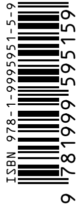

ISBN 978-1-9995951-5-9

£6.95

the welsh agenda

Autumn/Winter 2020
Issue 65

Education Special

Decolonising the curriculum
Shavanah Taj interviews Charlotte Williams

Education during the pandemic
Gareth Evans interviews Kirsty Williams

Louise Muteham on how to keep pupils safe while learning

Voices from the NHS
Noreen Blanluet compiles frontline workers' reflections on the pandemic

+ **Dylan Moore** meets Kasim Ali | **Paul Silk** on parliamentary relations | **Lleucu Siencyn** on Raymond Williams

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Editorial
Auriol Miller

Welcome to *the welsh agenda*. We hope this new edition will help take your mind off the second lockdown in Wales with some great new writing and thought-provoking pieces.

I've been reflecting on a book I read early on in the first lockdown. Drawing from history and his own experience, Jared Diamond, professor of Geography at UCLA and environmental historian, offers insights in *Upheaval: How Nations Cope with Crisis and Change* that might help us to find the way to a more hopeful future. How might Wales measure up, eight months into the coronavirus pandemic, against Diamond's insights?

The first factor is whether we agree about what we're facing. In Wales, I think we do. There's a national consensus that this is primarily a health crisis, and that it should be managed as one. There are, of course, different views on how to do this. There is also consensus that attention should turn next to managing its economic consequences, without overshadowing the major crises we were already facing, namely the climate emergency and Brexit. The forthcoming election will of course test this consensus, so we want parties to be honest about the choices and trade offs that will be necessary.

Second, have we taken responsibility? I don't mean blame. It is too easy for blame to be politicised, and that's not helpful. Blame should not be confused with essential scrutiny of decision making. Responsibility here means all of us contributing what we can. So what do the people of Wales need from the next Welsh government to unlock that spirit of mutual support?

Next, what policies or ways of working do we want to accelerate or change, and which do we want to keep? What, precisely, does a 'Green Recovery' actually mean? Do we actually have a shared understanding of its definition, and more importantly of what we can realistically achieve in the here and now?

To help us in this immense collective task, Diamond asks what stories we tell ourselves about how we've overcome crises in the past? Aberfan, foot and mouth, the recent floods – these may not be stories of hope but they are emblematic of Wales' strong communities.

Diamond is clear that, in every crisis, mistakes will be made. Patience, ambiguity and tolerance of failure are crucial. Our public discourse needs to be one where not knowing, or admitting and learning from mistakes, is rewarded and not punished as a sign of weakness. Demanding infallibility from our politicians leaves them no way to change course, and it can be the most vulnerable in society who pay the price.

Last, Covid-19 has at least reminded us all of what we value most: our health, family, friends, neighbours and communities, the natural world around us, and our ability to decide our future. And one of Wales' most important core values is community cooperation and mutual support. We can build on this: we have lived this year together, though our individual experiences have differed sharply.

This Education Special picks up on many of Diamond's themes as we focus on the disruption caused in young people's lives. We know that generational change comes through education so today's young people are crucial to our shared future. The Black Lives Matter movement has also thrown the experiences of Black, Asian and minority ethnic people living in Wales into sharp relief. How we tell our collective story – our history – has never been more important. Everyone's voices need to be listened to far more carefully.

It also tells stories about vital work in Wales that many people don't normally see: the reality of working in health and care through the pandemic, the inequalities it has magnified further, the impact on our farmers and rural economies. What will all this mean for the places we love? We tell a story of nature's healing role for us all and how our cultural institutions could help us sing a new song.

Above all, as we interrogate so much that we previously took for granted, and we learn to live together in this precarious new reality – facing Brexit, climate change and life after this pandemic – we seek to tell a story of hope for our shared future. What will your own role be?

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The publisher acknowledges the financial support of the Welsh Books Council.

Institute of Welsh Affairs
56 James Street, Cardiff Bay, Cardiff, CF10 5EZ
Tel: 02920 484 387

Charity number: 1078435

The IWA is an independent think tank and charity dedicated to promoting the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales.

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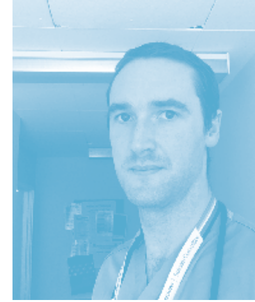
ISBN 978-1-9995951-5-9

In their own words: working through the pandemic

In September **Noreen Blanluet** *heard personal reflections from people working in health and social care across Wales. In their own words they discuss the impact of Covid-19 on their lives and work*



Specialist registrar in geriatric and general medicine
Dr Richard Gilpin

Imogen was three weeks old when lockdown started. We got all of our family visits in beforehand, but suddenly we had no visitors, and I had to go back to work – where everything was different.

Looking back, there have been different stages of the pandemic. It started with the rumours from other hospitals, the escalating news – but I felt we were late to take it seriously. I heard reports of doctors working in intensive care in English hospitals treating patients with Covid who had picked it up locally a fortnight before lockdown. I remember the nurses saying they were subject to ridicule when they went to a patient's home to perform a Covid test and donned full personal protective equipment; passers-by were taking videos of them on their phones. Then it hit properly.

And despite everyone being professional throughout, there was underlying panic and fear, particularly hearing about nurses and doctors dying of the illness. We were still coming into work initially unclear about how best to protect ourselves; a lot of the information felt confusing or contradictory at first. The whole landscape changed in Accident and Emergency. We saw very few patients who weren't *very* unwell: either they had the disease, or had been put off coming until their condition was serious. This seems to have settled: we are seeing a greater range of patients now. Unfortunately because of the perceived fear of catching Covid in hospital, some patients *are* fearful – and sometimes this exhibits as impatience or rudeness to staff. It now feels common to see a patient with a new diagnosis of advanced cancer who put off seeing a doctor in the early stages because of the pandemic.

Alongside panic and fear was chaos. Each week the hospital was run differently, constantly adapting to keep us all safe and plan for a large influx of patients. For example, one week it was announced that the way we run cardiac arrests was to change; this was due to the risk of aerosolisation of the virus when doing chest compressions. I have been doing the same thing for over ten years and overnight it was altered. But we adapted, and by the end of the week we had created training videos and run drills to help us understand the changes. Still, it has been challenging.

Morale has been fluctuant. Staff [in the hospital] were not complimentary about the 'clap for carers' on the whole; mostly they felt that there were other key workers who had it much harder – plus in the landscape of possible mass unemployment, we were lucky to have a stable job. I really felt for the supermarket workers, they had an awful time those first few weeks and got so little thanks. As a junior doctor, I have never petitioned for a pay rise (what I tend to ask for is better working conditions, like warm food out of hours, parking spaces, reliable computers, somewhere to rest).

It's difficult to know what extra pressure Covid has put on my family life, as most of the pressure has come from Imogen who loves a 3am scream! But not being able to see family was definitely the hardest part. The other fear, especially at the start, was not knowing what extra risk I posed to my new daughter if I brought the disease home – if she became unwell, or died, it would have been my fault. Even now I have real difficulty

It now feels common to see a patient with a new diagnosis of advanced cancer who put off seeing a doctor in the early stages because of the pandemic

calculating what risk I pose to my family and my patients, and tend to be over cautious.

I'm glad to be in the Aneurin Bevan University Health Board – they seem really responsive to staff wellbeing and have been really supportive of myself and colleagues; I've been proud to work in Nevill Hall Hospital where everyone has been looking out for each other and mindful of the stresses we have all been under. We have also been really grateful to the local community; businesses donated lots of food and drink for staff, that has been really vital through the worst of the crisis. However, if we were to go through this again I would ask for better and clearer communication: with the panic and fear, messages about how to contain and protect from the virus were often contradictory; we didn't have a plan for how to protect the community and care homes; and we felt at times that we got most of our understanding from the news rather than from our organisation.

Now the future seems so uncertain. Covid has given us a really good understanding of what 'bare bones' medicine is – which services are needed during times of national emergency and which patient groups suffer. There has been a drive towards more community management of acute illness (mostly driven by patients who were fearful of hospital attendance). I hope this is built upon: the community teams do a fantastic job keeping people safe at home. Thinking as a new dad, a lot of development for Imogen – to be sociable, playful and inquisitive – may suffer with social distancing. However, oddly, I feel that I speak to and video call my extended family more since lockdown than I would have before; I didn't fully realise until now the restorative and therapeutic effect of social contact.

Dr Richard Gilpin is a specialist registrar in geriatric and general medicine

Care and Support Worker
Heather Maling

I worked as a care and support worker during the lockdown, when there weren't enough staff around. If I hadn't stepped in, the person I was supporting would have gone back into hospital rather than being able to stay at home. And it was quite nice to be able to have a legitimate reason to get out and about, because otherwise I would have just been here at home all the time! I was going early in the morning, and as I was the only one going to see this person I had to go seven days a week for six weeks. That was hard. I could only go before my working day started at nine, so I would be there for seven in the morning, then back home by twenty-five to nine, have breakfast, and then straight into the day job.

It wasn't that bad really because I couldn't go anywhere with the day job anyway, it was just here at home, and it wasn't full steam at that point. Normally we run a Bed and Breakfast too, and we weren't able to do that during lockdown. I'm used to quite a hectic schedule, and some of that was taken away, so the care work slotted in quite nicely. I couldn't have done it under normal circumstances.

I'm not going anymore now – somebody else took over around mid July. The person I was supporting had improved also: to start with he needed personal care, but because of my background as a physio I encouraged him to be independent and to do the things that he could. He'd been in hospital for six months and that's difficult because everything's sort of done for you there, but I really encouraged him and towards the end, he was able to get up himself, use the shower himself. So my duties changed from providing care to, for example, going with him when he went out on his scooter, as a sort of safety advisor! We'd do lots of walking up and down and things like that. In fact when things came to an end with him, the Bed and Breakfast was reopening, I couldn't have done the care work as well, but by that time somebody else had come forward and was able to take over.

But I felt quite angry. There were shortages, I was hearing about staff not being paid (due to administrative delays), and here are people clapping standing on their doorsteps

During the lockdown there was such a shortage of PPE, before things got organised with the Council distributing it. People were running out and we were all racing around sharing stuff. I had face masks made by somebody who left them for me hanging on their gate in a carrier bag! And I have no idea who the person was, they just responded to a request. People were donating gloves when the price for a box went up to £20. When you have a few clients you get through a box of gloves very quickly! So there was that very positive side, and people looking out for each other. I think it sort of brought people together.

I did notice social services (as part of the Council) opening up to other organisations and realising that they have a network of highly experienced people like (local voluntary sector organisations) Credu, Alzheimers' Society, Dementia Matters… people like that – who in the past they may not have turned to. But during the pandemic they did because everybody worked together, and I think that's something that will stay in the future, that they will look outside of statutory services to solve problems.

Then one of the people receiving care and support got Covid symptoms and they got a test (which came back negative in the end), and it really brought it home to people. *What about the other clients? We'll have to phone all the other clients and explain what happened!* It caused a great amount of anxiety and stress, people really feeling like they're working on their own and there is nobody else to go and talk to if you're worried about things. That's my particular concern, for personal assistants and independent care and support workers who are not part of an organisation: it can be difficult, if Covid is in the area, being worried about what they would do if their clients contract it, that sort of thing, and not having anywhere to go.

With the 'clap for carers', where I am right in the middle of nowhere, people were blowing their horns and shouting, and some made the effort to go on the Facebook group for the community to say 'we're doing it'. But I felt quite angry. There were shortages, I was hearing about staff not being paid (due to administrative delays), and here are people clapping standing on their doorsteps, and yet we're not valuing people and paying them properly.

My hope for the future is that people will be valued more for what they do, that people who provide care and support will be valued more. My fear is the status quo will continue, and everyone will forget about it, and forget about them.

You know at the time, I kind of minimised the stress of all of this. I was talking to a counsellor and she asked how it had been and I said, 'Oh, it's not been too bad'. But thinking back, the real impact – of wearing a bin liner instead of an apron because there weren't any aprons left, that felt very scary and I did feel very, very shaky, especially when everything was running out. And I remember thinking, 'When is it all going to end?'

Heather Maling worked as a care and support worker during the lockdown

Theatre assistant in orthopaedic surgery
Anonymous

Warning: contains references to dying and bereavement

I will admit that at lunchtime I cried. It was just so sad. A lot of these patients were younger than me, there weren't many over 50

I normally work in orthopaedic surgical theatre, but at the beginning of the pandemic they were trying to limit the number of elective patients being operated on, and the number of staff who were working. So all of us operating theatre staff were told that we'd either be put on the team for trauma theatre, or in what they call the 'pool'. Trauma operations normally happen in a different hospital, but it was taken over for Covid, so the operations would be happening in our hospital.

How it was decided – which I personally didn't agree with – was they put all our names in a hat, and pulled a certain number of names out. Those people were in the pool, which meant you had to stay at home, but be next to your phone – basically on call for your normal working hours. I was in the pool so I'd still get up as though I was going to work, but just have the phone by me constantly. If the phone went it could mean that you were sent to the other hospital, or any of the coronavirus field hospitals, or you could be put on any of the wards. I found that quite nerve wracking at first, because I've never worked on a ward, and now I'm sat by a phone waiting for a call that could send me anywhere. But I told myself, *You can do this, it's fine. Wherever you go doesn't matter. I will just say to them, 'You tell me what to do and I will do it, because I've never done this before'*. So that's how I came to terms with it in my own head. I had to, because I do worry, I overthink things.

So I got the call and I had to go over to the ICU, the Intensive Care Unit. I was told I had to take a complete change of clothes, underwear, everything. It was when I first got into all the PPE (personal protective equipment) that suddenly it hit me: *this is real*. But I must say that working in ICU was the safest I've ever felt. They were so good with the PPE. They had two people dressing you, checking your back to make sure there were no gaps in any of the layers. They were absolutely brilliant, I can't praise them enough for it. When I finished a shift, I would go straight from the ICU into the showers, have a complete change of clothes, go home and those clothes were washed straight away on their own. I felt very protected throughout.

Then I entered the ICU proper and that was another shock to the system. It was full of Covid patients, and you're talking about 80 beds. People normally go into the ICU for all sorts of reasons. I knew there'd be patients in there, that's what ICU is for. But it was the fact that every patient had Covid, every single one. There wasn't anything else but Covid, everyone on ventilators. It did upset me, but I couldn't leave: once you're in the PPE you have to stay there for four hours. But I will admit that at lunchtime I cried. It was just so sad. A lot of these patients were younger than me, there weren't many over 50. That first day went quite quickly. I was just doing bed baths, which I'd never done before. It sounds simple, just washing somebody, but when they're being kept alive on a ventilator, you have so many tubes and everything, I just didn't know where to start. But the nurse I was working with showed me and once I'd done one it was fine. I ended up talking to the patients because that just felt natural. You know, washing them, I'm intruding on their privacy, even though they're unconscious.

Next to each patient there'd be a stand with drivers on it: they're a type of machine that you put the syringe of drugs into, and it releases automatically into the bloodstream at certain times. Without them you'd be injecting people all the time. Now before, I'd seen drivers with maybe, say, two different drugs going in. For Covid patients they had six. And every half an hour, maybe even quarter of an hour, I had to read out what was left in each driver for the nurse to write on the notes. I was scared I was going to get the measurement wrong; it's so important, that's what's keeping them alive.

There were a lot of staff in there. And I realised that if you were very ill, that would be the best place for you to be. They were so good, they were constantly with each patient. And I saw these dignifying things which I expect people don't see: even though the patients are unconscious they have their teeth cleaned every day, they are washed, they're talked to. You don't think of things like that, but it's still dignity, you know? So I was very impressed with that. Every few hours every patient had to be turned, because it helped with the ventilation for the lungs. That took in excess of eight members of staff for each patient; there are so many tubes, and nothing can move, it has to stay exactly put. So it took that many people to turn each patient effectively and with as little disturbance as possible.

When it's family you have time to grieve, you know, you take time off if you want to. But when it's work colleagues you can't just stop. I don't suppose you can grieve, really. The NHS has got a Wellbeing Counselling place but I mean you'd have everyone in there – that can't happen either

The day that I got there, they'd just put a patient into this one particular bed. She was 50 years old I remember, because it was her 50th birthday on that day, and we sang happy birthday to her even though she was unconscious. She was a nurse from one of the wards. The bed that she'd just gone into, someone had died there in the night, another member of staff.

I did a few shifts there in the ICU. And then after that, I was told to just stay at home.

At the beginning I loved the Clap for Carers, I thought that was great. But then when I was being kept off work, I couldn't bear it, I felt like such a fraud. I had to close the window so I couldn't hear it. I just felt so guilty, all I wanted was to be working and I couldn't. My partner said, *Right, the way to look at it is, you've been in the NHS for 21 years. Take it as a thank you for that.* And that's how I got to be ok with it in my head.

Eventually I had a phone call to say they were trying to bring back some staff and would I be interested in going back to work? They'd reopened some of the theatres and brought cardiac and thoracic surgery over from another site. All their staff had come over. That was the Green Zone, which means no Covid: any patient coming into the Green Zone would have been told to isolate for two weeks, and they'd have had a test. So work rang to ask whether I'd be interested in coming back and sitting on the main door to the Green Zone; for anyone who comes through: take their temperature, write their name down, whether they'd had any symptoms, what time they came in, what time they left. Everyone had to be monitored and nobody else was allowed in: just patient admissions for the next day or staff.

So at first I thought, *Yes! Definitely, get me back.* We all wanted to get back to work. But let me tell you, eleven hours sat on your own in a freezing cold corridor with nothing to do… In the end I said to management, *Right, I'm bringing a book in, I can't cope just sitting here.* I did that for two weeks. Then on my next day off I had a phone call asking whether I was interested in going on to reception in main theatres instead. Well, I'd never done it before but it got me out of the freezing corridor! So now I'm on reception. I've been lucky: I've kept my

The block of operating theatres where I used to work is completely closed down. I went over there the other day to have a little look and it's like one of these abandoned towns that you see on TV where people have had to leave very quickly. They've just pushed all the beds, everything, into theatres. It's quite eerie

normal shifts, purely because it works with the other receptionist who works there. I'm in when she's on a day off, and vice versa. And I'm loving it. I do all sorts. It sounds boring, but it's not. Once the morning starts, the phone's going all the time, it's really busy.

I've also had to deal with things that I've never dealt with before. A couple of weeks ago, we had a patient die – not of Covid, with heart surgery. I'm orthopaedic and all our surgeries are normally elective. There's risk with every surgery of course, but we're not used to having that happen. Also, because of the Covid situation we had to keep him in theatre for his family to come and view. We turned the temperature down as far as it would go. We couldn't send him to the mortuary because their viewing table was still in the field hospital, so there was nowhere else to put this man. There's a lot of things people don't see.

We lost a nurse in my hospital, to Covid. When it was her funeral they brought her and the vehicle did a tour of the hospital while everybody stood outside.

How do you deal with that? I don't know, I suppose you haven't got a choice. It's incredibly sad. It's awful. When it's family you have time to grieve, you know, you take time off if you want to. But when it's work colleagues you can't just stop. I don't suppose you can grieve, really. The NHS has got a Wellbeing Counselling place but I mean you'd have everyone in there – that can't happen either. It's almost like you've got to say it's an occupational hazard. You can't do anything about it.

If we have a death in theatre like we did the other week, that theatre doesn't get used for the rest of the day at all; but then the next day it's all back to normal. You just have to pick yourself up and carry on, because there's other people who need help. When it's all finished, when we – I say get back to normal, there will never be normal again, but a certain type of normal – that's when it might hit certain people. But then by that point time will have passed, and time does help. But some people won't cope with that, in the long run. I don't know; it's such an awkward, hard situation.

At one point in August they brought everybody back who had been staying at home; I guess they couldn't afford to just keep people away on full pay. Everyone's back and we've also got the staff who have come over from the other hospital. And it's hard because we've got to do the social distancing, but there's so many people here. For example we're only allowed four people in a coffee room. So I end up having my lunch at my desk now, because that means someone else who doesn't work at a desk can have their dinner in peace and be comfortable, on a proper chair. On the plus side though, they have reopened more theatres so that's good, more patients are getting their operations.

When they asked me to go back, I was also worried that if they found they were getting by alright with a smaller number of staff... And then if you'd been offered a job that you turned down, if they were looking to downsize, you could be one of the people. That's me overthinking things, like I always do, they probably can't do that for legal reasons – but at the time that was a real worry.

For now I'm still on reception in the Green Zone. I'm waiting for my old unit to reopen. The block of operating theatres where I used to work is completely closed down. I went over there the other day to have a little look and it's like one of these abandoned towns that you see on TV where people have had to leave very quickly. They've just pushed all the beds, everything, into theatres. It's quite eerie.

This person is a theatre assistant in orthopaedic surgery. They wished to remain anonymous

Retired Clinical Director
Dr Jonathan Richards

When I retired three years ago, I had to ring the General Medical Council to go through the formalities of getting my name removed from the medical register, and at the end of the call the lady I spoke to said, 'Your name is now off the medical register, but I can assure you, your contribution will never be forgotten. And you will always be called Dr Richards.' It was an emotional moment.

