

Planning the Destruction of Communities and their Language

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**National Eisteddfod Lecture
Swansea 2006**

ISBN 1 904773 14 1



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The Author



Ron Jones is the founder and Executive Chairman of the Tinopolis group of companies. Tinopolis PLC is amongst the largest independent media companies in the UK. It has more than 400 full-time staff, having grown significantly during 2006 with the acquisition of The Television Corporation PLC. Headquartered in Llanelli the company also has offices in London, Glasgow, Cardiff and Oxford. The company produces over 2,900 broadcast hours of television programming a year. Amongst its better-known programmes are *Question Time*, the Ashes coverage, *Wedi 3* and *Wedi 7* and *A Very Social Secretary*, the drama-documentary on the life and loves of David Blunkett.

Ron began his career with Arthur Andersen which he joined on leaving university. After qualifying as a Chartered Accountant he progressed to become a worldwide partner of Arthur Andersen S.A. During his career Ron handled a large number of the firm's largest and most prestigious clients and worked in a number of countries.

Ron was the founder Chairman of Real Radio, the commercial radio licence for south Wales and a joint venture between Tinopolis and the Guardian Media Group. He is a former member of the Council and the Court of Governors of the University of Wales, Swansea. As a director of UWS Ventures Limited, the university's commercial arm, he advises the college on maximising its return on its technology knowledge and skills. He is also a non-executive director of Enfis Limited, a venture capital-backed high technology company.

He is a former member of the Sports Council for Wales and the Welsh Language Board and has held a variety of other posts in the public and private sectors. Ron was for eight years Honorary Treasurer of Glamorgan County Cricket Club. He is a board member and former Chairman of Llanelli Rugby Football Club Limited.

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Introduction

When I was asked to provide this year's lecture for the Institute of Welsh Affairs the immediate problem was deciding what to speak about. The National Eisteddfod of Wales is a time in the year when it is appropriate for us to consider matters Welsh and where we are going as a nation. The obvious answers to my dilemma were in the field of business or perhaps in broadcasting – the two areas where I have spent most of my adult life.

The first is an alien one to many – the dynamics of starting, operating and developing a business do not feature highly in the list of sexy things to do in Wales. Meanwhile, broadcasting and its future are being driven by global changes. Globalisation is with us and the global economy is fast developing a global culture. This cultural reality has been with us for a generation but now the pace of change is such that monthly we see new developments that affect all of us in our daily lives, even if we don't always realise it. There are great challenges here for us in Wales. In such a world how does a small country maintain its cultural identity, in either of its languages?

The possible themes of the economy and broadcasting are in fact at the heart of any discussion about the future of Wales, what it is to be Welsh and whether we have a role amongst the nations if not the nation states of Europe.

Outside the day job, one of my fascinations has been the analysis of what is Wales and where are we going next. I decided to speak about a wider issue facing us in Wales. Are we building the Wales we want and need or are we building a down-market version of the British state with its metropolitan bias and its lack of interest in ensuring that the benefits of progress are available to the whole of the country? Now, as a boy from Brynaman brought up in what was for children then a virtually monoglot village, it is perhaps natural that I see this analysis through the prism of the Welsh language.

Planning the Unexpected

The Government of Wales Act has its critics and its faults. It has elements of political chicanery as well. However, it does provide a legal platform upon which we can build our country. The powers are there to help us build the

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country we want to be. In the middle of the enthusiasm for these new powers my thoughts turn to what we intend to do with them. It is to community and therefore to language that I turn today. These issues should be in the front line of our political discussions. My belief is that we are already betraying these key elements of the new Wales and the new powers directed to the wrong ends can make matters worse.

This is not intended to be an academic thesis – those of you that know me will testify to my liking for the intuitive rather than the analytical. It is not intended to be a party political analysis or argument either. Many of my criticisms today are in fact directed at the party where so many of my political instincts are to be found.

The title of the lecture refers to the planning of destruction – the planning of our own destruction, of our own communities and our own language. Now, very few people in recent times have sought any of these results. We do not need to live in an age of paranoia. Recent complaints and over-reaction about Anne Robinson or Tony Blair and their possible problems with us as a people are best set aside as childish prejudice or examples of the natural human tendency to distrust things we do not understand. Blair's identity crisis is his problem not ours. Within Wales the George Thomases now enjoy the fate they have earned. The Llew Smith tendency in the Labour Party is little more than a footnote in the Labour manifesto. In these PC times not supporting the Welsh language has fallen into the same disrepute as other historical anomalies such as Paki-bashing and homophobia.

