the 2026-2030 term is the Welsh Labour leadership succession now under way following Eluned Morgan's resignation on 8 May. Ken Skates has been appointed interim leader pending a full leadership election whose timetable the Welsh Labour Executive Committee has yet to set. The new leader, whoever emerges, will lead Welsh Labour as a Senedd opposition party of nine seats rather than as the governing party — the first time since devolution began in 1999 that a Welsh Labour leader will not also be First Minister. Welsh Labour at nine seats faces fundamental questions about its electoral coalition, its constitutional posture, and its strategic relationship with Welsh nationalism, devolution sceptics within its own tradition, and the UK Labour Government. Different leadership outcomes produce materially different political environments for the framework's longer-term recommendations.

A leadership outcome producing a Welsh Labour that engages constructively with constitutional development under enhanced devolution would strengthen the framework's Section 6 cross-party dialogue dimension significantly. A leadership outcome producing a Welsh Labour focused on rebuilding its traditional electoral base might engage less actively with constitutional questions but would not obstruct the framework's institutional capability development work. A leadership outcome producing internal Welsh Labour fracture, or a posture explicitly hostile to constitutional development, would complicate Section 6 substantially without affecting Sections 2, 3, 7, or 8.

The contest timetable will itself shape the framework’s relevance through the 2026-2030 term. A short contest resolving by autumn 2026 would clarify the political environment in time for the framework’s first-term recommendations to be sequenced against a settled Welsh Labour posture. A longer contest, or a sequence of transitional leaderships, would leave the framework operating across a period of continued Welsh Labour uncertainty. This framework is not premised on any particular Welsh Labour leadership outcome or any particular contest duration. Its institutional development work proceeds under any of them. But the sequencing and pacing of Section 4 constitutional preparation and Section 6 cross-party dialogue would be calibrated differently depending on which Welsh Labour emerges from the contest and how quickly. Recipients should read the framework as deliberately constructed to be robust across the range of plausible Welsh Labour outcomes, while recognising that the specific 2026-2030 implementation pathway will depend in part on which outcome materialises and when.

On the framework’s neutrality

A final note on the framework’s deliberate neutrality on Wales’s eventual constitutional destination. The Independent Commission (2024) explicitly declined to recommend any of the three options it identified — enhanced devolution, federal structures within the United Kingdom, or fundamental constitutional change. The Commission’s stated position is that the choice between options is for Welsh citizens and their representatives. This framework adopts the same position. The institutional capability work it proposes is valuable under any of the three options and necessary for any of them to succeed. Readers who hold settled views on Wales’s eventual constitutional destination may find particular sections more or less congenial to their preferences, but the framework as a whole is designed to be useful regardless of which constitutional outcome Welsh democracy ultimately chooses.

The framework is offered as a contribution to a conversation that should happen rather than as advocacy for any particular line. The 2026 result has created the political environment in which that conversation now proceeds.

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