And then Covid happened. I received an email from the General Medical Council to say that because I had retired from being a doctor less than five years ago, they would put my name back on the register – unless I opted out and specifically said I didn't want them to. It all happened very quickly, within about 10 days. Without having to pass any tests, have any interviews or appraisals or anything, my name was back on the register, and I am allowed to be a doctor once more. I wept again.

It didn't occur to me to opt out. I wanted to help, to make a difference, to be useful. I contacted the health board straight away, and my surgery, to say I was available if they needed me. The surgery got back to me to say it wasn't safe for me to work there because I live with Type 2 Diabetes. They had a very simple rule, which I think is quite a good rule: that if you're somebody who is on the list to have a flu jab, that means you're vulnerable to Covid and you shouldn't be involved in frontline general practice. So that one avenue of helping out was closed to me. It was disappointing, but at the same time it was done very quickly, and it kept me safe.

Instead I started training myself up online to do telephone and video consultations with patients. Because of course, in March and April, that was what was expected: lots of people who rang up would be given a video consultation. I completed quite a lot of online training.

Then the call came to help with the out-of-hours service, because they could do with additional GPs joining the team. I said yes immediately, of course. Back when I was working for the health board, I had been interim Clinical Director of the out-of-hours service for about six months; so I knew about it, I knew all the staff, and I was looking forward to working there with them all again.

But at about that time I also noticed that a lot of salaried GPs and locums were saying, *The NHS is bringing back retired GPs who already have a nice pension, who don't have young children or mortgages, and they are now doing the work that we would normally do. So we are actually losing work.* I didn't want to take work away from a younger doctor who probably isn't earning anything like my GP pension and needs it more than I do. I decided to turn down the offer to work in out-of-hours after all, and to tell the health board that they should really be using a salaried doctor or a locum doctor instead.

In any case, while all that was going on I had to get myself back onto what's called the GP Performers List, which essentially tells the general public and the health board that I have been vetted, and that I am safe to be a

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It's funny because I still do not have an NHS ID code, which means I can't access the NHS IT system. Nobody knows why that is, but it means that to do my work I have to look over someone else's shoulder

GP with up to date training, all the right checks, and so on. Although it was all online it took several hours – days really. I had to have a new DBS check, an ID and probity check, and go through a selection process as if I was applying to be a GP for the first time. But once everything was submitted, I don't know why but in Wales that whole process took a lot longer than it did in England. The system in England was different and there were retired GPs in England who were back on the GP Performers List within a week or two. I know quite a few former GPs like me in Wales, sitting at home twiddling our thumbs and waiting for our name to be processed for a few weeks more than colleagues in England. That was frustrating.

Anyway, after six weeks I got on to the GP Performers List, and I'd decided I wouldn't do out-of-hours work because I didn't want to take work away from a younger doctor, and then the Associate Medical Director in Cwm Taf Health Board (he's essentially the top GP in the health board) got in touch and asked me to come back to work on a project: a new system for GPs to review the deaths of patients from Covid in care homes and nursing homes, making sure everybody had had a care plan, and that the care plan had been followed. The form and the whole process had to be piloted so that we could identify and flag any problems, make sure that it was as user friendly as possible, that we collected the right information and everything worked. There are a whole range of practical checks to do. I used to do these reviews when I was a Clinical Director, so I knew what the difficulties could be, and I could bring my experience and my knowledge to this job.

So at the moment I am going into work, reviewing and testing the system. You know, it's funny because I still do not have an NHS ID code, which means I can't access the NHS IT system. Nobody knows why that is, but it means that to do my work I have to look over someone else's shoulder. I'm working with another doctor on this process, and he's salaried and has a login, so as I can't have my own I have to go in on his. I'm going to be working on this until we've finished reviewing the patients who died, everyone who needs to be reviewed. There have been problems with the IT; they thought it would be three or four weeks, but we're way behind. A couple of other doctors have now been roped in to help with the work. So it might be another fortnight, it might be another month, I don't know.

After that? They might find some other work for me to do, probably senior management work. I can be useful there and take some of the pressure off while not taking work a younger doctor could do. I'm working pro bono, you know. I'm in a very privileged position because I have a more than adequate pension and I'm able to use my life experiences and the gifts that God has given me – to do things, to support, to be engaged. If after this project ends they don't need to put more work my way, I will contact the Director of Public Health in Cwm Taf Health Board; we have talked about working together in the past, there are several things I know we both feel passionate about – inequalities in health, and variation in the determinants of health, that sort of thing. I will contact him to say, 'I have lots of experience. I'm available, I'm willing.'

Dr Jonathan Richards was a general practitioner in Merthyr for over 30 years, and is a retired Clinical Director from Cwm Taf Health Board

Hospital Laboratory Worker
Anonymous

Being in the laboratory we have no patient contact by design, and because we're so isolated from the hospital at large, I've only really experienced the pandemic by witnessing its secondary and tertiary effects. It often felt like being in a remote outpost, observing the aftershock of a distant earthquake. To outsiders – which is most people, as very few people have ever been inside a hospital laboratory – it is easy to imagine us in hazmat suits, working at LED-underlit stainless steel benches with racks of glassware. The truth is much more mundane: chipped paint, dented linoleum (imprinted with the footprints of since-decommissioned machines) and machines the size of cars that do the majority of our work. It began as nervous chatter, a few team briefs, and then the samples began to arrive with '?Covid' on the form. The GP work essentially stopped, we saw the temporary triage bays appearing out of the windows. The car park emptied out as those that could work from home began to do so. Rumours began circulating about outbreaks at other sites. The beginning was really rough; especially before there was concrete guidance and the lockdown began. There was a lot of uncertainty.

We responded quickly to the initial change in workflow – going from maybe two or three marked 'high risk' samples a day (of course they're all potentially dangerous, but we only had a couple a day that were marked as such) to dozens. We used existing equipment to contain the samples safely (and store them, thereby reducing risk to frontline staff by minimising rebleeds for further testing). The only downside was the scramble for PPE. The messaging on what was required wasn't set in stone to begin with, but it was soon cleared up. On the whole I think the lab was lucky and did well. Now things have settled into a more steady rhythm – where Covid continues, but work is beginning to more closely resemble 'normal times'.

I can't imagine there'll be any rush to go back to a 'normal' work week should this ever end. I've been very interested by the calls for a four day work week

When the workload dropped initially, and in order to accommodate social distancing, 9-5 working was essentially halted in favour of three to four 12-hour shifts a week (everybody had already been doing shift work, but on weeks where you weren't on nights or the weekend, the expectation was a standard 9-5 week). There was a little trepidation about that when it was being discussed, but I think it's been for the best, and most people have come around to it. Not only does it allow for more quality time at home, but it's also better suited to the work we do. We're a 24 hour service and always have been, but only now is that really being reflected in the shift arrangements. I can't imagine there'll be any rush to go back to a 'normal' work week should this ever end. I've been very interested by the calls for a four day work week (both before and after the pandemic hit) and now that I've lived with a compressed working week (still doing my equivalent hours but across longer days) I feel it is now a matter of pressing concern. People need the time and space to enrich their lives, and the old way wasn't cutting it, and isn't cutting it for millions (to say nothing of the broader implications of our current economic model; one that pursues growth at all costs, as workers are ground into powder).

But truthfully, I've never had a better work-life balance than I do now. Compressing my work into a few days allowed me more time to spend with my partner (and family once lockdown restrictions were eased). The restrictions on 'normal life' activity were disconcerting, of course, but in terms of pure work-life balance I think it was the shock the system needed to consider other ways of working. Outside of work – trying to live during a pandemic – has been difficult. I am, by nature, quite an anxious person, and with an expecting partner and a parent in the high risk group, it has been hard to switch that off. I know I'm fortunate in that I have a stable career, and have not had to endure the hardships of frontline key workers – though I have seen the impact of the pandemic in their faces in my passing interactions with them – but I suspect we are yet to see the true impact that Covid-19 has had on NHS workers. One thing I observed was how quickly I went from 'active fear' – living normally with bursts of dread about the then-tentative reports of a pandemic making its way here – to a new form of normality where there is a low hum of anxiety at all times. I often catch myself clenching my fist or look down to see my leg shaking. I have lived with this for months, and have spoken to several friends inside and outside the business who have questioned – as I have – what the point of any of this is, if you're just going to spend your life wondering who's going to give it to your ageing mother, or what kind of life your children will have if this never goes away. Detachment can only take you so far before you have to admit to yourself you're living with a permanent existential dread.

I suspect we are yet to see the true impact that Covid-19 has had on NHS workers

All that aside, with my colleagues morale seemed to be reasonably good. There was a genuine sense of camaraderie, of pulling together and I couldn't be prouder of my department's response. In the first few months it really did feel as though the public were grateful to the NHS – the clapping, the rainbows in the windows, businesses and community groups sending food and supplies, pictures from children – I thought it was a nice gesture. I think there still, however, needs to be a broader reckoning regarding 'unskilled' work, as many jobs that are considered 'unskilled' were – in fact – essential for our survival during the initial lockdown. It wasn't just doctors and nurses, it was cleaners and supermarket workers that kept us going. Healthcare support workers, porters, the people that are often overlooked in children's pictures and in the minds of the public. I work in a key carded secure facility, and was at far less risk of exposure than somebody working on the tills. Was my contribution worth more to society than somebody facing down the public every day to keep food supply going?

My big hope for the future is that we could see meaningful societal change as a result of all this; an awakening of sorts, a realisation that this needn't be an age of loneliness and declining social function

The pay rise issue is a constant struggle, but not one that has cut through as it should within staff groups. I feel now – as I did then – that the move to longer term pay deals (x% increase over three years, instead of yearly negotiations) was a bad move for us, as it removed the discussion around NHS pay from the public sphere for a protracted period of time. But again I think the pay rise debate is no longer consigned to just the NHS, and there needs to be a significant social effort to ensure that work actually pays, that minimum wage and living wage meet (and are actually enough to live a comfortable life on). Somebody in full time work should not be reliant on tax benefits or any government subsidy (or, hell mend us, food banks) to get by, they should be paid a decent wage for their time and energy, and if companies cannot afford to pay decent wages then they deserve to be folded up and consigned to the ash heap. Public opinion seems to be moving more in this direction too.

I remain proud to work in the NHS (particularly in Wales, where I feel it is somewhat closer to Aneurin Bevan's original vision than it is across the border, where contracting services to private providers and fee creep is continually blurring the line between the public and private sector). I wanted to serve the community as best I could when deciding on a career and serving the public as part of the NHS here in Wales has been a professional privilege. I love Wales deeply and remain convinced the NHS was our finest hour.

My big hope for the future is that we could see meaningful societal change as a result of all this; an awakening of sorts, a realisation that this needn't be an age of loneliness and declining social function. I think there are some positive early signs of this – brands trying to chummily portray 'going back to the office' as a joyous lark have been met with generalised revulsion, and I think more people now are thinking about what work should look like, or how their community ought to function. Additionally, I feel the heightened community awareness that sprouted around the beginning of the pandemic – the mutual aid groups and the sense of helping your neighbours – could be indicative of a turning of the tide. Whether this will lead to a broader social movement and class solidarity I don't know. Perhaps something like that is not possible – or at least much harder – in an age of rank individualism, but I am certainly more optimistic about all that now than I was even a year ago.

This person works in a hospital laboratory. They wished to remain anonymous

‘When we say *black history*, what we mean is racial justice’

Charlotte Williams *is leading a working group to advise on and improve the teaching of themes relating to Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) communities and experiences across all parts of the school curriculum in Wales. Here she talks to* **Shavanah Taj** *about her childhood, the need for positive role models – and for education not to be seen as a quick fix*

‘It was fabulous because Wales is fabulous,’ says Charlotte Williams of her childhood. ‘I had an interesting mum and an interesting dad. We used to travel to West Africa because dad worked in a university there, so I had experiences that ordinary children wouldn’t have.’ But there was also a downside. Born of a white Welsh-speaking mother and black Guyanese father, she remembers that in north Wales in the 1960s, ‘the only other people I ever saw who looked like me were occasional kids who would crop up at the Barnardo’s home.’ One of five girls, what Williams describes as her ‘private world’ was ‘a very dynamic and animated community’, but outside the home ‘we had to do all this work to do, negotiating identity.’

Fast forward to 2020 and it’s Professor Charlotte Williams OBE who has accepted an invitation from the Education Minister, Kirsty Williams, to chair the new ‘Communities, contributions and cynefin: BAME experiences and the new curriculum’ working group. ‘Nowadays we have the language to describe those childhood experiences,’ she tells me. ‘They were microaggressions, but they didn’t have a name back then. You know: *can I touch your hair? do you wash your hair?* And of course, sentences starting with *People like you…*’ Back then, representations of black people in Wales were limited to the negative stereotypes of Enid Blyton, *The Story of Little Black Sambo* or golliwogs on Robinson’s jam jars. ‘Any time other children saw other people who looked like you, it was negative.’

Stereotypes affected both the school curriculum and Charlotte Williams’ own opportunities through childhood. ‘I was the fastest runner in the school, and I was pretty strong, but I was never going to get the part of Mary in the nativity play or star in the school show. It was just: *wait until sports day – that’s your time to shine.*’ Her mother was always ‘out there fighting and doing the ambassador type work – she used to say, “I’m white but I’ve got a black heart” – but you feel shame that you’re different.’ This internalisation of prevalent societal racism is something Williams feels young people would still recognise today, which brings us to the work she has been tasked with carrying out by the Education Minister.

‘The sin of omission is very prevalent,’ she says of the curriculum then and now. While a lot was done in the 1970s to purge negative stereotypes from educational materials, Williams notes that ‘there has been nothing to replace it that is taken for granted and known and accepted.’ Her own grandchildren have passed through the primary system in Wales and are now embarking on secondary education. Williams says some things have changed since her own childhood. ‘There are more positive influences, for example on television or more generally in children’s lives, but we have not got it where we would like it in Wales.’

The problem facing Williams and the working group she leads is the complexity and scale of the issues at hand.

'Just 3% of the teaching workforce in Wales is BAME, although there is a higher rate among teaching assistants and more casual staff. But the higher up the hierarchy you go, the slimmer the representation.' However, she is careful to point out that: 'Good inclusive teaching is great, irrespective of the background of the teacher.' Williams remembers her own French teacher inviting her to the front of the class to explain the word 'beautiful'. Recognising it as the teacher's attempt to educate the rest of the class, she says 'it meant a lot at the time, and I've remembered it all my life.'

Such positive role models are needed across society, says Williams, who is very clear that 'it's not simply down to schools', although 'once you've got a diverse workforce, you're enriched by a richness of ways of being.' Part of the work of the group will be to suggest ways of encouraging BAME graduates into teaching in Wales, and how to retain them here. Currently focus groups are being run to add qualitative information about the experiences of BAME education professionals to the statistics, 'so that we will have something very clearly to say about how we might do CPD.'

In the context of Black Lives Matter, I ask if Wales is ready to confront its own role in colonisation and slavery in its curriculum. Like so many of her responses, Williams' reply is nuanced. She is keen to stress that her

'It's not about multiculturalising the curriculum; some nice local black faces here and there; it's something much more transformative'

remit is not about curriculum content, but about processes that will underpin it. 'It's not about multiculturalising the curriculum; some nice local black faces here and there; it's something much more transformative.' She cites the '100 Great Contributions to Wales' approach that some have relied on in the past, and uses Colin Jackson as an example: 'Yes, Colin is a great sportsman, but why is he here in the first place? And why does someone on a London bus spit at Colin, the Chancellor of Glyndŵr University? We're not doing Colin a service if we're only talking about him as a sportsman.'

Charlotte Williams is optimistic about our desire as a nation 'to really understand ourselves as an underdog – with socialist and trade union history, with a story of language oppression – so people are interested to look at the development of Wales. We all know the history of diversity in Cardiff, but what about elsewhere, too? And of course, slavery and colonialism are vital in understanding the histories and contributions of black people to the development of Wales.' Anticipating sites of resistance in some quarters – 'attitudes of *we can't be bothered with this when our area is 97% white, we've got too much local history to cover*' – Williams says: '[black history] doesn't take away, it adds.'

When I ask about other minority communities who have been forgotten by mainstream histories, like the Roma gypsy and Irish traveller communities, Williams celebrates the 'potential for creativity' in the new curriculum – 'it's bottom up, not top down; it gives autonomy to schools in design and delivery' – but admits 'it's short on mandates and content; it's not driven by these imperatives.' She would like to see schools using this freedom to draw up curricula that cover 'the Roma, the Irish, the Polish, all the Eastern Europeans who

'When we talk about black history,' she says, 'we're talking about social justice; racial justice'

have come since May 2004… all of these demonstrate the diversity of identity in Wales.'

But then she stops and gets to the nub of what her work is about. 'When we talk about *black history*,' she says, 'we're talking about social justice; racial justice.' It is well-documented that some ethnic minorities do better than the majority, and others fall behind and do far worse, and it's this achievement gap that Williams' work really seeks to address. 'What's behind that struggle?'

So although the remit of the working group is schools, its chair is more than happy to agree that its task sits within a much wider international movement to 'decolonise the curriculum'. Students are demanding a more globally focused, internationalist, diverse curriculum and this applies as much to further and higher education as it does to primary and secondary. However, Williams does 'worry about the focus on education as [supposedly] having the ability to solve all of society's ills. There's got to be change right across the board. Education can't solve social injustice and racial injustice.'

Despite the multifaceted challenges, Williams is positive about what she sees as the maturation of governance in Wales in the twenty years since the advent of the Senedd, and also the relative accessibility of Welsh ministers ('We can just ring up Vaughan Gething!'). She sees opportunity in the range of policy levers that already sit in Cardiff Bay: 'key social policy fields… health, education – that's people's wellbeing!'

She's so positive about devolution that I ask her where she stands on Welsh independence. Again her answer is thoughtful and nuanced, and she answers in the light of international solidarity rather than narrow isolationism. Around her dinner table, she says, she can see that 'Yes! Welsh independence!' but when she thinks of the idea in terms of how she relates to 'those black fellas in Liverpool and those black fellas in London, who are important to me, I can't see that it would do us any good to say *we're the black Welsh ones*.' As she says this she hunches her shoulders apologetically to imply becoming physically smaller.

We use the shorthand BAME so frequently now that the focus falls on *ethnic* rather than *minority*, but Williams' body language is a reminder that black people still have to seek justice from a position of being invited into rooms where they are in a minority. This working group is a hugely welcome initiative, but the task ahead is mountainous. I added to the 'to do list' by asking how the group would ensure Black history is taught and recognised through an intersectional lens, as after all our lived experiences and identities are multi-faceted and often complex. Williams seemed intrigued and said I'd given her some food for thought – a challenge she intends to set for the group.

Williams reminds us that a key purpose of the new curriculum – one of the four – is to produce 'ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world'. If that dream is to be realised, this work is vital. 'We will do our best,' she smiles. 'It will take time, but hopefully we can kickstart things, prompt that momentum. I'm optimistic.'

Shavanah Taj is General Secretary of Wales TUC

How to run an education system in the middle of a global pandemic – and other challenges

Gareth Evans *meets Education Minister* **Kirsty Williams** *on the steps of the Senedd to talk politics, PISA, progress, the pandemic – and* that *algorithm*

This interview was conducted before Kirsty Williams confirmed that she will not be standing for re-election as MS for Brecon and Radnorshire in the 2021 Senedd elections.

Whatever your political persuasion, you can't help but feel a degree of sympathy for those with ultimate responsibility for guiding us through these uncertain and troubling times. The pandemic presents a litany of challenges and politicians across the globe are having to grapple with things unimaginable just a few short months ago.

Kirsty Williams is certainly no exception to that rule and from the moment the majority of schools closed their gates in March, she has carried on her shoulders the weight of an education system in turmoil.

When we meet al fresco on the steps of the Senedd (our plan to meet in a local coffee shop scuppered by recent changes to Covid regulations), how she has managed such a weighty burden is the first thing I ask her. 'It has been the most extraordinary period of my political career,' she says. 'Nobody left a handbook on the shelf entitled *How to run an education system in the middle of a global pandemic* – I wish they had! What has been tremendously helpful to me has been the way in which we've been able to corral the collective effort of educationalists across Wales to try and plot a way forward.'

Beyond the confines of our own borders, Ms Williams says she has welcomed the opportunity to engage with colleagues across the world courtesy of Wales' participation in the Atlantic Rim Collaboratory (ARC), a member organisation involving education systems intent on sharing best practice and stimulating discourse. 'So I've been hugely helped by the strength and resilience of educationalists here in our own country… [and] to gain an insight into actions that education ministers across the globe are having to take. We share some similar problems as to how to minimise the disruption of Covid-19 on the education of our children, whilst dealing with this immense public emergency.'

Minimising disruption to learners has been a central tenet of the education minister's response to Covid-19, and with good reason. Earlier in the summer, an open letter written on behalf of junior paediatricians and specialists in allied fields across Wales pointed to the 'collateral damage' children had suffered since lockdown, with more referrals for children experiencing mental health problems and eating disorders, and fewer children being seen for safeguarding assessments. And that's not all; educationally, it is estimated that pupils from more deprived backgrounds could have fallen up to 75% further behind their more affluent peers.