The appointment of Jim Griffiths as the first Secretary of State can be seen as the first step in the creation of the new governance of Wales. Whatever the political motives and pressures, Wilson set on its way a process that could not be reversed. Ron Davies in his famous remark that "devolution is a process not an event" was acknowledging the historical journey that had begun years previously and of which he was just a part. However, the graveyards of political and social progress are filled with the unintended consequences of actions well-meant but ill-considered. I have just returned from Boston where the first actions of those escaping religious persecution was to hang those who sought religion outside the Puritan tradition.

I believe that we are adopting for Wales a pattern of governance unnecessarily like the UK model. By transferring to Wales and its governance much of the mindset of the British governing class and their

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metropolitan prejudices we are building a country that we will in a few years not recognise as Wales. Devolution gave us the opportunity to consider afresh how we organise ourselves and the ways in which our community and communities work. It goes without saying that if we lose the characteristics of a different sort of country, a nation different to our neighbours, the language will be lost as well.

How have we got to where we are today? What is the effect of the way we have ordered our country these last years and what is the long-term impact on all of us, our communities and our language?

The British Effect

The United Kingdom has always been one of the most centralised states in the world. It hardly needs analysis. History and monarchy made it so. Generations of politicians including our own kept it so. A governing civil service certainly had no incentive to change it and they didn't. All roads lead to London. Most UK public companies are headquartered in London. Virtually all our public institutions are based there. The effect is of course cumulative and today most public investment is in the South East because otherwise the region would implode. Despite their protestations, regional centres such as Leeds, Birmingham and Manchester are subservient to London. They lack many of the characteristics of independence and self-sufficiency that one sees in the major cities of the US.

London does of course have some justification for its position of pre-eminence. History cannot be rewritten and it is one of the great cities of the world, an engine for the British economy and the provider of much of the national wealth both financially and culturally.

The impact on Wales has been clear. I will avoid a historical treatise here but the railway and road networks are the living embodiment of where Wales has fitted into the map, and the politics and the society that is the United Kingdom.

Intriguingly for me as a businessman it may be business, or at least government interference in it, that has had the most far-reaching impact on the Welsh economy today. The nationalisation of our great industries on a United Kingdom basis, rather than a Welsh one, removed any local control and management, let alone ownership. More important, in later

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years it took away any chance the previous companies had to evolve into companies in other sectors as genuinely Welsh companies. Regional centres like Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds, already larger and more powerful economies, retained much of their commercial and industrial infrastructure and have retained their economic lead over us in Wales ever since.

The famous sign above the mine reading "owned by the people for the people" has a hollow ring today. The later British view of the need to dispose of our mines altogether was a natural end-result of the lack of a genuine Welsh perspective in the management of that industry and its strategic and economic importance. I am no advocate of the delights of mining. I comment only on the consequence of a British rather than a Welsh perspective.

The Welsh Office is no more. It now finds its deserved and small footnote in our history. For years a refuge for the second-rate within the civil service its time running Wales is gone. Who would argue against the proposition that its true and perhaps appropriate role was to implement UK government policy. As one Permanent Secretary famously said when asked whether his first loyalty was to the government or to the people of Wales – "Can't I say both?"

How many UK government policies before and during the period when we had the Welsh Office were truly in the interests of Wales? Was the impact on Wales even considered? Would the Welsh Office have prevented Tryweryn? Would it have ameliorated the impact of the railway closures? It took that great Welsh maverick, Sir Wyn Roberts, to play the system for all it was worth to allow Wales sometimes to get things done in its own way. These problems were not a conspiracy against Wales, merely a reflection of what happens when you get wrong, as Britain has for centuries, the balance between the importance of the state and the people it ought to be there to serve.

Today, New Labour appears to have the same obsessions with centralised management and a disregard for anyone they do not understand. I will avoid the issues of freedom of the individual and war – they are not needed for my thesis today. Let's just consider the areas of government not fully devolved to Wales. Agriculture and the country life – they must be rich toffs – let's do them down. Police – let's force through mergers. Jobs in St Athan – tough luck.

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The World as Seen from Cardiff

The process of devolution has now been underway for some 40 years and we are entitled to inquire whether that process is likely to ensure that the new Wales does not follow slavishly the centralist model still being followed in Britain? Are we now producing a country where all its people and communities are treated fairly and equally, or will the new Wales be subservient to the needs and ambition of Cardiff – the new bully in the governance of the people?

When Nick Edwards, now Lord Crickhowell, as Secretary of State announced the creation of the Cardiff Bay Development Corporation he spoke of his ambition for Wales. In his view the resurgence of Cardiff would be the spark to reignite the economic and social development of Wales. The benefits of the investment would ripple across the country and all of Wales would benefit. I have never doubted Nick Edwards' loyalty to Wales or his integrity. However, in this judgement he was wrong and fundamentally and damagingly so.

