1. The National Assembly for Wales has evolved in terms of competences and powers since it was first established in 1998. This has led to the emergence of a ‘capacity gap’ that may lead to a situation of institutional exhaustion if it is not remedied in the near future. This ‘gap’ was recognised almost a decade ago when the Richard Commission on the Powers and Electoral Arrangements of the National Assembly called for an increase in the size of the Assembly. In a unicameral Assembly with primary legislative powers, Richard felt that an increase to 80 Members by 2011 would be essential if the Assembly was to discharge its roles of holding the Government to account, representing the people of Wales and making laws for Wales effectively. The recommendations made by Richard in relation to the Assembly’s powers have been largely implemented whereas those relating to its size have not.
2. There is a fairly clear ratio within comparative politics in relation to parliaments and legislatures where the executive is derived from the legislature. Too few members and the need to appoint an executive essentially hollows-out the capacity of the legislature and leave the executive possibly over-dominant; too many members and the legislature risks becoming bloated and inefficient with few opportunities for career progression for individual members. Size does matter and in this regard a relatively straightforward argument can be made that with just sixty members the NAW is now under-sized *vis-à-vis* its increasing powers and financial oversight responsibilities. This is particularly true once the fact that of those sixty members over a quarter are generally either members of the executive or holders of senior offices that prevent them from undertaking scrutiny or legislative tasks.
3. As a result the NAW is over-dependent on a small number of members who are expected to hold multiple roles. The existence of some functional overlap can be a positive component in some legislatures or assemblies but in relation to the NAW it arguably reflects a significant capacity gap that risk affecting not only the quality of legislation and subsequent policies but also the reputation of the assembly and the wellbeing of its members (and staff). What makes an effective scrutiny committee cannot be reduced down to the number of members but it can be related to having sufficient members with sufficient time and energy to really commit to an area of policy and to forge meaningful relationships with other members. In relation to the NAW an increase in members to around 100 would increase capacity and allow more members to serve on a smaller number of committees. This increase would also be broadly in line with the increase in assembly powers.
4. Increasing the number of politicians, let alone the associated costs in terms of staff, offices, expenses, etc., is never going to be popular. It is therefore vital that the NAW thinks carefully about the public engagement strategy surrounding any plan for expansion. In this regard the costs of an increase in members is not significant when placed against the annual expenditure for which the NAW is responsible and the main chamber has the capacity accommodate additional members without the need for major rebuilding work. In terms of framing any possible increase in members and capacity the NAW Commission might consider rejecting ‘the politics of pessimism’ that seems to surround contemporary politics and instead embrace a new ‘politics of optimism’ that defines expansion as a reflection of a bold and confident country.