> **'Clearly, the focus is very much on those children facing public examinations next year, but also children from more socio-disadvantaged backgrounds'**

Analysis by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) has suggested that a decade of progress in narrowing the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their classmates in England (which was already known to be smaller than that in Wales) is likely to have been reversed due to the coronavirus pandemic. Talk of a 'lost generation' appears entirely legitimate, however unpalatable, and the minister is intent on doing everything in her power to negate the devastating impact of Covid-19 on our children and young people.

'The first part of that was the decision to get every child back into school before the summer holidays,' she says. 'Because we recognise that while some cohorts of students will have been more affected than others, clearly lockdown has had a massively disruptive element for all of our children's education and that was one of the reasons we were determined to give every child the chance to check-in, catch-up and begin to plan, so that our teachers could begin to assess the scale of that challenge.

'What we've also done now is made the financial commitment to try and bolster individual school budgets so that they can employ additional staffing resource to help them identify and support children for whom the impact will be the greatest. Clearly, the focus is very much on those children facing public examinations next year, but also children from more socio-disadvantaged backgrounds… we had an attainment gap anyway and we know the potential for the lockdown to widen that gap is significant.'

Another challenge, shared by education ministers in each of the UK's devolved administrations, has been awarding end-of-year qualifications to pupils that are both fair and accurate. Having cancelled the scheduled summer exam series, Wales' independent exams regulator Qualifications Wales and exam board WJEC instead used a statistical model to calculate grades, so as to ensure comparability with previous cohorts. However, the net result was that thousands of pupils in Wales received A-level and AS-level grades below those predicted by their teachers and moderated by their school – forcing ministers into an embarrassing U-turn.

The belated adoption of 'Centre Assessed Grades' (CAGs) as the sole determinant for grade outcomes was welcomed by pupils, parents and the wider education system, but the damage had already been done and a great deal of stress and strain inflicted.

I asked Ms Williams if she regretted the grading fiasco. 'Well, of course, any education minister would regret the anxiety that was caused to the cohort of A-level students and AS students that found themselves caught up in it. Clearly there are lessons to be learnt right the way across the United Kingdom, in the sense that four education ministers representing four different political parties created a system which we thought would be the best in the worst of circumstances, only to find that that system couldn't hold the confidence of practitioners and the public.

'We need to do better for next year and that's why we have set up the independent review chaired by Louise Casella of the Open University in Wales to have an independent eye; to look at the actions and the decisions that I took, that the regulator took, the exam board took [and] the system as a whole took, to ensure that we can avoid a similar situation next year, because even though my absolute hope and determination is that we *can* hold public examinations next year, the reality is that for those students for whom education has been impacted, there is the potential that it will continue to be impacted by Covid-19.'

Notwithstanding the minister's commitment to a thorough evaluation of what happened, there remains confusion as to why steps weren't taken to redress the situation earlier, in an attempt to soften the blow to learners. It wasn't until 17 August, four days after A-level results day and a week after the Scottish Government took similar action, that Ms Williams announced all grades awarded in the summer would be based on CAGs – and not the much-maligned 'algorithm'.

So does she regret not intervening sooner and avoiding some of the anxiety suffered by pupils? 'Well, you know, hindsight is a wonderful thing,' she begins. 'Examinations, quite rightly, are run independently of government to avoid the perception of political interference in examination results – and all the problems associated when politicians are seen to interfere and could be accused of manipulating results. Certainly, in the run-up to the publication of results, everybody agreed that a standardisation process was necessary; there was no disagreement, in fact the discourse up until results day was *how were we going to ensure that Centre Assessed Grades were fair?* – because of the well-known and well-understood problems with Centre Assessed Grades.

'In terms of the balance of fairness and trying to ensure that Welsh children were not disadvantaged, as well as maintaining confidence in the system, I feel we acted correctly – but that's why we have to have the independent review to look at whether things could have been done differently.'

The notion of 'doing things differently' is pertinent to almost all in education post-lockdown, though there is a suggestion that we might use the Covid-19 crisis to our advantage when it comes to assessment and the gauging of pupil progress. Could this be the ideal time to fundamentally reconsider existing assessment practices with a means to better meeting the needs of all learners, regardless of their academic ability? 'The irony is, that work's already going on as a necessary component of the consequences of curriculum reform,' says Williams. 'We're already engaged in that debate about the future of qualifications and how we assess a child's progress in education; [and] how we can quantify for universities, colleges and employers what that child has achieved during their time in school… that's already open and up for debate.'

We're already engaged in that debate about the future of qualifications and how we assess a child's progress in education

And so conversation quickly turns to the forthcoming Curriculum for Wales, which underpins the Welsh Government's entire education agenda and devolves responsibility for what and how children learn direct to teachers. While the subsidiarity on which the curriculum is built is a key strength, in that it allows teachers more freedom to do as they see fit for their own learners, so too is it an inherent weakness in that it opens the door to disparity and difference. Indeed, one of the major concerns of curriculum commentators (including this one) is that the new approach could lead to greater inequity between schools and wide variation in pupils' understanding of the world around them.

'Sometimes I think our proposals for the new curriculum are unfairly described as a free-for-all,' argues Ms Williams. 'We are very clear in the documentation that has already been released [that there is] a system of scaffolding which underpins a nationwide approach to the learning and experiences we would expect a child to have. That is first of all encompassed in the Four Purposes of the curriculum, then that is distilled down into the Areas of Learning and Experience… and then below that we have our What Matters Statements as a level down again, so I believe we have got that crucial balance between national expectation and national scaffolding, but then giving the freedom of individual practitioners to deliver on those expectations in topics and ways that are particularly relevant to the cohort of children in front of them.'

Ms Williams warned against the introduction of a 'canon' of things that every child in Wales should learn as a matter of course, as 'we know that when we develop canons, certain voices are left out'.

With time against us, I'm keen to shift focus onto PISA – an international comparator that measures the knowledge and core skills of fifteen-year-olds as they near the end of their compulsory education. The bane of education ministers across the globe, PISA has been particularly harsh on Wales, which has been consistently rated the lowest in the UK for science, reading and maths since its first foray into education's world rankings in 2006. But there are signs Wales has turned a rather gloomy corner and incremental improvement across all key performance indicators in the last set of PISA results, released in December 2019, was a welcome shot in the arm for an education system that has been through the mill.

'I was satisfied that we saw an improvement on where Wales had been before, but we still have significant progress to make – particularly in ensuring that we see more of our young people performing at higher levels, which is where we continue to see a gap'

Was the minister satisfied with last year's upturn? 'I was satisfied that we saw an improvement on where Wales had been before, but we still have significant progress to make – particularly in ensuring that we see more of our young people performing at higher levels, which is where we continue to see a gap. I think we are an improving system that understands far better than we have in the past about the collective endeavour we all need to make to continue to make that improvement – so there is a consensus on our National Mission and the steps that each part of the system needs to make to continue that improvement journey - and that's what any good system needs to be, is constantly striving to improve.'

We conclude our interview by considering Ms Williams' own future – there is a suggestion her time as education minister is drawing to a close, and speculation she may not stand for re-election in May's Senedd Cymru election. I ask her straight if she will be seeking to retain her seat in Brecon and Radnorshire, a seat she has held for twenty years. 'Oh my goodness me, Gareth, there are some days where I can't even see the horizon at the end of the week! For me, the focus in the last couple of weeks has been… getting our schools open again and getting children back to school – and now the children are back in school, keeping them in school and continuing to find ways of minimising the disruption.

'We have the situation with exams looming large [and] we're going to have to make timely decisions so that we can give certainty to both students and staff… and of course we've got the Curriculum Bill to get through – and after all of that, who knows, I might still have enough energy to run in May.'

Ms Williams, a Welsh Liberal Democrat in a Welsh Labour Government, said it had been an 'immense privilege' to serve as education minister since 2016 and whatever happens in May, she hopes that the changes she has overseen 'will have put the education system on a firm footing for that continuous improvement'. She says she is proud that 'we have been able to establish and to get buy-in for a collective vision of what the system needs to do to get better' and that 'hopefully, we have put some confidence back into the teaching profession'.

Ms Williams assures me that her political affiliation has not prevented her from doing what she's wanted to do in government, and that she's 'been given the space' to run the education brief in her own way. It has certainly helped, though, having first ministers with whom she's had a good working relationship. Of the Welsh Government's current leader, she said: 'I have a huge amount of respect for Mark Drakeford and I think Wales has as well following the way in which he's handled himself and how he has led this country through this pandemic. When you have to work across party lines, the important thing is to try and focus on things that you agree on, rather than disagree on.

'I think the public wants you to find the common ground and I think it's the job of progressive politicians – and I would regard both myself and the first minister as progressive politicians – to make progress, and I think that's what we've done… I think the ability to create trust between political opponents is crucial to making an arrangement like this possible.'

It's at this point that I hand over to Poppy Stowell-Evans, a talented young writer and pupil at Llanwern High School, in Newport.

Poppy begins by thanking the minister for 'getting me back in school'.

It raises a smile amongst all those present, but the sincerity with which she spoke is extremely powerful.

And given all she has had to contend with, there will doubtless be many more expressing their gratitude to a minister who stepped up when our system needed her most.

Gareth Evans is Director of Education Policy at University of Wales Trinity Saint David

On top of her brief

***Poppy Stowell-Evans** reflects on her encounter with the education minister on the steps of the Senedd, a chance to ask her about classism, coronavirus and the exams fiasco*

In the last edition of *the welsh agenda*, I was lucky enough to be given a platform to publicly grieve the loss of my once impending GCSE exams, which went hand-in-hand with the end of my high school life. I now understand that not only was that the end of my Year 11, but also the end to an underappreciated version of normal.

At the time, I remember feeling as angry as I was bereft. Not only were decisions that would directly affect my life and future completely out of my control, it also felt like the decisions made about *my* life weren't being made with me and my peers in mind; they seemed to be rolled out with little consideration of the impact they would have on our futures and on our livelihoods.

Socially distant on the steps of the Senedd on a beautiful September day, I finally had the chance to be able to ask the questions that had been running through my mind for months. Meeting the minister allowed me to truly appreciate, as a young person, her genuine passion for education and aspiration to support the pupils across Wales. She was incredibly welcoming and open to me, showing an interest in my future and congratulating me on my GCSE results.

There can be no doubt that this must have been an unprecedented and challenging time for any education minister, but her passion for her responsibility and hope for the future remained ardent. This brought me a great sense of comfort and opened a door of trust.

As a pupil in an improving state school, I have huge concerns around the attainment gap and what it represents in actuality – what I believe is systemic classism. However, reassuringly the minister appreciated that: 'We talk about our education performance being a national mission… a key element of the national vision is to reduce the attainment gap and we do that in a variety of ways. We are spending over £90m this year on the pupil development grant, which is additional money that goes into schools – every child that is entitled to free school meals gets an additional sum of money into their school budget, so the schools can really help the child focus on their education needs.'

'Thank you for getting me back in school'

However, there can be no doubt that the closure of Welsh schools will leave pupils from less affluent backgrounds more disadvantaged. This brings great concern especially with upcoming exams. Education is a fundamental human right and therefore I passionately believe that every young person should have access to consistently fantastic education, whatever their background. And whilst Ms Williams commented that 'we've also assigned £29 million in catch-up money… all of that stuff is really important…' I still feel a sense of uncertainty and apprehension about the effects that Covid-19 will have on *all* pupils.

Having only been in sixth form for a short amount of time, I have already found difficulty encouraging the rusty cogs in my brain to function at a sufficient level again. I can only imagine the difficulty others will continue to face, and while the minister provided me with renewed hope, only time will tell if every pupil at the table has been catered for.

Another element of Covid-19 turmoil for many pupils was the exams fiasco – which undoubtedly highlighted elements of our education system that must be addressed. I may admittedly still be sore from the anxiety and sleepless nights caused by my dreaded 'exam' results, but I must also appreciate the Minister's recognition of the mistake and her understanding of how pupils felt. I found it comforting to realise that she is in fact seemingly very aware of the emotional ripples (more like tsunamis) that her decisions can cause.

Clearly on top of her brief (a refreshing change compared to the UK-wide picture of politicians during the pandemic), the minister made me think back to all of those moments of anger and confusion. At the height of the period of uncertainty around exams, I felt isolated and scared but now I can appreciate that not one decision was made on a whim, without consideration.

As Ms Williams had said to Gareth Evans, there was no handbook for running a country's education system in a pandemic. Whilst mistakes were made I commend the minister for her benevolent and considered decisions and determination to get pupils back to school.

But I can also assure you that there was, equally, no guide book for students. As I hypothesised in my original article, Covid-19 has guaranteed change and uncertainty in every aspect of life, and I think it will continue to do so. However, I will continue to appreciate the compassionate actions of those around me, a value I believe the minister has displayed in an exemplary manner. It is truly amazing how a little bit of normal has compensated for months of confusion and isolation.

Poppy Stowell-Evans is studying for the Welsh Baccalaureate, and A Levels in Maths, Physics, History and RS at Llanwern High School, Newport

How do we keep Wales learning while keeping pupils safe?

With the new term now well underway, teacher **Louise Muteham** *reflects on how we keep Wales' school pupils safe and learning*

Keep Wales Safe. Keep Wales Learning. A simple message of utmost importance, and much more than a government strapline. Moving forward, the challenges and opportunities for learners, teachers, leaders and families should not be underestimated.

If lockdown has achieved something positive for education it has served to highlight the importance of learning and teaching, and though the rapid closure of schools in response to Covid-19 was something unimaginable not long before it happened, schools responded to all that was asked of them and more.

The nature of a never-before-seen global pandemic means we are trying to solve problems that the sector has never faced, find solutions that never needed to be imagined, and, more importantly, safeguard the health and well-being of those we love and are responsible for. Whilst this isn't an issue exclusive to education, managing these needs in an ever-shifting context means balancing knowns and unknowns whilst maintaining a focus on learners, learning and what really matters.

The way in which schools responded to their sudden closure and subsequent use as childcare hubs for key workers has been admirable. I remain proud of the way in which the workforce answered every call that was sent to them and I continue to be inspired by the innovation and creativity of my colleagues.

We know in education that there is no single solution to a problem; each context, each learner, each practitioner will have different needs at different times, and we are well used operating in a landscape of this complexity.

In honesty it's not been easy. I have never met a teacher who entered the profession for any other reason than they wanted to support children to reach their potential, yet they have had to operate in an almost untenable situation. Should they provide live learning? Should they give more work or less work? Who has access to devices? How can they reach all learners? Are the children in their schools coping? Have home circumstances changed? Are the learners all receiving enough to eat? Are young carers being supported? Will all learners come back the same children as when they left? For each of these questions and hundreds more there will never be an answer that everyone agrees with or is universally correct. Schools have always been about far more than simply teaching; they are not simply buildings where learners go for hours each day to acquire knowledge; they are communities.

To add to this complexity, we find ourselves learning a whole new lexicon relating to blended, distance and digital learning and this gives potential for confusion. The importance of terminological precision must not be underestimated. We need to be speaking the same language in order that our communications are universally understood.

Should they provide live learning? Should they give more work or less work? Who has access to devices? How can they reach all learners? Are the children in their schools coping? Have home circumstances changed? Are the learners all receiving enough to eat? Are young carers being supported?

With the transition to distance learning I have been heartened by the willingness of schools across our region, Wales and the global community to share... what works in their setting

The shifting of our education system to a virtual environment has presented long term challenge and opportunity in equal measure. But how do we seize the opportunity offered when we are responding to very real and immediate short term demands that require our attention?

I don't have the answer, nor do I believe there to be a perfect answer. What I do think we have collectively is parts of the answer and some impactful and innovative examples we can learn from.

Practice, provision and pedagogy have never been more readily shared. With the transition to distance learning I have been heartened by the willingness of schools across our region, Wales and the global community to share what they are doing and offer their learning about what works in their setting. External organisations have also responded to need by making many resources freely available. This sharing, coupled with openness and honesty from leaders and practitioners about successes and challenges, provides us all with a wealth of learning opportunities and supports meaningful collaboration based on a shared need and purpose.

Research continues to be developed and shared. Lessons from our own settings and the global community can help shape and challenge our thinking. The education system in Wales has worked together; schools, local authorities, consortia, Higher Education Institutions, Estyn, Welsh Government and all the other organisations I can think of have worked tirelessly to try to ensure equitable education for all.

The main risk I can see here is knowing where to begin. There is so much 'stuff' in the system now, how do we know where to start? To do this I will always focus on a clear question. What is the problem we are trying to solve? This removes the noise and makes certain that the focus is back to learners and what really matters. As always context will drive needs and priorities – we know our schools and we know our learners.

Now, as the most unusual school year I've known to date has ended and a new one begins, I've had time to reflect. I'm reminded of trying to avoid the tyranny of *stuff* to let me focus on what's important. Whilst I still have more questions than answers, I know I am operating in a system of innovative, creative leaders and practitioners who collectively have the dedication, knowledge and skills to ensure that we keep Wales safe and keep Wales learning.

Louise Muteham is Senior Strategic Lead for Professional Learning in Central South Consortium

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A decisive moment can't go unnoticed

Jessica Blair *says there needs to be joined up thinking if votes at 16 is to be a success in next year's Senedd election*

Every year most people in Wales receive a brown envelope from their local authority containing information about who is registered to vote in their household. Normally this is routine. You just check that the information is correct and if it is you carry on with your day. This year though, something else came inside that unremarkable envelope. A flyer letting people know that as of 1 June, 16 and 17 year olds and all registered foreign nationals will be able to vote in next year's Senedd elections.

For some, this may have been the first they heard of the biggest change to our franchise since the voting age was reduced to 18 in 1969. It's a decisive moment and a demonstration of the Senedd's legislative capacity, and yet it could be argued this has passed most people by.

I distinctly remember the discussion around the extension of the vote to 16 in Scotland in 2014. Allowing 16 and 17 year olds to vote in the referendum was a big thing, discussed in the UK media on a regular basis, with young people seemingly more politically engaged than ever before.

But the story of votes at 16 in Scotland and Wales is different for a number of reasons. For one thing the Scottish referendum was a key political moment with a decisive question being asked of voters about the future of their country. Second, Scotland historically has a stronger media presence than Wales with four national newspapers and arguably a much more distinct relationship with UK media. God only knows how many times I've shouted 'that's devolved' at UK media headlines about 'England and Wales' in the past few months and years.

In the end, with the eyes of the world on them, Scottish voters went to the polls on 18 September 2014 and chose to remain as part of the UK. Over 100,000 16 and 17 year olds registered to vote at the time, with that age group turning out at a higher rate than 18 to 24 year olds – and with 97% of those who voted saying they would do so again. This tide of young voters has not been held back in Scotland since then, with the extension of the right to vote now applying to Scottish parliamentary and local elections.

All of this means that we have a huge challenge ahead of Wales even to get anywhere near to the levels of success Scotland has had with votes at 16.

We have a paucity of Welsh media, with little attention being paid to what goes on in the Senedd. The reality is that most people in Wales get their news from UK sources. Prior to the pandemic I could count on one hand when UK media covered devolved Welsh issues in the past few years and can barely recall Welsh Ministers previously being interviewed on flagship programmes like *BBC Breakfast* or *Good Morning Britain*.

The other issue is that a Senedd election, which has never reached 50% turnout anyway, is a very unlikely election to truly capture the attention of a new generation. This might have changed somewhat with recent seismic changes to young people's futures – with the fiasco around GCSE and A level results hitting the top of the news agenda – but there is no argument for saying that the 2021 Senedd elections is in any way like the 2014 Scottish referendum.

What this means in practice is that Wales has to work multiple times harder to ensure votes at 16 here is a success. With a lack of media coverage, organisations like the Electoral Commission in Wales, Welsh Government and the Senedd Commission need to overcompensate and directly engage with newly enfranchised groups and people that we already know are less likely to vote.