He was wrong to believe that Wales could benefit even if the new Cardiff was successful. He was wrong to believe that a small town like Cardiff, however successful, could be an economic, cultural or social engine for Wales. Cardiff is smaller than Croydon, little bigger than Nottingham. This is not a budding Dublin or Barcelona or potentially an economic powerhouse like Dusseldorf, Milan or even Toulouse. He was also wrong in that his view reflects a misunderstanding of Wales as it had been, it was and it could become.

Devolution has led to a compounding of this fundamental error. The obsession with Cardiff and what is good for Cardiff continues as a consequence of so much of what we now do in Wales. The most distressing aspect of these developments is that the approach is not going to work. It ignores the way Wales works and it will damage our country permanently.

Wales has always been a land of small towns and separate communities. Our geography and our local rivalries and frankly our differences made it so. No philosophy for governing Wales that does not recognise the needs and differences of Maesteg and Llanelli and Bangor and Bargoed can succeed.

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The Last Days of Welshness

In the last years of the British Empire the joke was that the newly independent states instantly acquired the trappings of statehood – an airline, army and a parliament building. In our case we have failed at the first, we thankfully are not allowed the second, and the third has been as much of a shambles as experienced by any banana republic. Wales has its own absurdities as well.

The Welsh Office may appear dead but as if from a 1960s Hammer movie it is back and they of the Welsh Assembly Government are determined to get us. Like some crazed secret society they are slowly strangling Wales. The control-freak civil service culture of the Welsh Office has been sold to the elected politicians and they have bought it. A whole new generation of Sir Humphreys is being born before our eyes. Since devolution our public sector has grown enormously and it continues to grow as I speak.

Consider the fate of the Objective 1 funding round that is just coming to an end. It entailed billions spent largely by the public sector on new people in the public sector doing things we never knew we needed.

Consider the exploits of ELWa. Consider the management of the bonfire of the Quangos. Some have been killed off and they are re-emerging as clones of the Welsh Assembly Government, more secretive and less accountable than ever before.

Oh surely not! Well, let me talk about my experience as a member of the Sports Council for Wales for many years. I was fortunate enough to come to the end of my term just as the Council came under Assembly Government control and interference. Unelected and unaccountable it may have been, but for years the Sports Council had an enviable record of performance, serving sport in Wales. I saw at first hand the Assembly Government officials seeking tighter and tighter control – not by the Assembly you understand, but by officials just as unelected and unaccountable as before but perhaps without the same commitment to the job in hand.

Our elected leaders seem unprepared or unwilling to challenge this process. Dafydd Elis-Thomas is one of only a small number of our politicians to have spoken about their concerns about the way things are going. We face a future governed by faceless bureaucrats.

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More than the Assembly

Where does local government or local democracy fit into the new Wales? We have 22 local authorities and goodness knows how many bodies we have ostensibly in charge of our health system. We have the appearance therefore of devolution inside Wales, but in practice it is to bodies expensive to run, too small to be strategic, and perhaps too small and weak to be a threat to politicians in the Assembly and officials sitting in the Assembly and in the Assembly Government.

Naturally enough, the recipients of public funding have been quick enough to pick up the mood music. How many national institutions are now based outside Cardiff? Few indeed. Even the Church in Wales is now apparently considering whether its head in Wales should always be the Bishop of Llandaff to match the realities of Welsh life. Has nobody noticed how ridiculous it is that even the Urdd, the Eisteddfod, S4C and the Welsh Language Board, institutions that should be emotionally indivisible from the Welsh-speaking heartland, are based in Cardiff? These are good well-paid jobs in Welsh requiring some of our best young Welsh-speakers to leave their home areas to advance their careers.

In their roles as national institutions have they perhaps forgotten that institutions are there for a purpose not for the benefit of the institutions themselves? Are these deficiencies at least partly the effect of the nation of institutions we are creating? I will choose as an example the Welsh Language Board, a body I was part of for many years. Our lives are now surrounded by Welsh language schemes, a bastard offspring of the Welsh Language Act I was part of negotiating through the Welsh Office. With the Welsh language under enormous pressure as a community language throughout Wales the Board sleeps well at night because virtually all public documentation is available bilingually. A civil service answer to the problems of the Welsh language has now been accepted by all of us even though it does nothing to deal with the real crisis.

The centralist tendencies sometimes provide for strange alliances. Not only our politicians fall into the trap of believing that national institutions should be a protected species. Consider for a moment the debate surrounding the Arts Council of Wales. This was painted as a battle

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between the arts professionals and a philistine arts minister anxious to spread the money amongst amateur groups around Wales at the expense of quality institutions of national and international significance. This sounds to me not very different from a new African nation in the 1960s trying to convince itself that its new airline was essential to national prestige whilst the tribal areas starved in poor health. I would have been more supportive of the luvvies' cries of outrage had I seen in recent years any real commitment to serving all the people of Wales. It seems to me that we have forgotten not our roots but our responsibility to work for the benefit of all our people.