Work is underway to develop resources for schools but we have long been advocating for much stronger political education across the board. Over the past few years ERS Cymru has been heading into schools to let young people have their own say about what is needed. Our 2018 project, Our Voices Heard, co-produced recommendations with the first cohort of young people set to vote at 16 around political education. They called

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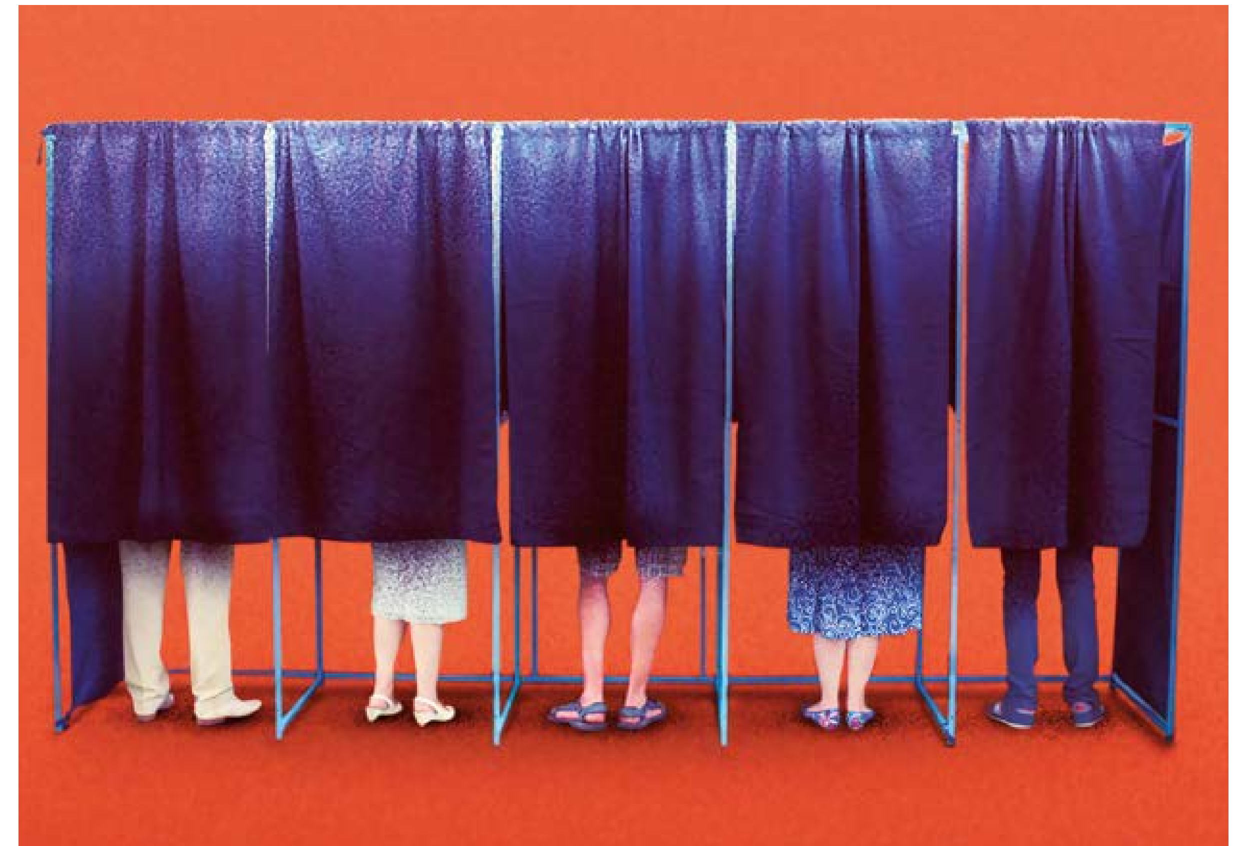

for statutory political education in schools, visits from Members of the Senedd to do live hustings and question and answer sessions, debating time in class and spaces to discuss and reflect on real current affairs as well as a national mock election.

There is limited progress on much of this. The new curriculum currently going through the Senedd is not clear enough on what exactly it will do to enhance young people's awareness and knowledge of our parliament. It will also not be in place in time for next year's election.

While it is likely that the success of votes at 16 in Wales is, to borrow the overused Ron Davies phrase, going to be 'a process and not an event', we at the very least need to start that 'process' at next year's election.

With a patchy level of formal political education across Wales' schools we need a national campaign coordinated by the key actors to distill some key messages ahead of next May: how to register; how to vote; what the vote is for; and why it's important to turn out on the day. Those recommendations from young people in our 2018 project are now more pertinent than ever.

With a patchy level of formal political education across Wales' schools we need a national campaign coordinated by the key actors to distill some key messages ahead of next May: how to register; how to vote; what the vote is for; and why it's important to turn out on the day

A national campaign should have a role in schools, on social media and within our communities. It's not just young people we need to persuade to turnout next year; it's everyone.

Before every election many of our communities, charities and organisations work hard to raise awareness of how important Senedd elections are and why it is important to vote and have your say, but there is a real need to join up organisations and the people who are delivering this ahead of May's vote.

To play our part in this ERS Cymru is coordinating a group of third sector organisations to ensure these messages are getting through to the people we work with and to share resources and develop an on the ground campaign ahead of next May.

That flyer sent out to every household in Wales by the Electoral Commission via our local authorities is the first step in a long process of letting people know about the changes to the franchise and encouraging new generations to register to vote. For some, it will already have been relegated to the nearest recycling bin, but for others this might have prompted them to register to vote for the very first time. Only time will tell whether these interventions will be enough to ensure voters, especially those new voters, turnout on 6 May.

Jessica Blair is Director of the Electoral Reform Society Cymru

How can English-medium schools help create a bilingual Wales?

Alex Lovell *says the new curriculum is an opportunity for a radical, holistic approach to teaching and learning Welsh in English-medium schools*

There is general agreement that the current system of delivering Welsh to learners in English-medium schools is not fit for purpose. Indeed, Dr Gwyn Lewis made this very point a decade ago in his paper for a Welsh Assembly report examining the teaching and acquisition of Welsh as a second language. There are of course many examples across Wales of excellent Welsh language teaching, highlighted in recent annual reports by Estyn. However, these same reports, along with reviews by Professors Sioned Davies and Graham Donaldson, have confirmed that fundamental change to the way Welsh is delivered is needed in order to improve standards of Welsh amongst English-medium learners.

With education being a key theme in the ambition of the new Welsh language strategy to reach a million speakers of the language by 2050, Welsh Government acknowledges the urgency of a need for change. In *Cymraeg 2050* they state: 'The English-medium sector

has an important contribution to make to our aim of developing Welsh speakers. To reach a million speakers, we need to transform how we teach Welsh to learners in all other schools, in order that at least half of those learners report by 2050 that they can speak Welsh by the time they leave school.'

So how best can the successful delivery of Welsh in these schools be supported? One key is the need to strengthen Welsh language provision. Many learners leave school with little grasp of Welsh and even less desire to continue study further.

The current provision falls short of ensuring that learners are able to leave statutory education as functional Welsh speakers. The Welsh Government's proposal to place renewed focus on learning Welsh as a means of communication in the new curriculum for Wales seeks to address this: 'We intend to develop a single continuum for the teaching of Welsh as a language, with an emphasis on learning Welsh predominantly as a means of communication, particularly oral communication.' This would be a welcome departure from current practice, in which too much focus is placed on developing grammatically correct forms of Welsh. By focusing on Welsh as a means of oral communication in particular, it's hoped that learners will view Welsh as being a more useful discipline for the 'real world'.

The development of a 'continuum' of learning Welsh is particularly interesting, but certainly not a new concept. In their 1998 book *Encyclopedia of Bilingualism and Bilingual Education*, Colin Baker and Sylvia Prys Jones, for example, argued for the establishment of a continuum of learning Welsh for all learners, 'from early language learning to full fluency'. The idea that every learner, no matter what their socio-linguistic background, is on a journey towards bilingualism makes for an inclusive approach to language learning. It also helps to do away with unhelpful labels such as 'first language' and 'second language'. However, the full implications of a 'continuum' model of progression need to be explored further. What are the expectations in terms of learning outcomes for Welsh learners in the English-medium sector? What are the practical implications of a single continuum for assessment?

Given that 'traditional' Welsh language lessons, by themselves, tend not to succeed in developing

If English-medium schools are to develop into truly bilingual schools over time, it's equally important that Welsh is embedded into schools' ethos, as well as their curricula

Initial teacher training providers have a key role to play in developing a bilingual workforce for the future of Welsh education

pupils as functional Welsh speakers by the end of their compulsory education, consideration needs also to be given to other ways that English-medium schools can support the successful delivery of Welsh. One such approach is Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). In the CLIL classroom, the target language is used as the vehicle of teaching and learning (usually around 50% of instruction), ensuring more meaningful use of the language for explicit and implicit learning.

CLIL can be viewed as being a flexible and effective approach which could provide greater exposure to Welsh, without compromising the number of hours devoted to delivering other subjects. The case for exploring CLIL and its development in the English-medium context is particularly strong, given that the Welsh Government now recognises Welsh as a cross-curricular responsibility in the new curriculum for Wales, and the need for English-medium schools to gradually move towards bilingual provision.

If English-medium schools are to develop into truly bilingual schools over time, it's equally important that Welsh is embedded into schools' ethos, as well as their curricula. By actively promoting Welsh across the school community, the incidental use of the language can be normalised, and its status strengthened. Learners need to be encouraged and supported to use the language beyond the confines of the classroom and the school, making connections with language use in the wider community.

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing English-medium schools in improving the delivery of Welsh is the current shortage of practitioners across the education sector with the relevant skills and confidence to be able to teach Welsh and through the medium of Welsh. Significant investment in the training of new teachers and retraining of current teachers is urgently needed. The seriousness of the current situation was recently highlighted in a briefing by the Welsh Language Commissioner, who noted that: 'There is a real danger that a shortage of Welsh-medium teachers will undermine two of the cornerstones of the *Cymraeg 2050* strategy, namely to increase the proportion of learners in Welsh-medium education, and to transform the way Welsh is taught in bilingual and English-medium schools.'

One recommendation made in the briefing note, for example, was the need to review the provision currently offered by the Welsh language Sabbatical Scheme and to ensure that more training pathways are made available to practitioners across the educational sector. As my own research highlighted, for instance, there is currently no bilingual teacher training tailored to subject specialists working in English-medium secondary schools. This is an area of training that will need to be targeted if English-medium schools are to move along the language continuum and embed Welsh further into their curricula. Initial teacher training providers also have a key role to play in developing a bilingual workforce for the future of Welsh education.

There are a number of challenges ahead and issues that need to be explored more fully. Nevertheless, the current development of a new curriculum for Wales offers an opportunity to take a new approach to delivering Welsh. This can be achieved not only by delivering Welsh as a compulsory subject and as a medium of learning and teaching across the curriculum, but also by ensuring it is a living language used on a daily basis within and beyond the classroom and school. In considering that the vast majority of learners in Wales are in English-medium education, only by taking a radical, holistic approach to delivering Welsh to these learners can the education sector stand to make any meaningful contribution to the realisation of a million Welsh speakers by 2050.

Dr Alex Lovell is a Lecturer in Welsh at Swansea University

Missing Links:
Improving inter-parliamentary relations

Paul Silk *welcomes a new IWA report advocating closer relationships between the five parliaments of the UK nations*

You could describe the British Constitution as a sort of fluid mosaic – an arrangement of tiles fitting together to form a basic picture, but where individual tiles, and occasionally whole elements of the design, are being refreshed continually. Different hands are at work to refresh the picture, and there are constant countervailing pressures – the pressure to keep things as they are (often falsely represented as if this is as they always have been), and the pressure to change.

In the part of the constitutional mosaic where Parliament sits, the arrival of three more legislatures in 1999 disrupted old ideas – that laws were made at Westminster only; that Pitt the Elder's 'grand inquest of the nation' took place in the House of Commons alone; that the Westminster Parliament was sovereign; that national identity could not be polymorphous. The disruption is still being worked through – the mosaic has been rearranged, and may be rearranged further. That future is not necessarily a linear development: it is just as conceivable that the patterns of the past will re-emerge as that the future tessellation will look quite different. But what is certain is that change in the territorial constitution is as dynamic now as it ever has been.

The IWA, with the backing of the Legal Education Foundation, has produced a report *Missing Links: Past, present and future inter-parliamentary relations in the devolved UK* that is a tiny but valuable addition to the parliamentary part of the constitutional mosaic.

Paul Evans's excellent article – available at *the welsh agenda* online – set the context masterfully, anticipating the report and detailing the chronic inaction that has bedevilled the past. The essential problem is one of poor communication and ineffective cooperation. Every citizen in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland has two legislatures representing them and making laws that govern them. Stormont, Holyrood and Cardiff Bay also have common interests in their relations with the Government in London – a Government that is scrutinised by the two Houses of Parliament at Westminster. The IWA report was a powerful call for these five parliamentary institutions to work together more effectively and to develop inter-parliamentary mechanisms that improve outcomes for citizens.

Unusually for the IWA, the report ranged across the whole United Kingdom. It was based on research conducted by a Scottish academic, and was overseen by a reference group made up of academics from institutions outside as well as inside Wales, people with experience as officials in all five institutions.

There were five basic recommendations. Risk-taking and experimentation was encouraged. A formal role for parliaments in scrutinising intergovernmental relations was advocated. A recommendation to strengthen the role of devolved parliaments in the process of legislative consent (the 'Sewel Convention') was made. The Interparliamentary Forum on Brexit and the British Irish Parliamentary Assembly were cited as examples of good practice to be built on, and there was a call for greater transparency, openness and public information on inter-parliamentary relations.

None of this is particularly startling, but it was important for the IWA to add an authoritative voice to what has been called for for a long time by many of us who want to see the parliamentary processes in London and Cardiff, Edinburgh and Belfast working better together in the interests of the citizens they represent.

A virtual launch event for the report took place on 22 September. I was joined by two MSs, Mick Antoniw (Labour) and Helen Mary Jones (Plaid Cymru), and two

The IWA report was a powerful call for these five parliamentary institutions to work together more effectively and to develop inter-parliamentary mechanisms that improve outcomes for citizens

MPs, Bernard Jenkin (Conservative) and Pete Wishart (SNP), as well as Professor Deirdre Heenan, a former member of the President of Ireland's Council of State.

This very distinguished panel might disagree fundamentally about issues like the future of the Union, but they were unanimous in supporting the thrust of the IWA report. Consequently I am confident that they will be championing inter-parliamentary cooperation in their own institutions, especially Bernard Jenkin as Chair of the Liaison Committee (the Committee that brings together all Select Committee Chairs in the House of Commons), Mick Antoniw as Chair of the Senedd Legislation, Justice and Constitution Committee, and Pete Wishart as Chair of the Commons' Scottish Affairs Committee.

The IWA report was published at an opportune time. There is an expectation that the UK Government will soon be bringing forward proposals to replace the less than satisfactory intergovernmental mechanisms, and it makes complete sense for this reform to be complemented by inter-parliamentary mechanisms – though parliament-watchers have always to be on the lookout for Governments' natural tendency not to be enthusiastic about parliamentary processes that inhibit them.

The Institute for Government has published a report on the Sewel Convention that meshes well with the IWA report. And the importance of inter-parliamentary cooperation figured in a major report from the Constitution Unit at University College London on Parliament and Brexit. There are also important developments at Westminster as well as in Whitehall: the House of Commons Procedure Committee has launched an inquiry into the Procedure of the House of Commons and the Territorial Constitution which will be considering better ways for committees to work together and for legislative consent motions to be considered. Written evidence is being accepted until 12 November. At the other end of the Palace of Westminster, the House of Lords (which has often been ahead of the elected Chamber at Westminster in terms of innovative scrutiny practice) has recently established a Common Frameworks Scrutiny Committee.

What the IWA report recommends would have made sense at any time after 1999, but the need for effective and productive inter-parliamentary working has been sharpened now that Brexit has altered the constitutional mosaic so fundamentally (not least by removing a third layer of legislature in the European Parliament). Perhaps the Internal Market Bill was always going to be too politically controversial to be subject to inter-parliamentary pre-legislative scrutiny (though a bit more pre-discussion would have been highly desirable), but future discussions on Common Frameworks would surely be made easier if parliamentarians from all the UK's legislatures are able to discuss them together.

To return to my image of a mosaic floor, having five different ideas for which tile to lay next is best resolved by discussion, not unilateral design decisions. The parliamentary process at its best is the political manifestation of the wisdom of crowds – and five crowds acting as one are wiser than five separate crowds. As a citizen of Wales, I want to see the wisdom of the MSs and MP that I elect enhanced by the wisdom that other parliamentarians throughout the United Kingdom will bring. Inter-parliamentary cooperation is the vehicle for that, and the IWA has served the interests of citizens throughout the UK by its powerful report on this recondite but important area of democratic scrutiny. ▾

Sir Paul Silk chaired the Commission on Devolution to Wales and is a former clerk in the British House of Commons and National Assembly for Wales

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DTUK000074_06/19

‘A rewarding, fascinating, wonderful, frustrating job’

In the second of her series of interviews with people behind the scenes of Welsh politics, **Shazia Awan-Scully** *meets* **Matt Greenough**, *former special advisor to Carwyn Jones*

There are few, if any, people who have been as close to the heart of politics and government in Wales during the last decade and more than Matt Greenough. For the latest in this series of pieces about former senior political advisers, I spoke to Greenough (in a suitably socially-distanced way, of course) about how he came to work in government, his time there, and life after leaving the centre of power.

Although many talk about the ambitious career politician these days, for those who are behind the scenes the path often seems indirect and accidental. Matt Greenough is no exception. After a first degree in English and History at York, he enrolled for a Masters at Cardiff University’s renowned School of Journalism. Greenough’s path into active politics followed growing doubts about journalism as a career choice. ‘I always had my heart set on that and never thought about doing much else.’ The problem came, as Greenough describes, when studying journalism. ‘I got disillusioned. I had a romantic view of how objective the world of journalism was, and the more I studied it I realised it wasn’t the case. I realised that news and reporting of news was political and subjective. I realised: if you are going to play the political game you should just pick a side and go in and bat for that side.’ And so reporting politics was diverted into active involvement.

He could not have guessed from his early involvement that he would end up working within the highest reaches of Welsh Government. His first job was simply a work experience placement in Transport House for Welsh Labour around the 2001 general election. Even after securing his first proper political job – as press officer to Wales’ two Labour MEPs at the time, Glenys Kinnock and Eluned Morgan – Greenough was far from convinced that he would be working in politics long term. What changed his mind, as he describes, was that he simply ‘fell in love with political communications’.

‘Over reliance on special advisors is not healthy: you are there to advise, not to make decisions’

As he explains: ‘Political communications is not smooth sailing, which is why I was attracted to it. It was very challenging; it felt like you were fighting for something. Going into battle for a set of ideas with the power of words, trying to win that battle of ideas, I found fascinating… It felt like a natural fit to me.’

After working for Welsh Labour’s European team for several years – including the difficult experience of fighting the 2004 European election which, he now says, offered the first inklings of what he terms ‘the Brexit debacle’ – Greenough moved over to work in the National Assembly in a role that he glamorously describes as ‘researcher, speechwriter, press officer and bag carrier to Huw Lewis and Lynne Neagle.’ Although Matt eventually was to work closely, and be identified closely, with Carwyn Jones, this first job in Cardiff Bay led to him helping to run the rival leadership campaign – of Huw Lewis – in the 2009 contest to succeed Rhodri Morgan.

The approach that Greenough took to the leadership contest was shaped by his experience years earlier, of hours of tedious effort as a work experience student. ‘My first job at Transport House was photocopying a bunch of old news stories. There was a massive stack of them: about the party’s big moments over 3-4 years, and all about battles between Rhodri and Alun Michael, Rhodri and Ron Davies; that proper in-fighting warfare that happened back in that period, and for me, not steeped in typical Labour party knowledge at that point, it was a real eye opener thinking *what the hell is going on here?* When it came to our leadership election, I was really determined we wouldn’t see any of that sort of nonsense, and I think hopefully that’s what came to pass. It was fought in the right way and it meant the party was in quite a good position after Carwyn got elected.’

After the leadership election, Greenough spent a period working directly for Welsh Labour as a press officer and then Head of Media. These two years were far from dull, encompassing a general election, devolved election, and the 2011 Welsh referendum. The latter two contests were triumphs; the former much more challenging. In particular, as Head of Media Greenough found himself in a difficult position during the 2010 general election campaign when Prime Minister Gordon Brown was caught on mic labelling Gillian Duffy as a ‘bigoted woman’. He recalls that: ‘it was the first time in my career I gave anyone the day off! I just told everyone to go home, I said *there is nothing anyone can do today that is going to help this election campaign so just go home.*’

It was during this period that Greenough started to work increasingly closely with Carwyn Jones, now First Minister and Welsh Labour leader. As he reflects, ‘to be fair to Carwyn it says a huge amount about him, hiring me after I helped run the campaign against him. I think he is such a fair minded guy; I can’t say that if it had been left to all the people around Carwyn that that would have been the case. Huw became a key minister in Carwyn’s cabinet, as did Edwina, the other person in the leadership contest. That speaks volumes about who Carwyn is. I also think it is testament to the spirit in which that leadership campaign was fought – it was very positive – as much as it can be.’

Not that the path to building a relationship with his boss was entirely smooth. As Greenough recalls: ‘We’ve got a very close relationship and developed a good understanding but it took a while to develop. I haven’t hung back in taking the mick with other politicians, I’ve always been very informal and that’s the relationship I went in for with Carwyn. And I remember him looking at me blankly when I ripped into him over something. I think I started too cheekily and too quickly! He got comfortable with it over time.’

In time the pair would become close, and it increasingly fell to Greenough to find the words that expressed the thinking of the first minister. As he recalls, ‘Even before I became the sole author of his bigger speeches, people would look to me for ideas. I have always loved writing and I really relished that work.’ While some shy away from the challenge of writing speeches for others, Greenough has always enjoyed the challenge to ‘get into someone’s frame of mind – you spend time with someone and get to know them.’ His advice, to civil servants and others needing to approach writing words for others, is to ‘just watch the speaker you are writing for, as much as you can. Whether it’s answering questions in the chamber, or oral statements, opening schools, visiting hospitals… so you pick up almost by osmosis their natural language patterns and what works for them and you work with them then… You get an idea of whether they speak in

metaphors; long or short sentences; everything about when and how they speak, and it gives you such an armoury when you sit down with a blank piece of paper – *where am I going to start?* If you already know what tone and phrases people normally adopt you're fifty percent there before you start.'

Inevitably, when working at the top levels of government, there are a large number of potential areas of focus. In retrospect, Greenough is not wholly sure that he always got the balance right in where he chose to channel his efforts. 'I regret not spending more time out of the office. Particularly when I became the Chief Special Advisor – if you wanted to be at your desk 24/7, you could. There is always something to do: answering queries, helping with problems, reading emails, reading submissions, refuting things. You could be at your desk 24/7 and still not get through everything. So it's difficult to get away from that mindset of *I have to be in the office, I have to be at my desk*. But the most that I learned was out of the office, and my eyes got opened to what was really going on when I was out and about with Carwyn, doing visits with other ministers, or speaking to the media, businesses, teachers. Everyone had an insight into Wales. All the most instructive time spent at work, about how the Welsh Government was or wasn't impacting on people, was away from the office.'

Inevitably, the multitude of calls on one's time also exacts a personal cost. Greenough has a young family that kept him grounded. Nonetheless, as he recalls: 'It is hard to find a balance and not let it consume you. It is very difficult to not switch off. I never called myself a full-on political junkie – everything that I touched, breathed and read wasn't pure politics. I did my level best to break out of the political world when I could. I love sport, that's a big release, and trying to find the time with the family was really important to me. Working in party politics, the pressure points came and went – but there was no real let up in government. You never know where the next crisis is coming from, so it's different.'

In recent years it has also sometimes been difficult to know when the next election or referendum has been coming from – something that has exacted a particularly heavy toll on party leaders and those closest to them. For both Carwyn Jones and Matt Greenough, Theresa May's

'The most that I learned was out of the office, and my eyes got opened to what was really going on when I was out and about with Carwyn, doing visits with other ministers, or speaking to the media, businesses, teachers'

snap election was particularly tough going, despite the ultimately strong Labour result in Wales. 'I think Carwyn found that election really, really tough and it came quickly on the back of 2016 which was a really hard fought one for us where we surpassed all expectations in the seats we held onto. And we absolutely flogged Carwyn in that campaign: he was our election winner, our biggest asset. We adopted the masochism strategy on steroids, we'd come back disappointed if we hadn't found someone to vent their frustrations. We'd watched the safety first 2015 General Election closely and just rejected that out of hand. But that style of politics really takes it out of you; and then the same thing happened in 2017! At the start of the 2017 campaign, Jeremy Corbyn's popularity in Wales was through the floor and local parties were in full panic mode about that crazy poll! The Tories were going to make these historic gains, and everybody, man and woman, across the party was convinced that the only chance we had of sheltering Wales from this oncoming onslaught was to make Carwyn the face of the campaign. "This is not about Westminster, this is about Wales and who will stand up for Wales." At the end of that election he said *I am not doing this again*. So when he said he was stepping down, it wasn't a surprise.'

Or, at least, it wasn't a shock to Matt Greenough. The big announcement, at Welsh Labour's 2018 conference in Llandudno, took almost everyone else wholly by surprise. 'When Carwyn resigned only three of us outside of his family knew… The media and senior politicians, their faces properly dropped… gobsmacked. A couple of us around Carwyn a lot had been used to this happening for a little while – we had known a little while, it was at least two months. It is quite a thing to keep to yourself without anyone knowing. Because that reaction has settled for you over weeks it's a shock to see the reaction on people's faces. When they found out for the first time, it was a big day to say the least!'

One thing was certain, for Greenough – with Carwyn leaving government, he would too. 'I knew I didn't want to carry on when he left – this was never a forever job for me. I was lucky in that, having done it for two to three years I got a slightly different role, just when I would have been looking to move on: from education to media to chief special advisor. My job changed enough each time to recharge my batteries in a new challenge. I don't think being a special advisor is a healthy job for any individual to do for a long time – it's very hard work as you don't switch off as you are always expected to be reachable. When you are in a media job or chief spad there is never a moment when you are not under strain or under pressure. I didn't realise that until I stopped. I picked up the paper the day after I quit, and put on the radio, and thought *if there is anything bad here it's not my fault!* I don't think I realised how responsible I felt for a bad headline, and how personally I took everything. It's good for an institution to see a change of personnel. Over reliance on special advisors is not healthy: you are there to advise, not to make decisions. You shouldn't become part of the furniture, as it's a risk. I am done, done and done with that life… I really enjoyed it, it was fantastic, and I knew if I stayed in Wales I would never have a more interesting job than that, as you are in the room the whole time and get a say on really big decisions. You know before anyone else what is about to happen and it's a rewarding, fascinating, wonderful, frustrating job – but it definitely has a shelf life, I would say.'

So if there is no going back, where does he go now? Greenough is running his own business, something which he had started to turn his thoughts to while still in government. As he puts it, 'knowing that Carwyn's time was coming up, I had half an idea of what to do next. I didn't want to jump straight into another job as I thought I want to take time to make sure I was going to do the right thing for me and make sure I see my kids growing up.' And while lockdown has made some things difficult for him, as for everyone, he is greatly encouraged by the direction of his party. Having been, in his own words, 'very disheartened' with the direction of Labour under Jeremy Corbyn, 'things definitely feel on the up now, and we are a respectable progressive force again.'

Shazia Awan-Scully is Global Head of PR at CreditSafe and a member of *the welsh agenda's* editorial group

Don't we control Wales as well?

Adrian Masters *picks through the wreckage of the initial 'four-nation approach' to the coronavirus lockdown, and tries to find positives for the devolution settlement*

It was a very frustrated motorist in the Brecon Beacons who was trying to understand what the police officer was patiently explaining to him. The man had driven for over an hour from the west of England in order to swim in the ice-cold pools at Ystradfellte and enjoy the picturesque waterfalls. He even had his wetsuit, as he showed to the officer and the ITV Wales camera operated by Tim Ward. He and my colleague Hannah Thomas had been watching Dyfed Powys Police attempt to enforce Wales' lockdown rules on the first weekend of significant difference from the rules in England.

There was no malice in the young man, no anti-Welsh arrogance. He just didn't know that things were different on this side of the border. As he put it to the officer, 'So even though Boris says you can go where you want, do what you want . . .?'

'Yes, that's England.'

'But don't we control Wales as well? Because it doesn't say that bit on the news, that you cannot drive here. And then to end up getting a fine! You should be like, mate, and we should be like – oh right, let's go home. Wasted two and a half hours.'

It certainly was a wasted two and a half hours for him and, yes, he was fined – but I'm fairly sure he wasn't the only person to have asked similar questions. There have been a number of times when I've imagined hearing the words 'Don't we control Wales as well?' echoing in all sorts of offices and Zoom meetings.

A couple of weeks earlier there'd been incredulity at the idea that the governments of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland would take significantly different approaches towards lockdown restrictions to that of the UK Government for rules in England. After all, the four governments had gone into lockdown on 23 March together and, barring a few gripes and very minor differences, had renewed the same lockdown rules on 16 April.

The four-nation approach to taking decisions had been praised by many, criticised by some and had surprised others, including me. I've been reporting for far too many years on the differences of devolution and have seen the whole range of tensions it can bring. I've become used to being exasperated when politicians and some in the UK media get it wrong, either wilfully or by mistake. I've seen how politicians on all sides can exaggerate devolution differences to suit their own agendas. So I took it as a sign of how serious this situation was that four governments led by five different political parties were able to put aside their differences in order to try to combat the coronavirus pandemic. Money flowed from London to Cardiff – more than £2bn extra at the time of writing – with few of the squabbles that usually involves. Welsh ministers moved quickly to match schemes being announced in England with little of the usual reluctance they show at following suit.

When I was still attending socially-distanced press conferences at the Welsh Government building in the centre of Cardiff in person, I was surprised to see uniformed military personnel standing around and chatting. Perhaps unsettling to see in peacetime, but also visible proof of the four-nation approach. Welsh ministers had requested and received the help of the

> The four-nation approach to taking decisions had been praised by many, criticised by some and had surprised others

Credit: Flickr - EVO GT

First Minister Mark Drakeford and Prime Minister Boris Johnson

military in working out the logistics of delivering personal protective equipment and, later, in trying to sort out some of the problems getting tests delivered.

I don't want to overstate the differences. It's true, as many have said, that cooperation has never been as close. What's more, differences between the nations aren't necessarily a problem, even if they do cause some temporary confusion and frustration. After all, we're used to navigating different parking rules in different towns and cities on different days. And there was always going to be divergence between the nations as the lockdowns ended.

What shouldn't and needn't have happened was for there to be such a stumble at such an important time: during the build-up to the second lockdown review that the governments were legally obliged to conduct on 7 May. Miscommunications and missed opportunities in the week or so before and after that date left both governments looking as if they weren't talking or listening to each other. And it led to a long bank holiday weekend of unnecessary confusion for the public. What surprised me was that the warning signs were there.

From my privileged point of view I could see it unfolding in slow motion even if some of those involved couldn't or wouldn't admit that it was happening.

By Friday 1 May it had become clear to me that the four governments weren't communicating well. First Minister Mark Drakeford said in a radio interview that 'a plan that comes like Moses coming down from the mountain is not going to work.' It's difficult sometimes to decode the First Minister's softly spoken aphorisms but someone who knows him well helped me by messaging to say: 'They won't push him around Adrian. He's a lovely man but he has a core of steel as they're about to discover.'

The UK Government was also frustrated. I was told there was a feeling that ministers and officials from Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland seemed to have little recognition of the economic harms prolonged lockdown could cause, dismissing them as Tories wanting to reopen golf courses.

Following a weekend of briefing and counter briefing, on Monday 4 May I was saying online and on air: 'Don't expect lockdown to end on Thursday.' There'd been a consistent note of caution in briefings from the Prime Minister's official spokesman as well as in Welsh and Scottish Government press conferences.

Even at this stage senior figures in all four governments weren't overly worried about potential differences because they thought, with some justification, that by the end of the week, they'd all settle on pretty much the same cautious changes.

But there wasn't much conversation, and there wasn't much time. As late as Tuesday 5 May there was a phone call between the First Minister, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster Michael Gove and the Welsh Secretary, Simon Hart.

Newspaper headlines such as 'Hurrah! Lockdown freedom beckons' on Thursday 7 May could have been the product of briefings or wishful thinking. Certainly official briefings from Number 10 continued to downplay any changes due in the Prime Minister's planned statement.

The first of two Welsh cabinet meetings ended around lunchtime and after it a spokesperson said crossly: 'Some reporting in today's newspapers is confusing and risks sending mixed messages to people across the UK. The First Minister of Wales will announce the outcome of the Cabinet's decision in due course. Our message for this bank holiday remains; Stay at Home, Protect the NHS, Save Lives.'

That afternoon the Prime Minister spoke to the First Ministers for the first time since he returned to work. But to head off accusations of lack of engagement, the Wales Office pointed out that it was one of a series of ministerial and official phone calls. The official account of the call from Number 10 acknowledged for the first time that the Prime Minister expected there to be differences of approach: 'He reiterated his commitment to continuing our UK-wide approach to tackling coronavirus, even if different parts of the UK begin to move at slightly different speeds. Those decisions will be made based on the science for each nation.'

Having waited to hear what Boris Johnson had to say, Welsh ministers held their second cabinet that evening. They made it clear they would not do anything that would risk the R rate escalating. There'd be no 'Hurrah! Lockdown freedom beckons' headlines in Wales.

While they were talking, I spoke to the Welsh Secretary Simon Hart via Zoom from his home in Pembrokeshire. 'I hesitate to say this,' he told me. 'But I think the PM's announcement over the weekend is going to be a very cautious one. Nobody wants to rush this. Nobody wants to risk triggering a second spike. Nobody wants to go through all of this horrendous agony again.'

But he also made what seemed to me the first acknowledgement from the UK Government that ministers in London (or wherever they were locked down) may not have been in lockstep with ministers in Cardiff. 'I'm hoping we can operate alongside the Welsh Government and take the Welsh Government with us as far as it is possible to do so,' he said. 'I think it would be a pity if we can't because I think it will lead to some confusion and potentially some sort of economic consequences to that too.'

It was a bank holiday on Friday 8 May, but that didn't mean a rest for anyone in Welsh politics. Michael Gove called the First Minister to talk about the imminent announcements. Then at 12.30pm the First Minister made his proclamation. Lockdown would continue for another three weeks. No change to the rules. No easing. And certainly no new message. On the morning of Sunday 10 May, it was being widely reported that the UK Government would be changing its message to 'Stay Alert. Control the Virus. Save Lives.'

Not in Wales and Scotland. A Welsh Government source who was eating a croissant from a Cardiff Tesco Extra told me between mouthfuls that it was a UK slogan. 'Ours remains *Stay Home, Save Lives*.'

After a meeting of his cabinet, Boris Johnson chaired a meeting of COBRA, in which the First Ministers took part. But it was the first since 16 April and they'd made their announcements.

In the end the differences were relatively minor. When he made his statement at 7pm Boris Johnson was as cautious as the First Ministers had been, even with the changed message.

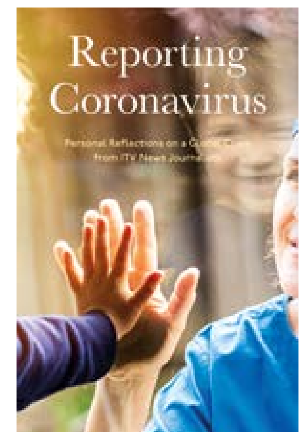
But a week or so of misjudgements and misunderstandings on both sides had nearly brought the four-nation approach to an end. And it would happen again. In July the UK Government announced its plans for 'air bridges' but without first gaining the support of the devolved governments, who would have to implement changes to the quarantine rules. It sparked another unnecessary argument over something all four governments were actually prepared to agree on.

But behind such high-profile fallings-out, officials continued to talk and the Chief Medical officers of all four nations continued to work closely together to agree the UK's alert level.

Let's be positive. Maybe the crisis has brought the devolved UK to a more realistic and sustainable position. One in which differences are acknowledged and dealt with rather than ignored. That might be healthier in the long term for the way the governments manage their dysfunctional relationships.

Adrian Masters is Political Editor at ITV News Cymru Wales. He is the author of *Nothing Has Changed*, a book about the 2017 general election

This article comes from a forthcoming collection, *Reporting Coronavirus: Personal reflections on a global crisis from ITV News journalists*



Profile: Kasim Ali
'If you're doing business, how do you do it well?'

Dylan Moore *meets* **Kasim Ali**, *the man behind Cardiff's Waterloo Tea brand, and finds him exercised as much about geopolitics as the challenges facing the hospitality sector*

'If you're benefiting financially from the system, you're not going to change it'

At the end of our meeting, at Lakeside Tea – one of Kasim Ali's six Waterloo Tea outlets across Cardiff and Penarth – I ask the entrepreneur and former pharmacist to briefly recap his CV for the tape, partly because our conversation has taken so many interesting digressions that I haven't had time to get things in order. It doesn't take long for Ali to be riffing about how he has been 'lucky to see movements – the Kurds, Palestinians, the Zapatistas in Mexico, Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia' and how 'when you look at what's portrayed in the media from those countries, and what's happening on the ground, it's very different.' Despite that he has reached this analysis through a resume of his backpacking days, between schooling at Cathays and Cardiff High, a degree in Pharmacy at Nottingham and a masters in International Relations at Bristol, it's fair to say these are not the movements I was expecting to be under discussion when pitching up to interview a member of the Welsh Independent Restaurants Collective.

Born in Cardiff, the youngest of five boys – 'so my mother did well!' – Kasim Ali describes himself as 'classic second generation' in the sense that he 'studied hard and got good grades', but throughout our conversation something about Ali's Pakistani heritage comes to the fore in his politics and business ethics. A couple of times he returns to the fact that his parents were born around the time of Partition, and as he was growing up would often relate stories passed on from his grandparents. The first time he mentions it is in the context of talking about change, which he says 'can happen very quickly' – citing his parents' tales of what happened in the Punjab – 'these used to be our neighbours' – and it's clear these run deep in what makes Kasim Ali tick. More of that later.

We start by attempting to focus on the Welsh Independent Restaurants Collective (WIRC). Ali describes as 'quite startling' the 'minds that are involved… how creative they are.' He lists a few of its members – 'Simon Wright from Wrights Food Emporium who brought WIRC to life, Cerys Furlong, Bar 44, Curado, the Felinfach Griffin…' – before emphasising that hospitality accounts for between 10 and 15% of the Welsh workforce. 'Previously, the voices that have had the ear of government have been those representing the big breweries and chains.' WIRC is an effort to correct this. Ali talks about the foundational economy and the advantages of shorter supply chains, and in the age of Covid-19 it seems WIRC is pulling in the direction of the wind of change blowing through the economy as a whole.

Ali's pharmaceutical background made him more sensitive than some of his colleagues within the collective around the issue of opening inside, and our conversation takes place against the rather odd backdrop of an empty teahouse, our view Ali's customers spaced at socially distanced tables outside. 'Your first job as a state is to look after your citizens,' he says, in the first of several conversational giant leaps from the immediate issue at hand to more global forces. 'My hope – when the pandemic started – was that *this is the time for change*. But it very quickly goes by the wayside.'

He rails against a system that pays such low wages that many of his own staff will never be able to afford to buy their own home, or even a car. When I express surprise that he – an entrepreneur and business owner – seems so down on capitalism, he explains his view that we are all of us trapped in a broken system. For Ali, the fact 'Old Etonians are still running things' is symptomatic of a pretend democracy. 'If you're benefiting financially from the system, you're not going to change it.' Other than Rishi Sunak, Ali wouldn't trust any member of the UK Cabinet to 'buy me a loaf of bread.'

'The reason why I have those views,' he explains, 'is because we find ourselves in a system where this is the only way we can operate. A cup of coffee should be priced at around £5. That would recognise all the work that goes into it, and to clean the table and do the washing up. But multinationals are essentially cartels, fixing the prices, so that leads us to have a business model that everybody in the industry hates, and zero hours contracts.' He outlines the difference between the locally sourced quality produce used by members of the WIRC and the processed, frozen ingredients supplied through wholesalers to the multinationals. 'We're at a massive disadvantage.'

Ali describes the task of the independent restaurant or cafe as akin to a start-up soft drink company taking on Coca-Cola, and describes the nightmare scenario of 'town centres only containing Greggs and Starbucks and nothing else' as 'a trend that's already happening.' Realistically, he feels WIRC members can only aim to capture between 20–30% of the market.

The task lies in underlining the positive difference independents can make. When I ask him what he can do to affect a seemingly impossible situation, Ali is bullish. 'First, pay your taxes. Second, support local.' He says there are things that can be done, if government is

It has been clear throughout our conversation that a keen social conscience drives Kasim Ali in everything he does

willing to support. He advocates shareholder schemes and cooperatives, to allow employees to share in company profits – 'which government could support by paying the legal fees, for example.'

He is frustrated that 'at the moment, the solution involves a 60-year-old civil servant leaning back in his chair, thinking about his pension' and that 'if you call [Welsh Government] toothless, they say they're not, and if you ask them to do something, they say they're toothless'. More than once, he expresses a disdain for the 'men in grey suits' who he says 'lead us down dark alleys'.

Kasim Ali is impatient for change. When he talks about 'playing a long game' he says, 'it's quarters rather than decades' – and he is even more passionate about big societal shifts than he is his own business. 'We need to keep up the pressure,' he says of the Black Lives Matter movement, which he calls 'incredible' but which is 'already losing momentum'. He compares the protests to what happened after two million people marched against the war in Iraq.

He jumps around, comparing Nigel Farage's playing of the race card with Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan. 'My mother-in-law hates it when I say this, because he's a national hero, but I feel he was an opportunist.' Then he's on to Brexit and 'skinheads in the eighties', both of which arose because he says 'people were made to feel poor and unequal'. After that he's reminding us that 'a hundred years ago, all European nations wanted to do was massacre their neighbour' and then his memories of travelling in Israel around the time Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated and meeting East Germans in Brazil, who related tales of how before the Berlin Wall came down they had only been allowed to travel to Cuba or Namibia.' It's an exhilarating frame of reference, which makes for great conversation.

'But I feel like we haven't talked about tea,' I say, to a roar of laughter. 'Sorry, I've ruined the angle of your interview,' Ali jokes, before launching into an equally passionate explanation of how and why he has ended up running a chain of teahouses. 'Tea, for me, is a form of meditation. Look at the Chinese or Japanese tea ceremony – it's about taking time out of your day. After travelling around Asia, I'd come back to the UK and seen the espresso culture. People didn't even have time to sit down to drink their coffee.' After securing a number of blends that had won best in category at the World Tea Championships, Ali was able to open his first shop – Waterloo Tea in the Penylan area of Cardiff – with a legitimate claim that 'we had the best teas in the world.' He later set up the Tea Brewers Cup, both a UK version and a World version, which ran at the same time as the World Barista Championships.