What about the equally disadvantaged English-speaking areas of Wales? The events before and after the untimely death of Peter Law, the AM and MP for Blaenau Gwent, are of course partly a family feud and can be dismissed by the Labour Party as such. However, there is a deep sense of betrayal now throughout the Labour heartland that mirrors much of that in rural Wales. The Valleys of Gwent and Glamorgan, like the Welsh-speaking heartland are being stripped of their young talent by an economic and social model doomed to fail. These people too believe they and their communities are no longer seen as important. Whilst efforts are made to attract the private sector to invest in these areas our public sector masters stick like limpets to Cardiff and the M4. We cannot expect private business to be the first to take their wagon trains into these areas. The public sector works for us. They should be the pioneers, creating the jobs where the jobs are needed.

Those that are left

Across the world we see the movement of people to the cities. It is the natural effect of industrialisation. Throughout China and India huge new cities are being built to drive the economy and to provide futures to those fleeing rural poverty. This should strike a chord in Wales. Many generations of Welsh people shared these experiences, flooding into the mining valleys during the 19th and early 20th centuries and emigrating to Slough and the Midlands in the years between the wars. Today there are opportunities outside Wales that continue to take some of our best people. In a global economy the movement of people is inevitable. Llanelli is now newly full of Poles and they are undeniably adding to the local community.

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The issue for us in Wales is whether our economic and social policies are contributing unnecessarily to this trend. After all, ours is a post-industrial society where the opportunities should be somewhat different to those faced by communities and people in emerging countries. Are we attracting people away from our traditional communities not to drive the economic future of Wales but to feed an unnecessary, and government, public sector-led boom in just one of our towns?

Another Country, Another Way

What has been the impact of the way we have ordered our country these last years and what is the long-term impact on all of us, our communities and our language? Are these problems I have outlined necessary characteristics of the new Wales and does it matter?

Well, if we create a country that loses its soul it matters to me and I think to most of Wales. Can a Wales based on a mistaken view of the importance of national institutions based in Cardiff survive? Perhaps it can but will it be recognisably Welsh? Can a language survive an unintended attack on its status as a community language purely in the hope that it will re-emerge as a vibrant language in Cardiff and the other naturally English-speaking parts of Wales? Certainly not. Can communities facing oblivion survive when we are unwilling to build an economic model that allows them to find new roles in the modern world? Not unless we radically change both our own attitudes and those prevailing in the National Assembly and the Assembly Government.

We have to live in the modern world I can hear people say. It's the way things are. These are natural socio-economic movements we can do nothing to stop. A call for us to find another way is a romantic idealism. Naturally enough, I challenge these charges. Having never been accused of romanticism before, this could provide a new and populist gloss to my public image. In fact my views are not romantic at all. They reflect the reality as I see it that we are, by default, engineering a country that will be different to the one most of us want.

Changing our approach to the building of our country may be difficult. It may even be too late to reverse the trends of the last 40 years. It may require our politicians to stop thinking of Wales as a single entity and to accept that

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a prosperous Wales needs strong, independent and vibrant communities. If they continue to argue that the way to build a better Wales is to build a centralised country they will need a better spin-doctor. Our institutions will need to recognise their responsibilities to the whole of Wales.

Perhaps we all need to think of a Wales where devolution does not stop at Cardiff. In some countries, geography does mean that the centralist model cannot be adopted. In others the mere thought would be offensive.

I mentioned earlier that I had just returned from Boston. I spent some time in Vermont, the tiny rural state to the north of Boston. I know the area well and I saw again one fundamental difference between our ways of doing things here in Wales compared to the US. The little town of Stowe, about the size of Llanrwst or Llandovery, has a level of community activity I suspect we now rarely see in Wales. It certainly has a level of control over its affairs and seems better for it. It has a school partly built by the parents and local helpers and a rich cultural and community life presided over by that mysterious mode of government, the town meeting. Vermont's capital is a town about the size of Llanelli. Its largest town, Burlington, sitting on Lake Champlain, is no bigger but has a university that is well resourced and a civic confidence not often seen in the UK. It is the very model of a fiercely independent and liberal state determined to find its own way to do things.

Boston, the nearest metropolitan centre and a London rather than a Cardiff in terms of size and potential influence, is just a few hours away by car. It is an essential part of the economic patchwork that is New England. It is successful and fast-growing, yet it prospers not at the expense of its neighbours but alongside them.

It is in the nature of lectures such as these that questions are raised and answers not provided. Perhaps there are no solutions to the problems I have raised. Perhaps I am suffering from the natural Celtic streak of pessimism. However, I do believe deeply that the future is a time we can as a people organise and manage. History is there to be created not endured as victims.