'Tea is like a gift from Asia. They do all the hard work. We just provide the hot water,' he says. 'So we make sure the water is good. And it's just good fun, good flavours. Caffeine is the only socially acceptable drug we have left.'

We finish by returning to Asia, and the question of Ali's roots, which keep cropping up anyway. It has been clear throughout our conversation that a keen social conscience drives Kasim Ali in everything he does, and so – as he is still in his early forties – I wonder what his plans are for the future.

'There's always that itch of Pakistan,' he confides. 'I used to go a lot when I was a kid, and then I didn't go for years, but when our father died I had to go and do a lot of paperwork.' He talks about the poverty and rapid social changes enveloping the area around the family's home village. 'The rush into the cities is starting – people can earn seven times more if they move into the city, compared to what they might earn on the farm. I've always felt we could do a lot of good work on healthcare with something like £20,000.'

Ali feels a generational duty to put back. 'As the second generation, it's our duty. If we don't do something, and soon, who will?' I ask him when such a project might begin. 'Well I always said I'd do it at 45, and I'm 44 now.'

'Well, you've said it now in *the welsh agenda*,' I say. 'So it's got to happen now.'

Dylan Moore is Editor of *the welsh agenda*

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Coronavirus: The Great Magnifier?

Michael Woods *provides detailed analysis of the rural-urban disparities that the pandemic has highlighted across Wales*

Lockdown spared the Welsh countryside from the worst ravages of Covid-19, but the economic impact of lockdown measures hit rural districts especially hard

In the first weeks of the Covid-19 outbreak in Britain a notion circulated that the coronavirus would be the 'great leveller', pushing through the country and indiscriminately affecting all regardless of class, race or gender. Several months later it is all too clear that on the contrary the pandemic has reinforced social, ethnic and spatial inequalities.

In Wales, one of the most evident divisions has been between rural and urban areas. Up to the end of August, the nine rural counties of Wales had recorded 4,676 confirmed cases of Covid-19, 4.6 cases per thousand residents, compared with 13,103 confirmed cases, or 6.2 per thousand residents, in urban districts. Differences in mortality rates are even clearer. Statistics for the small geographical units known as 'Middle Layer Super Output Areas' (MSOAs) – typically groups of wards with an average population of around 7,700 people – show that people living in cities and large towns were more than twice as likely to die of Covid-19 than those in villages and isolated dwellings (with 0.92 coronavirus deaths per 1,000 people in cities and large towns up to the end of July, compared with 0.45 per 1,000 people in villages and isolated dwellings).

At the end of July, there were still 14 MSOAs in Wales that had recorded no deaths from Covid-19, all but two of them covering rural areas or small towns, including Bangor, Barmouth and Dolgellau, Llandrindod Wells and parts of Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion, Powys and Pembrokeshire. At the other end of the scale, the urban areas of Pontypridd West and Porth East and Ynys Hir in Rhondda Cynon Taf and Canton in Cardiff, had all experienced more than 25 Covid-related deaths.

The geographical pattern has emerged through a series of phases that have been common across Europe, as documented by the Aberystwyth University-led IMAJINE project on territorial inequalities. The coronavirus entered Wales multiple times, initially with people returning from Alpine ski breaks or trips to hotspots in Italy and Spain, but in the first phase took hold most rapidly and fiercely in urban areas with denser populations and busier public transport, offices and shops. In the second phase it was carried into new areas by commuters and visitors, clustering especially along the M4 and A55 corridors. By the time that lockdown was introduced in March the coronavirus was present in every district of Wales, but more than half of confirmed cases were concentrated in Cardiff, Caerphilly, Newport, Rhondda Cynon Taf and Swansea.

In the lockdown phase the rural-urban difference

People living in cities and large towns were more than twice as likely to die of Covid-19 than those in villages and isolated dwellings

was strengthened by what Dr Mike Simmons, a clinical lead in the Hywel Dda Health Board, has called 'natural rural distancing': contact between individuals was further reduced by dispersed settlement patterns and small village populations, creating additional obstacles for virus transmission. The effect was particularly visible in Ceredigion. The county recorded 24 Covid-19 cases up to the first week of April, but then only another 34 cases until the end of June, even as numbers continued to build elsewhere. As well as geography, the low incidence was attributed to the council's 'home-made' track-and-trace system and early isolation of care homes, but the county's industrial structure and luck also played a role.

Anglesey had also initially experienced relatively lower cases, but numbers surged with an outbreak at the 2 Sisters meat processing plant at Llangefni in June. Similar clusters were found at meat factories in Merthyr Tydfil and Wrexham, again reflecting an international pattern of food processing plants triggering localised

Property prices in mid Wales are booming as rural living has become attractive to mobile, safety-seeking urbanites, but where some see opportunities to reaminate villages and small towns, others see threats of gentrification and displacement

flares of Covid-19. Such sites are vulnerable not only because of the working conditions, but also because they often are staffed by migrant workers who both work and live together, increasing opportunities for infection. At the same time, this closedness limits risks of transmission to local communities.

Lockdown spared the Welsh countryside from the worst ravages of Covid-19, but the economic impact of lockdown measures hit rural districts especially hard. A greater proportion of the workforce was furloughed in rural districts than in urban districts, including around 30% of employees in Ceredigion, Conwy, Pembrokeshire and Powys, compared with the national average of 25%. In tourism-oriented towns such as Dolgellau, Porthmadog, Pwllheli and Tenby non-grocery spend in local businesses fell by 70% on the previous year, according to analysis by Tortoise. A study by the RSA projected that one in three tourism jobs in Conwy and Pembrokeshire could be at risk.

As Wales entered a new phase with the easing of restrictions, rural areas faced a dilemma – balancing enormous pressures to re-open for tourism with the deep concerns of many rural residents that an influx of visitors would bring the coronavirus sweeping through their communities. A combination of the compressed season, uncertainties over international travel and good weather brought record numbers of domestic tourists to rural Wales, and with many indoor attractions still closed, visitors swamped popular outdoor sites causing problems of illegal parking, littering and trespass. Yet, the feared explosion of Covid-19 cases never arrived. In August, 127 new cases of Covid-19 were confirmed across the key tourism counties of Anglesey, Ceredigion, Conwy, Gwynedd, Pembrokeshire and Powys, a rate of just 0.19 cases per thousand residents and below the average rate for Wales of 0.22 cases per thousand residents.

Indeed, the upturn in cases in an emerging new phase of the pandemic has been driven more by the crumbling of social distancing and over-eagerness in reuniting with families and friends. Confirmed cases have climbed in September in all parts of Wales, but the acceleration is again greatest in more densely-populated urban areas.

The trend is repeating another striking pattern in the geography of Covid-19 in Wales – the association of severity and urban deprivation. Analysis by the Office for National Statistics reveals that residents in the 20% most deprived wards in Wales are almost twice at risk of dying from Covid-19 than those in the 20% least deprived areas (121.4 deaths per 100,000 residents between March and July, compared to 65.5 deaths per 100,000 residents) – a bigger gap than for non-Covid deaths. The critical factor is not poverty per se, but the conditions that go with it: overcrowded housing, fewer private gardens, more people employed as key workers and placed at greater risk of infection. In the United States, the *New York Times* have published stories about 'white collar lockdown' – and the notion resonates equally in Wales.

In contrast to urban poverty, rural poverty is associated more with isolation and lack of mobility, ironically offering a degree of protection in the pandemic. However, coronavirus has exposed other rural-urban inequalities. Working from home is easy with fast broadband and a reliable 4G signal, less so in rural 'not-spots' of digital deprivation. Rural residents struggling with intermittent wifi or joining Zoom calls from roadside lay-bys are clearly disadvantaged compared to urban colleagues. Concerns over tourism or second home-owners have moreover reflected fears about limited healthcare facilities in rural areas being overwhelmed by Covid cases.

The coronavirus has reawakened old tensions in rural communities over poor public services, a lack of affordable housing, precarious jobs and over-dependence on tourism that extend to the post-Covid recovery. Property prices in mid Wales are booming as rural living has become attractive to mobile, safety-seeking urbanites, but where some see opportunities to reanimate villages and small towns, others see threats of gentrification and displacement.

Far from being the great leveller, Covid-19 has become the great magnifier, revealing and enlarging the inequalities and injustices that run through Welsh society.

Michael Woods is Professor of Human Geography and Co-Director of the Centre for Welsh Politics and Society at Aberystwyth University

A perfect storm: farming, Covid-19 and Brexit

Even the iconic Welsh mountain sheep are affected by the pandemic, says **Edward Thomas Jones**

The closure of large hotels and cruise liners – which routinely invest in new carpets – contributed to a fall in demand for wool from Welsh mountain sheep

On 31 December 2019, the World Health Organisation (WHO) received reports of an unknown virus behind several pneumonia cases in Wuhan, the capital of China's Hubei Province. This unknown virus caused the respiratory illness which later became known as coronavirus disease 2019. By St David's Day, Covid-19 cases had been detected in Wales, England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland.

Following the first outbreak, it took just twelve weeks for the virus to bring the world to a halt, to put lives, societies, and economies on lockdown (people only able to leave their homes under a list of very limited purposes, the banning of public gatherings, and the closure of non-essential shops). The restaurant and tourism sectors were hit particularly hard by governments' policy of deliberately shutting down their economies to halt the spread of the coronavirus disease. Despite easing of lockdown rules, fewer than 40% of tourism businesses in Wales were open and operating at full capacity by August 2020.

Few areas of the Welsh economy escaped the effects of the coronavirus pandemic, and the farming industry was no exception. Farmers in Wales experienced a turbulent first half to 2020 as the food services sector – pubs, restaurants, and cafes – closed. Farmgate prices for livestock fell sharply at the beginning of the pandemic as supply chains faltered. Red meat, poultry, and potatoes were affected by the sudden, considerable drop in demand from the food service and hospitality sector. There was significant price volatility being experienced in dairy; as demand fell millions of litres of milk and thousands of tonnes of fresh produce went to waste. Such was the concern for this part of the industry that Minister for Environment, Energy and Rural Affairs Lesley Griffiths announced financial support for Welsh dairy farmers affected by the coronavirus outbreak. Even the iconic Welsh mountain sheep were affected by the pandemic; the closure of large hotels and cruise liners – which routinely invest in new carpets – contributed to a fall in demand for wool from Welsh mountain sheep. Thanks to a hill-dwelling lifestyle, Welsh sheep have a coarser fleece, which tends to be used in carpets.

Following lobbying by farming unions and other organisations, food production and associated activities joined health and education as being classified as a critical service. With livestock needing daily attention, farm workers were not furloughed during the pandemic. But the risks to people keeping the country fed was, and remains, high. Significant outbreaks of the virus were reported in food factories and processing plants where staff have long periods working closely together indoors. In June, 2 Sisters Food Group suspended production at its chicken plant in Llangefni, Anglesey after confirming multiple cases of Covid-19.

Overall, the Welsh food system has weathered the challenge of Covid-19 particularly well. One positive outcome from the pandemic is the newly discovered love for primary food producers as consumers become more worried about their food. Where does it come from? Will it be available? Who produced it and how? This consumer interest and response to food could be amplified in Wales. As Professor Kevin Morgan said during the Farmers Union of Wales (FUW) Royal Welsh Show virtual seminar: 'If Covid-19 has taught us anything, it is the value of foundational services such as health, social care and food security. In Wales we have a need (because of high levels of poverty) and a duty (because of our Well-being of Future Generations Act) to set a high priority on good food for all.'

Remember Brexit?

The Welsh food and drink sector has been a recent success story. 2019 saw the industry reveal a record turnover figure of £7.5 billion, surpassing the ambitious target set in 2014 to achieve 30% growth and reach £7 billion of sales by 2020. This could soon change as 73% of all Welsh food and drink exports went to the European Union in 2018 and the market of 447 million people continues to be crucial to the industry.

The first cases of Covid-19 in the UK were diagnosed on 31 January 2020, the very day the country left the EU. Brexit probably has not been at the top of anyone's mind during this pandemic but the likelihood of a no-deal Brexit has increased dramatically in recent weeks. Disruptions from coronavirus have elevated the issue of food security and the impact of coronavirus is rapidly colliding with the country's plans for Brexit.

The export market is vital for the Welsh farming industry. Roughly 40% of Welsh lamb are exported, with over 90% of those exports going to EU member states. In the event of a no-deal Brexit, Boris Johnson plans to buy almost the entirety of Wales' lambs. However, it remains unclear what the Prime Minister intends to do with all these.

Even when discounting the impact of Covid-19, the industry has seen its highest level of uncertainty since the 2001 foot and mouth outbreak. While Welsh produce is in demand across the world, uncertainty could lead to customers looking elsewhere. Wales can trade around the world under the UK membership of the EU, but at the end of this year the country will have to negotiate new trade deals – and that is a process that takes time.

During trade negotiations, Welsh farmers may lose out to the demands of other business interests such as financial services and manufacturing. New trade deals could potentially bring down food prices for consumers but expose Welsh farmers to cheaper overseas competition. The perception of UK (including Welsh) food as higher quality and hence more expensive than elsewhere is not always accurate. Argentine beef farmers could meet UK animal welfare requirements at a substantially lower price than British farmers. Argentine farmers were a major supplier to the UK, but they were blocked when the country joined the EU in 1973. When the UK looks to make its own trade deals with large countries that have lower cost farming practices, such countries will want access to British consumers.

The EU not only protected Welsh farmers from foreign competition, it also provided financial support through its Common Agriculture Policy (CAP). The CAP is one of the biggest EU programmes, with a budget of over €148 billion in 2019. For all farm types in Wales, the contribution of EU financial support to overall farm income increased from 55% in 2018 to 85% in 2019.

The Welsh food and drink sector has been a recent success story. 2019 saw the industry reveal a record turnover figure of £7.5 billion, surpassing the ambitious target set in 2014

In September 2020, the UK Government introduced the Agriculture Bill to the UK Parliament. The Bill provides the legal framework for leaving the CAP and establishes a new system for agricultural support across the UK. The Welsh Government intends to publish a white paper towards the end of 2020 which will set out the context for the future of Welsh farming and pave the way for an Agriculture (Wales) Bill. The exact details of the financial support the Welsh farming industry will receive in the future are still unknown.

There is more to New Zealand than rugby

No discussion about post-Brexit Welsh agriculture is complete without reflecting on the experience of New Zealand. The All Blacks' performance against Wales on the rugby pitch isn't the only record the country can boast. There were around 9.5m sheep in Wales in 2019 – sheep outnumber people three to one (Welsh Government, 2019). While the country has the largest sheep population of any region in the UK, Wales still falls behind New Zealand, where sheep outnumber people six to one.

The New Zealand government cut subsidies to its farming industry during the 1980s. The industry was still hurting after losing access to a key market in 1973; when the UK joined the EU, New Zealand lamb, beef and dairy farmers suffered as their privileged access to the British market was cut off. Today, New Zealand is considered a world-beating food exporter and is often referred to as the 'Saudi Arabia of milk', given its position as the world's biggest exporter of dairy products.

However, the experience of a small and well-placed southern hemisphere agricultural exporter may not be directly applicable to Wales. New Zealand farmers were perfectly placed to meet rising demand for dairy products from China and other Asian markets. The country's farmers already had experience of having to find and trade with new markets before losing government support; such a culture did not have to be created from thin air. As a net food exporter, New Zealand could prioritise agriculture in all its trade deals at the expense of other parts of the economy. Finally, the country's banks were attuned to the needs of agriculture and were persuaded to restructure debt during the 1980s rather than let farms go bankrupt.

Challenges and opportunities

Farming is the backbone of the Welsh rural economy. This year has produced a mixed picture for the industry, with some businesses suffering harshly from the effects of the lockdown, while others continued working almost as normal. The pandemic has raised concerns about food security and there is growing support for more food self-sufficiency. A positive outcome is that it has and will continue to drive demand by consumers for locally produced foods which can be purchased from local businesses. The challenge for Welsh local producers is to make it convenient to buy, and to communicate loudly and clearly the benefits for consumers.

But at a time when the farming industry is adjusting to a 'new normal', a bigger threat looms. At the end of the year Wales leaves the EU single market, and possibly without a trade deal. That is a bigger step into the unknown.

Dr Edward Thomas Jones is a Lecturer in Economics at Bangor Business School. His research is primarily in the area of economic growth, regional industrial structures, and innovation in public and private finance. Kindly sponsored by the Royal Welsh Agricultural Society, he is a 2020 Nuffield Farming Scholar

Recovery and Restructuring

Wyn Morris *runs the rule over the rural economy*

The Covid-19 pandemic has had major economic and social implications, and while the rural economy has not been exempt from these, the reliance of rural communities on particular sectors has resulted in a different pattern of impact. Many individuals have used the lockdown period to reassess priorities and adapt the way they work. For businesses, especially those in the tourism and hospitality sector, the timing of lockdown could not have been worse, striking at the end of the quiet winter period and just before the start of the peak season. Whilst Brexit is no longer a continuous item on our news channels, in the background the debates rumble on. Many are using the term 'perfect storm' to describe the potential impact of Brexit and the Covid pandemic facing business in the UK. While financial institutions, large retailers and manufacturing have attracted the bulk of attention, concerns remain regarding the viability and sustainability of the rural economy and rural communities. Understanding the 'rural' is further hampered by differing definitions and measurements of what the word means. What is clear is that the impact of the pandemic has been different for more accessible rural areas such as the Vale of Glamorgan and Monmouthshire compared to remote rural areas such as in the Cambrian Mountains or Snowdonia, where access to infrastructure and services is patchier.

Wales is predominantly a rural country with over 80% of its landmass used as farmland. Its rural, agricultural heartland reflects a Welsh identity supporting Welsh language, culture and community. It provides shelter, local amenities, food and water. However, many of the goods and services produced – for example wood, meat, and dairy – have little value added to them within these areas. More often than not, more value is added outside Wales than inside. A similar position exists for renewable energy generation where rural areas in Wales have lost the opportunity to capture the value from large-scale projects. The potential of water resource generation in rural Wales is a debate for another day.

The rural economy of Wales is associated with low employment growth and is dominated by a small number of low wage sectors such as agriculture, tourism and hospitality. These are often interlinked, and each faces significant challenges from both Brexit and Covid-19. Opportunities for young people in rural Wales are limited, and there are concerns of a continued brain drain from Welsh rural communities as the next generation search for secure and well-paid opportunities. This outflow of young talent leaves rural economies with a more aged population, worsened by migration into rural communities by retirees who then over time start to impose a significant burden on local services. It is clear that rural development plans have failed to deal with the needs of the rural economy. This is particularly true for digital connectivity, a lack of which has hampered business. As more people work from home this issue becomes increasingly problematic, a brake on employment opportunities and growth. Many have found in recent months that home working is possible; however, connectivity, and the speed and reliability of this connectivity are critical to facilitate this shift in working patterns.

Support for initiatives such as the Mid Wales Growth Deal will be important in facilitating change and growth for local needs in rural areas. Within this rural context, there are a handful of essential sectors that are crucial for rural economy resilience. Rural development needs to have an awareness of a different set of sectors, which are often lower wage, lower productivity but employment creating.

The recent upturn in 'staycations' forced by the pandemic has allowed coastal areas to recapture some of the tourism losses sustained during the previous four months of lockdown. It remains to be seen, however, if this demand is enough to see these businesses through the winter. Whilst the long term trend in UK holidays is yet to be understood (and will likely depend on future Covid conditions), it is encouraging that the current situation has permitted Wales to sell itself as a destination of choice. The influx of visitors has not been without its problems and tensions, in particular between visitors, local authorities and locals. Whilst there are clearly economic advantages to the influx of visitors to Wales, a balance must be found to protect those local communities. We have seen that supporting infrastructure in these predominantly rural coastal communities has been creaking.

Investment in infrastructure is required to support these locations and ensure that rural communities can take advantage of the new demand without being exposed. There is also a danger that locals are priced out of the property market. There is a requirement to look more broadly in terms of tourism's capabilities to answer the economic needs of rural locations, where there are contrasting opportunities between coastal, inland and upland areas. However, opportunities exist in non-coastal locations, for example from the increase in adventure based destination tourism, as has been witnessed in some key post industrial areas, for example Snowdonia's Zipworld, based at the old Penrhyn Quarry in Bethesda, the slate caverns in Blaenau Ffestiniog and the forest at Betws-y-Coed.

The hospitality sector has been fundamentally and negatively impacted by Covid-19 and the existing restrictions will have long lasting effects and has forced some businesses to cease trading. There have been severe short-term effects for the high-end high-quality food market. The effect on hotels and restaurants has been somewhat alleviated by the business support schemes and schemes such as 'eat out to help out' however, the long term effects are yet to be understood. Business owners have adopted different strategies based on their individual position and vision. Sadly, some have simply closed their doors for good. The true extent of this is will be seen when the furlough scheme ends and at a time where business in small rural towns will be facing further financial pressures. Some mothballing has occurred. This is a process of reducing the business to maintain viability until the business environment becomes more favourable. However, other business owners have been more entrepreneurial in adapting their businesses. For example, local pubs shifting their business model by offering a take away service. Large retailers have adopted a disinvestment strategy closing some outlets. The impact is likely to be worse in rural towns as we witness a desertification of the high street. The outcome of this may be the resetting of currently unrealistic retail rents and high business rates; factors which are also limiting small independents and start-ups.

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Agriculture – the long production cycles have prevented any significant changes to date. However, it is likely that Brexit will pose a greater threat to Welsh agriculture than the Covid-19 pandemic. In the Welsh context, recent research on the diversification and resilience of Welsh farming prospects after Brexit reports that agricultural opportunities to build resilience in Wales are less favourable due to remoteness, land quality and limited opportunities for diversification. However, it could be argued that these businesses are more resilient due to their 'take it on the chin' attitude, with many individual farmers owning their farms therefore free from tenancy rents or mortgage debt. It is apparent that a common diversification strategy into tourism has not assisted business resilience during the pandemic. Opportunities to seek other more stable income streams such as renewable energy generation may be more secure. Sustainability and agricultural technology will be key drivers within the industry therefore adoption and a managerial mindset is key.

It is apparent from analysing these key sectors within the rural economy there is no one dominant strategy that can help all rural areas. It is apparent that the management of rural businesses and the entrepreneurial attitude of business owners are more influential in their response and resilience than the policies. The pandemic has afforded some business owners time to assess their businesses and in particular their costs of production and cash flows. It has also encouraged technology adoption and staff training with many individuals undertaking courses and improving their skillset during lockdown. Other business owners are preoccupied with business survival and we have witnessed some manufacturing businesses shifting production to PPE, while other industries within the rural sector may need to consider their agility. Agriculture for example may need to adopt a resource-based view in terms of outputs, whereby farmers consider the resources on the farm and the potential revenue streams.

There is a need for policy makers and industry to work with our Universities and organisations such as Menter a Busnes to develop young people with appropriate skills and develop opportunities to assist them to remain within the rural economy. Our current understanding as to how rural Wales 'works' is sorely lacking. With the bulk of Welsh economic analysis focussing on large towns and cities, and with these latter areas dominating national averages, efforts to understand rural areas are pushed to the back of the queue. It is therefore important that rural areas are recognised and decisions on the rural economy are evidence based. There is a need for a deeper up-to-date conceptual understanding supported by better quality data. It is critical that researchers are allowed access to datasets concerning rural economies.

The recent establishment of the Wales Rural Research Network is an important step forward where academics from differing institutions and disciplines have come together to tackle the research needs of rural Wales. Please get in touch for further details regarding the Wales Rural Research Network.

Wyn Morris is a Lecturer in Management at Aberystwyth University

There is a need for policy makers and industry to work with our Universities and organisations such as Menter a Busnes to develop young people with appropriate skills and develop opportunities to assist them to remain within the rural economy

What's Welsh for 'economic policy'?

***Jack Watkins** says the time has come for Wales to grasp the economic policy nettle*

In twenty years of devolution, successive Welsh Governments have struggled to articulate distinctively 'Welsh' economic policy. The closest we have come predates political devolution, in the form of the Welsh Development Agency. The WDA's success at attracting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) into Wales undoubtedly mitigated the effects of deindustrialisation on employment, and its influence remains, with the outgoing Welsh Government boasting an outsized share of UK FDI and, before March 2020, increases in employment that compared favourably with other parts of the UK.

However, even before Covid-19 this approach was starting to look outdated. Competing on cost with manufacturing regions across the world may have created jobs, but they were poorly paid. And as Ineos demonstrated this summer, giving public money to multinational firms doesn't buy loyalty. In addition, a series of structural challenges have led both pessimists and optimists to conclude that we have now reached the thick end of a wedge in terms of economic transition: globalisation, accelerating automation and the nature of our exit from the EU mean that an FDI-focused approach is unlikely to generate the same kinds of results in the future.

Diverse voices have begun to converge around the desire for an alternative. The political left has fixed its sights on the poverty and inequality that risk undermining the social fabric of the UK. Meanwhile the political right has recognised the need to 'level up' the towns and regions that were left behind over decades in which government policy was largely to allow the market to take its course. In a deeply divided society, the public are surprisingly unified on the economy – they

want better work and access to affordable necessities, with a more vibrant local economy around them.

This shared desire for an economic alternative is not formally articulated, but the principles are clear – there is a growing expectation that economic activity should contribute more to social (as well as economic) goals, and that governments should be ready to intervene and stimulate aspects of the economy in a way that supports this. This is borne out in Wales through cross-party support for emphasising local producers in public procurement, providing graduated non-domestic rate relief for small businesses and ongoing efforts to reduce environmental impact. Plaid Cymru and Welsh Labour's budget agreement also resulted in an experimental fund that has invested £5m in 'foundational' firms in social care, housing and food, to explore new ways of capturing more value – social and economic – within Wales.

Funded by CREW, the IWA is currently exploring the notion of the 'foundational economy', and we believe that this agenda should be a cornerstone of the next Welsh Government's programme. That Government will likely inherit the highest rate of unemployment of the devolved era, substantial business closures and the ongoing limitations placed on us by Covid-19. Nonetheless, it will also inherit a significant budget, tax-varying powers and a set of institutions that are growing in knowledge, experience and confidence. To meet its challenges, the Government cannot hope to buy-in a jobs miracle through FDI – it must create an environment in which Welsh firms can both thrive and contribute. It can do so by focusing on social value, fair competition and innovation.

Recent crises have shown that some firms provide value above and beyond the transactions that we make with them – they invest in the places in which they operate, providing good work and career progression and strengthening local supply chains, with many going out of their way to maintain provision during lockdowns. They are grounded in a place, and they work to make that place better. By contrast, many geographically-mobile firms determine their commitment to a local branch through a balance sheet. Their decisions to leave an area can cause extensive problems for local residents in terms of accessing basic necessities, such as high street banking. Government, both national and local, is well-placed to develop the right set of incentives to ensure that firms respond to their social ask by making commitments, as well as rewarding those firms who go above and beyond their day-to-day business.

We all need to recognise a fundamental issue of fairness in how markets operate. The availability and terms of private finance and the 'rules of the game' in regulation often better reflect the experiences of large firms with corporate structures and significant capital than those of small and medium-sized enterprises. Being pro-business and pro-market are not the same thing. Government needs to ensure that the engine of competition which drives the market economy is fair, rewarding hard work and innovation rather than rent-seeking. This means facilitating new entrants and shaping markets, addressing disproportionate regulatory burden and providing high quality business support and finance. The successes of the Development Bank of Wales in plugging gaps and building relationships over its first few years point to a direction of travel for the future.

IWA is currently exploring the notion of the 'foundational economy', and we believe that this agenda should be a cornerstone of the next Welsh Government's programme

Beyond regulation and investment, government has a significant role to play in smoothing the ongoing transition to a different form of economy. A digital 'knowledge economy' represents an immense opportunity to redesign business systems and processes, but to date, those opportunities have largely accrued to a small number of incredibly high-growth firms, which in turn is driving global inequality – Apple and Amazon are valued in the trillions of dollars, but both have faced significant criticism over the treatment of workers. As philosopher Roberto Mangabeira Unger has argued, government must play an 'inclusive vanguard' role in developing and distributing new methods of production. Just as in the past, it must stimulate R&D and dramatically increase skill levels to ensure that all firms and sectors are able to make the most of technology. Too many people believe that mundane goods and services like housing, food and care are resistant to change, ignoring the innovative potential of those sectors. But there is growing evidence of this potential, from Welsh Government's outgoing Challenge Fund, NESTA's extensive Innovate to Save programme, BT's recent 'Smart Rural' report and our own 'Our Smart Region' report.

The last five years have been dominated by discussions of everything but the economy: Brexit, the constitution, the 'culture war' and Covid-19. If we want to move past this divisiveness, we need to start talking about the grievance at the heart of it – how one of Europe's strongest economies also contains one of its weakest economies, and what can be done about it. Economic policy that is rooted in the Welsh experience is a good place to start.

Dr Jack Watkins is the IWA's Foundational Economy Project Lead

We need to start talking about… how one of Europe's strongest economies also contains one of its weakest economies, and what can be done about it

The cost of tourism

Rhys ap Gwilym *gives a personal perspective from Llanberis*

When considering the case for Welsh independence a frequent and understandable question is whether Wales can afford it. Are we too poor to be independent? Of course, in practice any country can afford to be independent, but the key question is whether it would be better or worse off compared with the status quo. This summer two reports have been published which help shed light on this subject. The first report by Wales Fiscal Analysis, a new research body within Cardiff University's Wales Governance Centre, published findings which sought to estimate the revenues raised and public expenditure undertaken in Wales under the current constitutional arrangements. The second report, by Sheffield Hallam University, analysed the widely differing range of reported economic performance between the countries and regions of the UK. An earlier report by the OECD shows that across its twenty-five member states the UK has the highest levels of regional disparities in labour productivity.

The Faenol Cottages were built at the turn of the twentieth century at the southern edge of Llanberis. Half way between the blasting of the Dinorwig quarry and the tourists' playground in Cwm Brwynog, the area was soon christened 'Limbo' by the locals.

This year, the sense of purgatory in Llanberis has been more acute than ever. Whilst Covid-19 brought overwhelming worries about health and income, the spring also provided endless days of sunshine and a tranquillity that we had previously only enjoyed sporadically. There were frustrations at missing out on football and rugby, at learning to homeschool the children, at holidays cancelled and jobs lost. But these were tempered by the opportunity to spend more time with family, more time to have conversations across the garden wall with our neighbours. Homeworking (or not working), traffic-free streets and benevolent offers of practical and emotional support to those who were shielding bolstered the sense of community.

This spring, I suspect, will remain in our reminiscences for a long time. When the fear of the disease has passed and the hardship of lost income has been survived, we will still remember those long sun-drenched days that we spent in the company of family and the immediate community.

Then came the summer. Those of us who had hoped for a gradual release of lockdown were to be disappointed. In early June, Mark Drakeford had promised that 'if there is anything practical we can do to offer the tourism sector something for this season, we will look into doing it. However, it has to be with the consent of the local community'. But the statement amounted to nothing more than empty rhetoric. Consent was never sought, and overnight we emerged from the tightest of lockdowns to a free-for-all.

On 5 July, the five-mile 'stay local' travel restrictions were still in force and the National Park remained closed, constraining everyone to a few paths in the bottom of the valley for their daily quota of exercise. The following day, the five-mile rule was lifted and the Park simultaneously opened in its entirety. One day, not even those who lived within five miles could go onto yr Wyddfa, y Garn or the Glyderau, the next they were open to everyone.

The widely-held perception that the National Park prioritises visitors over residents had been powerfully reinforced. Whilst the five-mile rule was in force, it took a two-week consultation to open one ridge on Moel Eilio. Yet as soon as visitors were allowed to travel to Eryri, the Park lifted all restrictions – the very same day. This time, the consultation was cursory at best.

The warnings of the pre-lockdown weekend, when record numbers visited the mountains of Eryri, had been ignored. Predictably, the abrupt release of lockdown led to a repeat. The residents of 'Limbo' reported having their sleep disturbed at 5am by the throngs returning to tread the path through Cwm Brwynog to the summit of yr Wyddfa. Following the quiet, the unrelenting flood of tourists was close to unbearable. Cars crashing into walls in Pentre Castell as the roads are used as racetracks, buses struggling to get past illegally parked cars at Pen y Gwryd, camper vans filling every lay-by and depositing their litter… everywhere. The volume of human waste that currently desecrates the woods around Castell Dolbadarn is beyond comprehension.

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'Sun going down over the Llyn Peninsula, North Wales'
Stuart Madden. CC BY 2.0

The apparent tension between public health and 'the economy' has been a feature of media coverage of the Covid crisis. The truth, of course, is that those places that have best dealt with the public health crisis have also seen least disruption to their economies. But the myth of such a conflict persists.

A similar myth persists with respect to tourism in Wales. That there is a tension between a successful tourist economy and the desires of resident populations. The myth is founded on the idea that a successful tourist economy requires large numbers of visitors, and it relies on the misconception that tourists and locals have incompatible preferences. The truth is more nuanced. Despite the huge numbers of visitors to Llanberis, the tourism economy here is extremely weak, supporting few high-quality jobs. And whilst the congestion and environmental degradation caused by busy summer weekends are a blight to locals, they are also a bane to visitors.

This is not to disparage those who have built successful, responsible careers and businesses in the tourism sector. Quite the opposite. That they have managed to do so, in a context where public policy – at all levels of government – encourages a race to the bottom, deserves high praise. When we turn a blind eye to illegal roadside camping, refuse to legislate against campervans in lay-bys and provide tax-breaks to second-home owners, we make life more challenging for accommodation businesses – not less so.

The economic value of tourism

Assessing the value of tourism is not a straightforward task. Tourism is not an industry. Tourists don't only spend money in theme parks and hotels, but also in petrol stations and supermarkets. Conversely, hotels and theme parks gain custom from locals as well as visitors. Moreover, how do we differentiate between tourists and non-tourists? If I go to Caernarfon to take my children to their swimming lessons, I'm clearly not a tourist. But if we visit the castle, are we now day-trippers?

These ambiguities give rise to wildly different measures of the economic value of tourism. Whilst the Welsh Government claims that '6% of all Gross Value Added in the Welsh economy' is attributable to tourism, the most recent exercise by the Office for National Statistics to value the contribution of tourism to regions within the UK put the figure at a much lower 3.6%.

What is clear is that tourism in Wales provides, on the whole, poorly paid and precarious work. The work is often part time and seasonal, and examples of employers who effectively pay below minimum wage by bundling over-priced accommodation with employment contracts are not rare. Xu et al (2020) report that 67.1% of workers in the tourism industries have incomes so low that they also claim state benefits (compared to 31.6% across all industries).

What none of these statistical exercises attempt to account for is the external costs of tourism. Some of these – such as noise pollution and cultural subordination – are subjective in nature, and nigh on impossible to value dispassionately. Others, however, can be valued. The costs of providing infrastructure, from public toilets to a third bridge over the Afon Menai, can easily be assessed. The cost of litter collection, environmental management and enforcement – whether provided or not – are clearly measurable. And of course, the impact of second homes and 'Airbnbs' on land values and, hence, the cost of living in our tourist hotspots, can be estimated.

Welsh Government and local authorities, in common, seem to reify tourist numbers whilst being blinded to the costs of over-tourism. Gwynedd council leases Cae'r Ddôl to event organisers for less than the price of a single entry into the event, even on busy summer weekends when accommodation is already booked to capacity. Only two traffic wardens are employed to cover this vast county, and the

A similar myth persists with respect to tourism in Wales. That there is a tension between a successful tourist economy and the desires of resident populations

enforcement of traffic regulations by towing is viewed as a revolutionary act. Welsh Government, on the other hand, refuses even to acknowledge the loop-hole in its small business rates relief scheme which allows second home owners to avoid paying any local taxes.

Resource curses, old and new

When the Dinorwig quarry was at its zenith, its slates were exported across the world, creating huge economic value. The names of these export markets live on in the names that were adopted for many of the *ponciau* (galleries) in the quarry – Abyssinia, Awstralia and Califfornia. Some of the other ponciau tell a different story. Veronica, Enid and Matilda are named for members of the Assheton Smith family – the owners of the Faenol Estate. The family had a near monopoly on land in Dyffyrn Peris between 1723 and 1967, which allowed them to extract a huge proportion of this economic value. Quarry workers not only had to negotiate a 'bargen' with the family to work the slate, but invariably paid rent on small-holdings or houses owned by the family.

As the relative value of slate has diminished over the last century, the value of our other abundant resource in Dyffryn Peris – the mountain environment – has grown. However, whilst the wealth associated with the slate was squandered predominantly by one family, the danger is that we are collectively squandering the wealth of our mountain environment.

Rhys ap Gwilym is Senior Lecturer in Economics at Bangor Business School, and a member of *the welsh agenda's* editorial group

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Beauty for all: *The National Trust at 125*

Justin Albert *finds this year's 125th anniversary of the National Trust to be more of a landmark than anticipated*

This year, our collective experience of lockdown has demonstrated how much people want and need open space

1895, Wales. An interesting but largely unremarkable year. People were born, like the great Llanelli rugby player Albert Jenkins, and people died, like my great-great-grandmother and translator of the *Mabinogion*, Charlotte Guest. The UK's last toll gates closed in Llanfairpwllgwyngyll, and in Dinas Oleu near Barmouth a philanthropist called Fanny Talbot gave a little over five acres of land to a new organisation called the National Trust. The charity marks its 125th anniversary in 2020, a year that started out with plans of great birthday parties at Tredegar House and Bodnant Gardens and has ended with, to quote the musical Hamilton, the world turned upside down.

So much has changed in the last 125 years, but 2020 has brought some of the most significant societal challenges. For the first time in our long history, we have had to close all our properties to visitors (something two world wars failed to do) and we are facing difficult financial decisions as we respond to Covid-19.

But, as a result of everything 2020 has thrown at us, this great charity is re-imagining itself and its contribution in delivering public benefit for the people of Wales. I believe that in these strange, scary, yet possibly hopeful times the role of the National Trust in Wales is more important than ever.

Many years ago, I read a short biography of the Trust's founder, Octavia Hill. It was a life-changing read. I learned a wonderful truth about this amazing organisation that has stayed with me ever since. At its heart, the National Trust is about delivering public good.

Like that first piece of land given by Fanny Talbot in 1895, the true vision for the charity was to give access to places of beauty to everyone. Octavia Hills wrote: 'Beauty is for all, beauty is the single glimpse of green, in sunlight however dimmed, in clouds however darkened, in faces however worn.'

It is this opening up of places of beauty, both houses and countryside, to everyone, that inspired me to join the charity nearly ten years ago. While so much progress has been made, sadly 2020 has shown that those social injustices that inspired Octavia Hill to take action remain a reality, and arguably are greater than they were in 1895.

Whether it's taking a moment to notice the shapes of the clouds, listen to the birds or watch butterflies and bees – it makes a difference. Everyone needs nature

This year, our collective experience of lockdown has demonstrated how much people want and need open space. This new appreciation is renewing and reigniting the special relationship the people of Wales have with our mountains, rivers, forests and beaches. We have explored our communities and environment in a deeper way, unfamiliar to our modern way of life.

Evidence shows that everyday connections with nature have a positive impact on our mental health and well-being. Earlier this year, the National Trust launched its *Noticing Nature* report which found that 68% of adults said that spending time noticing the nature around them has made them feel happy during lockdown and more than half of respondents said they'd continue to spend time in nature when life is back to normal. Whether it's taking a moment to notice the shapes of the clouds, listen to the birds or watch butterflies and bees – it makes a difference. Everyone needs nature.

As we emerge from the pandemic and our heads turn towards the long term, there is wide support for a 'Green Recovery' and I have considered what this

Everyone should be able to experience places of beauty no matter their age or their background

Tredegar House, credit: Robin Drayton

means for us. This is a complex question and many sectors of society and the economy have a role to play to ensure that Wales truly emerges as a better place.

For me, for the Trust in Wales and, in partnership with great Welsh organisations like Natural Resources Wales, RSPB Cymru, the farming unions, our National Parks and many others, we need to come together to find new ways to sustain and enhance the Welsh landscape and the natural resources we love and to make it accessible to all.

By this I mean that absolutely everyone should be able to experience places of beauty no matter their age or their background. For some, that may only be for ten minutes of calm, for others much longer, but by making all our great Welsh places open to all, nobody should feel they are not for them.

If 1895 was an unremarkable year, 2020 will be remembered for its significance, possibly a turning point in our journey. There are three global crises facing Wales and the world in 2020, and Covid-19 is only one of them.

Black Lives Matter is a long overdue introspection of our complicated history and places. Deriving from tragedy, the movement has asked deep and complex questions about identity which are at the core of what the National Trust stands for. Living in a country where anyone does not feel welcome is simply wrong.

These conversations and actions will provoke historic social change. We, as the National Trust in Wales, will have to rethink our history and be bold in sharing these stories and getting them right. Our ambition for everyone, for ever, draws on the values of Octavia Hill and we must live up to those values now.

Yet, however terrifying Covid-19 may feel and however profound the social changes brought about by BLM, we mustn't forget the climate crisis. We are putting our planet into a metaphorical oven and turning the gas to 11. It is a global emergency and it matters that we all do our bit to fight against it.

By 2025 we aspire to be carbon neutral in Wales. We aim to make 50% of our energy from our own clean, renewable sources and reduce our total energy consumption by 15%. Projects such as the hydroelectric scheme at Hafod y Llan Farm in Snowdonia are leading the way here and we will continue to challenge what is possible.

It is clear to me that the need for the National Trust in Wales has never been greater. Through caring for so many of our green spaces we give people moments of calm in a crisis, through challenging all the stories we have been telling and being open with ourselves and the nation about the intended and unintended evils of the past, we can reframe the narrative. And, by committing to be a leader in renewable energy, tree planting and the race to carbon net zero we, in partnership with so many others, will make a difference for our lives and the lives of future generations. ▾

Justin Albert is Director for Wales of the National Trust

Aelodau Glas Cymru: Croeso i Ddosbarth 2021

Fel cwmni nid er elw, mae Dŵr Cymru yn unigryw yn y sector cyfleustodau, am fod pob gwarged yn cael ei ddefnyddio er budd cwsmeriaid. Sefydlwyd ein rhiant-gwmni, Glas Cymru, at ddibenion perchenogi, ariannu a rheoli Dŵr Cymru.

Nid oes gennym gyfranddalwyr. Rydym yn dibynnu ar Aelodau annibynnol sy'n cyflawni rôl llywodraethu allweddol o ran dwyn Bwrdd y Cyfarwyddwyr i gyfrif. Maent yn cyflawni rôl debyg i gyfranddalwyr mewn cwmniau preifat eraill, ond nid oes ganddynt fudd ariannol.

Rydym newydd benodi ein Haelodau newydd ar gyfer 2020 – gan ychwanegu at y cyfoeth o wybodaeth ac arbenigedd y mae ein 51 o Aelodau presennol eisoes yn ei gynnig. Byddant yn cyfarfod o leiaf ddwywaith y flwyddyn ac yn clywed gennym yn rheolaidd ynglŷn â'r gwaith rydym yn ei wneud, fel y gallant sicrhau bod Bwrdd y Cyfarwyddwyr yn rhedeg y cwmni fel y dylai.

Rydym bob amser yn awyddus i glywed gan bobl sydd am fod yn Aelodau – ac yn arbennig o awyddus i glywed gan bobl o bob cefndir a phrofiad, fel ein bod yn adlewyrchu'r cymunedau rydym yn eu gwasanaethu.

Rydym yn rhoi'r cyfle i fynegi diddordeb mewn bod yn Aelod yn gynharach nag erioed o'r blaen ar gyfer y flwyddyn nesaf – felly gallwn gysylltu â chi pan fyddwn yn dechrau recriwtio eto.

Os oes diddordeb, anfonwch e-bost at ein Cwnsler Cyffredinol ac Ysgrifennydd y Cwmni, Nicola Williams, yn **company.secretary@dwrcymru.com** i gael rhagor o wybodaeth.

Glas Cymru Members: Welcome to the Class of 2021

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We have no shareholders. We rely on independent Members, who fulfil a key governance role in holding our Board of Directors to account. They fulfil a similar role to shareholders in other private companies, but don't hold a financial interest.

We have just appointed our new Members for 2020 – adding to the wealth of knowledge and expertise we already benefit from with our current 51 Members. They will meet at least twice a year and hear from us regularly about the work we do, so they can make sure our Board of Directors are running the company as they should.

We are always looking to hear from people who want to serve as Members – and particularly keen to hear from people from all backgrounds and experiences, so we reflect all the communities we serve.

We are opening up expressions of interest for next year's intake earlier than ever – so we can get in touch when we start recruiting again.

If you are interested, drop an email to our General Counsel and Company Secretary, Nicola Williams, on **company.secretary@dwrcymru.com** to find out more.

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What future for research and innovation?

Adam Fletcher *explains how the British Heart Foundation is responding to the coronavirus pandemic and the challenges ahead for medical research in Wales*

There is no doubt that life has changed for many people since March of this year. For most of us the impact on our lives has been profound. When the coronavirus pandemic hit the country, the British Heart Foundation (BHF) was faced with unprecedented challenges. First, there was a surge in demand for our information and support service. For example, the BHF's Heart Helpline recorded a 400% increase in calls in mid-March. Then the national lockdown led to the closure of all our shops and stores and the cancellation of fundraising events across Wales and the rest of the UK. This meant the ways in which we raise money to fund research came to a sudden standstill – this has had a huge impact on us as an organisation.

Our income this year has been devastated, and this inevitably has a knock-on effect on the amount of medical research we can now fund. We estimate that our budget for investing in new projects will halve this year from around £100 million to around £50 million – a sharp drop which could take years to recover to previous levels. Similar challenges are being faced by other medical research charities across the country.

As the biggest independent funder of research into heart and circulatory diseases in the UK, our priority is to save and improve lives and so we're also playing our part in the global fight against this pandemic.

Facing the challenges of Covid-19

What has not changed, however, is our commitment to protect our life-saving work and support the 340,000 people living with heart and circulatory diseases in Wales. BHF teams have been working tirelessly throughout the pandemic, providing vital information through our Heart Helpline, staffed by experienced cardiac nurses, and the coronavirus pages on our website. Prioritising our information and support services for patients and their families meant we were there for people who needed us when Covid-19 and the national lockdown hit the country. Now we have an equally daunting challenge because of the financial impact of the pandemic and the pressures on research funding growing at the same time. While helping people today, we need to continue to support our researchers to find the treatments and cures of the future.

The BHF currently supports a research portfolio of around £450m across UK universities, directly funding the salaries of more than 1,700 researchers

This crisis now threatens the future of research in the UK. The BHF currently supports a research portfolio of around £450 million across UK universities, directly funding the salaries of more than 1,700 researchers and supporting the research of many others. If this funding is reduced, then it will have a profound effect on universities and research institutions across the UK, and ultimately risks slowing that crucial pipeline of research advances that in time will save lives across the world.

We have made great progress in the sixty years since the BHF was formed. The number of people dying from heart and circulatory disease has fallen by half in Wales and the UK. It would be a tragedy if we allowed the coronavirus pandemic to threaten years of hard-fought progress in finding treatments and cures for some of the world's biggest killers. We owe it to future generations to keep funding research to find the next breakthroughs.

During this challenging time, we have continued to fund research into all heart and circulatory diseases – diseases which sadly still cause more than one in four deaths in Wales, around 9,600 deaths each year: an average of twenty-six people each day. We need to fund new research into earlier diagnosis, more effective treatments, better outcomes and faster recovery.

Research investment

Medical research charities are a vital part of the UK's research ecosystem contributing to major scientific advances and improvement in patient care, but the Covid-19 pandemic threatens this contribution. The BHF is currently funding £3 million of research at Welsh universities to identify new ways of detecting, treating, and curing heart and circulatory diseases.

iwa New Voices

This article is the third in a series of three for *the welsh agenda*, promoting the work of the British Heart Foundation. BHF Cymru are working in partnership with the IWA to support a 'New Voices' fund, which enables freelance writers on low incomes and from marginalised backgrounds to contribute to public debate through *the welsh agenda*, both in print and online.

To protect critical medical research and innovation in the UK over the next three to four years, medical research charities need co-investment from government. The BHF, along with the Association of Medical Research Charities and organisations including Cancer Research UK and Parkinson's UK, is urging the UK Government to urgently establish a Life Sciences-Charity Partnership Fund, where the Government matches charity investment, so life-saving research is protected through this toughest of times.

Government support to bridge the gap in charity funding will be vital to safeguard the UK's position as a world leader in life sciences. There are several ways that charity funded research contributes to Wales' vibrant life sciences industry, including by:

- Investing in early stage research and de-risking research areas to attract future investment from industry. This means charities uncover fundamental discoveries about basic biology, which reveal new lines of investigation for development of diagnostics and treatments by the rest of the sector.
- Involving patient and health professional communities in research, securing insights into their needs and experiences and ensuring that investments have the best chance of being implemented and improving patients' lives.
- Investing in unique infrastructure and research centres. This secures a pipeline of young scientists in UK research and brings together multidisciplinary teams.

Government support to bridge the gap in charity funding will be vital to safeguard the UK's position as a world leader in life sciences

There's work to be done

As we play our part in fighting coronavirus and its impact on those affected by heart and circulatory diseases, there is no denying the enormity of the situation we find ourselves in. Heart and circulatory diseases will continue to tear families apart beyond this pandemic. But with the public's continued donations and support, we remain determined to reduce the pain and suffering these diseases cause.

We want to ensure a vital pipeline of funding is maintained to secure the future of the next generation of researchers looking to find scientific breakthroughs which will change the lives of people with heart and circulatory diseases. While trying to protect our financial future, we've committed to supporting our current research programmes through to completion. We are also doing all we can to continue to fund new studies that have the potential to save and improve more lives.

We are only able to do this thanks to the public's unwavering support. But we recognise we're going to need this support more than ever if we are to keep up the pace of progress.

Over the last sixty years, our supporters have helped advance the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of many heart and circulatory diseases, helping save and improve thousands of lives. Our priority is to ensure this pandemic doesn't change that.

Adam Fletcher is Head of British Heart Foundation (BHF) Cymru

If your organisation is interested in working with the IWA to support this initiative, please contact dylan@iwa.org.uk

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Marxism, literature and other keywords

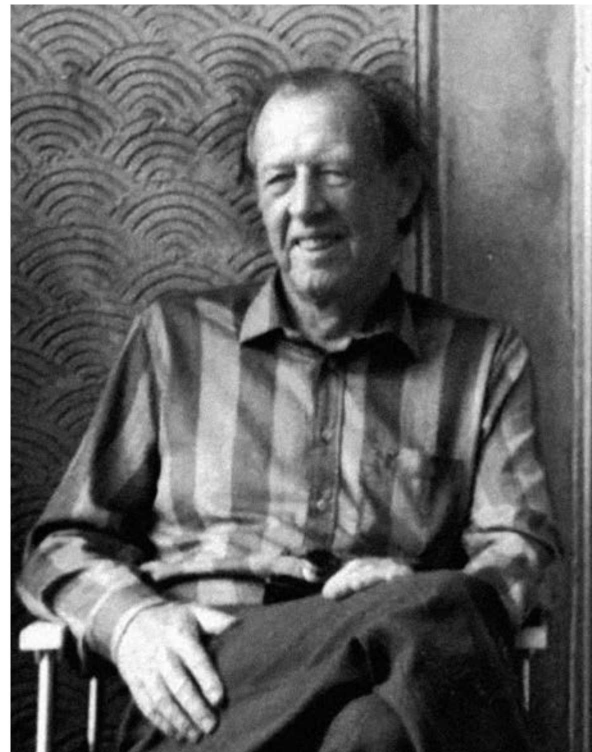
Lleucu Siencyn *recalls discovering Raymond Williams at 19, and introduces the steps being taken to commemorate his centenary through the legacy of his work*

I was first introduced to Raymond Williams at university by my South African-born friend. He gave me a copy of *Marxism and Literature* with a raised eyebrow, as I had never heard of Williams. 'And you're Welsh?' he said, surprised.

Back then my knowledge of literary theory and ability to analyse literature was more or less limited to FR Leavis, York Notes and a good deal of guesswork. I thought literature – and the process of reading – was all about the creative act. I could look at text, listen to words, sense images, and let them all float fairly aimlessly in my mind.

I didn't think, until I read Raymond Williams, that there was a political and historical process to the act of reading and understanding text. That it wasn't all down to my own imagination after all, that I wasn't in fact in charge of all my own thoughts and analytical processes. Raymond Williams challenged me to see that most of this had been forming over the *longue durée*, and my response to the written word had already been greatly determined by my own class, gender, background, location, culture and, of course, even language. Taking on Raymond Williams was a contest, and, I admit, I struggled.

The word 'Marxism' was the first hurdle ('literature' was to be the second). In the early nineties, amongst my generation, Marxism was a hazy political concept. It was selling the Morning Star outside Woolworths, having a Che poster and a nodding acknowledgement to Rick from the Young Ones. After reading Williams' book, I began to see that Marxism is a process of perpetually challenging ideas, forms and values. It teaches you to question what is around you, what happened before you and why. For me, it became a completely new mechanism for perceiving the world and a toolkit for taking things apart. I also found that Raymond Williams was a firm critic of 'old-school' Marxism and found much of the previous analysis monolithic. The purpose of *Marxism and Literature* was to identify new and radical approaches for understanding.



Then, of course, the word 'literature' itself. Again, I thought this was a universally recognised, fixed and linear term which I understood to be poetry, novels, and drama. If Shakespeare, Waldo Williams, George Eliot and John Donne were involved, then it was literature, and surely it meant more or less the same thing to everyone, everywhere. The practice of understanding literature – the 'theory' – was fairly straightforward so long as you knew your sonnet from your limerick and your *wers rydd* from your *cynghanedd*, and that you had a reasonable amount of imagination. Reading Raymond Williams' chapters on Cultural and Literary Theories, and coming across concepts such as base and superstructure, and dominant, residual, and emergent pretty much blew the bloody doors off my naive ideas of 'literature'.

Even though the doors had been blown off, I still struggled. At the beginning I felt frustrated that I didn't understand the words, the terminology, or the sentences. It was like reading another language, constantly referring to dictionaries and rereading whole paragraphs to check the meaning. The intellectual challenges of reading Raymond Williams were often daunting. But I thought to myself, I've been reading and enjoying Shakespeare for years and I didn't care that huge chunks of the Bard were also a mystery. So I did the same for Raymond Williams, and allowed myself to be immersed by his ideas.

At the beginning I felt frustrated that I didn't understand the words, the terminology, or the sentences. It was like reading another language, constantly referring to dictionaries and rereading whole paragraphs to check the meaning. The intellectual challenges of reading Raymond Williams were often daunting

At the time I wasn't sure if this plan worked, but something must have stuck, because I kept going back to him year after year. I couldn't help thinking about 'literature', 'culture' and 'language' differently, and found myself internally challenging ideas and notions which were presented as 'facts' or 'fixed'. I realised that my implicit judgements on literary quality, linguistic ability and cultural worth were founded on class values and actually contradicted my deeper admiration for a wide range of forms of cultural expression such as manga, hip-hop and comedy. After a while I discovered more of Raymond Williams' work, including the seminal – and deeply relevant today – book on Keywords.

As Raymond Williams' centenary approaches, a number of cultural organisations, collectives, activists and academics have come together to discuss how we could collectively mark the occasion. Rather than an overtly biographical commemoration, there is agreement that we will focus on the legacy of his work and what this might mean in a contemporary Wales.

His ideas – from collectivism, elitism, technology, to culture – provide the ideal foundation for a timely national conversation on cultural rights, democracy and the Wales we want for our future generations. Young people in Wales and beyond are actively engaged in difficult political discussions, and next year's centenary is an opportunity for us all to re-engage with Raymond Williams' progressive and radical thinking.

The raft of challenges facing young people, particularly those with lived experiences of racism and oppression, has created a generation of lively and assertive voices who are challenging the previously accepted 'realities' of the older generation. The awareness that many young people have of issues relating to intersectionality, trans rights, white privilege, and the legacies of colonialism and slavery has seen the development of new keywords and approaches to activism.

A collective and national conversation on the legacy of Raymond Williams will help pass on these ideas to a wider audience, and deploy the tools of questioning and analysing to those whose voices and ideas we all need to hear right now. As Raymond Williams said: 'to be truly radical is to make hope possible rather than despair convincing.'

Lleucu Siencyn is CEO of Literature Wales

Redefining Resilience in Wales' Literary Scene

Sadia Pineda Hameed *and* **Beau W Beakhouse** *analyse the relationship between the conditions of artistic production in Wales and how it is shaping, and being shaped by, the work of young creatives*

For a long time, investment in the arts in Wales has almost exclusively been dedicated to sustaining existing organisations and institutions. It is this obsession with resilience, regardless of whether or not an institution has proven to be harmful, that is part of a wider systemic logic seeking to exclude and silence possible alternatives. But establishment is contra fluidity for the contemporary literary movement, made up of diverse and intersectional writers that also exist within the wider arts as artists, filmmakers, performers, activists and community organisers. And this new generation of writers in Wales refuses to inherit the exclusionary structures that currently exist. If the previous generation of Wales' literature scene is defined by an attitude of resilience, then the new generation would be defined by their resistance and their will to change.

The reality is that the new generation demands change out of necessity, because it is not possible to exist in the Welsh literary scene today as a 'marginalised' person without experiencing immovable barriers. The environment is typified by the overused phrase 'that's just the way things are', wherein the previous generation are still the gatekeepers of the publishing sector. Resistance then becomes a form of protection against an industry that repeatedly harms diverse voices (or any that pose a threat to the current establishment) with no consequence. It becomes safer to forgo ambitions of being published in Wales than to chance working with one of its literary institutions following a recent history of problematic working relationships, extractive consultation processes and empty commitments to diversity in literature. There is an intrinsic refusal to devolve any meaningful power from the institutions, and opportunities and resources necessary for autonomy are denied to grassroots initiatives that work and serve marginalised voices cooperatively and equitably; this is despite the small yet more autonomous positionality of Wales being ideal ground for radical change.

This refusal to devolve power manifests in poor attempts to create accessible publishing and commission opportunities, mostly because these institutions are not prepared to platform people who criticise the system they are founded on and benefit from, or that write in ways alternative to it. The greatest fear to an institution, wherein certain people benefit off of the hierarchical structures, is a call for dismantling and the sharing of resources; and so the sector's imagination limits itself to reform. Some ring-fenced opportunities for diverse writers and performers are being created; however, when they come from the white-led literary institutions of Wales, a false sense of precarity is created. Whether the literature sector of Wales is conscious of it or not,

Diverse writers and performers are treated not on the basis of their creation but on their identity and are often asked to address social and logistical issues inside the organisation that no other creative would ever be asked to address

this non-committal model fosters distrust from diverse writers and performers, whilst simultaneously leaving them in competition with one another.

Within this model is a knowing lack of equity. Diverse writers and performers are treated not on the basis of their creation but on their identity and are often asked to address social and logistical issues inside the organisation that no other creative would ever be asked to address. With no room for the radical imagination, the sector must be seen to prioritise a public-facing programme and commission scheme that *looks* like it is investing in diversity. Rather than mobilising budgets to prioritise equal opportunities, free consultation and emotional labour from an unrepresentative number of diverse creatives will suffice in filling diversity quotas to secure the next period's funding. Diverse writers and audiences are left in a precarious position within a sector that is not built to serve but to systematically exploit them in order to stay funded – and therefore resilient. Wales has no funded and well-resourced alternatives to the limited traditional publishing routes consisting of the three major English-language publishers. It comes as no surprise that writers are seeking their first publication opportunities with BME-led, disabled-led and queer-led small publishers in England and elsewhere. And for Welsh-language writers who also face systemic exclusion within the Welsh scene, they may be trapped in a double-bind.

Read more about the challenges faced by young creatives in Wales and what needs to change in the full version of this essay coming soon to the welsh agenda *online.*

Beau W Beakhouse and **Sadia Pineda Hameed** are writers and artists living in Cardiff. They are co-founders of LUMIN, a small press, curatorial collective and radio programme for experimental, radical and personal literature and art. They have spoken about contemporary publishing and multidisciplinary archiving at Bangor University, Cardiff University and Gentle/Radical and curated the WARP Library Dialogue

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Aiden Lang, WNO General Director.
Credit: Gareth Iwan Jones

Opera
in the time of pandemic

Merlin Gable *talks to the new General Director of Welsh National Opera,* **Aidan Lang**, *and finds him excited at the potential for reexamining the role of performing arts in difficult times*

There are probably few things further from the tender majesty that opera can conjure – bodies and voices manifesting stories and emotions, bolstered by the clout of a large orchestra – than a video call on Microsoft Teams. And yet, in these times, and as with so many encounters nowadays, meeting Aidan Lang, the general director of the Welsh National Opera, was replaced with this ghost of the real thing.

Very quickly though this doesn't feel like a limitation. Even through a screen, Lang is energetic and engaged – conspiratorial even at times. Nobody though, I think, expects their first major crisis after taking the helm of a national organisation to be a global pandemic. Certainly Lang is conscious of this. Early in the conversation we hit upon the elephant in the room: *how* exactly, does one offer anything approaching WNO's normal output during lockdown? 'We don't have the stock of recorded performances [that other companies do]', Lang remarks, 'and, honestly … [although] there's a sort of sympathy and appreciation for the efforts for all the digital stuff coming out… the lack of that liveness has caused people to understand that it's the liveness which is the USP of what we do'.

Opera is not an art form known for its brevity, which makes its transfer to the virtual world yet more challenging. 'It actually behoves us not to put on *Parsifal* and expect people to sit in their Zoom chairs for five hours but actually do something which is very manageable, very deft, and makes its mark that way rather than attempting to recreate a full length opera… if we were to capture something I think we would send it out in ten minute chunks like it's a soap opera. To deal to the media, to the delivery mechanism – YouTube or whatever – that people would be experiencing it on. So it's forcing us to think differently.'

Lang took over the lead role in WNO from the double act of David Pountney and Leo Thomson just over a year ago. Pountney's artistic premiership, lasting nearly ten years, was a period of significant growth and multiple successes for the company. For many, although

WNO Brundibar Rehearsal, WNO Youth Opera. Credit: Kirsten McTernan

WNO Digital Experience, A Vixen's Tale. Credit Sioned Birchall

Long gone is the idea that we… turn people [into] lifelong Mozart fans

by no means all, his departure was considered a serious loss. A tough act to follow, perhaps, but by no means is Lang's back catalogue the weaker: a staff director at WNO in the 1980s, his most recent role as general director of Seattle Opera saw significant increases in ticket sales amongst young Seattleites – and he has previous experience leading a national company, as general director of New Zealand Opera, before that.

The coronavirus pandemic has forced almost everyone to think differently but perhaps the industry most challenged is performing arts which, as Lang observed throughout our conversation, is characterised by lots of people close together – both audience and performers – long preparation times and often a complex, delicate income stream comprising ticket sales, grant income, and donations.

Opinions expressed on the Covid-19 crisis tend to fall into one of two camps. There are those who wish for everything, as soon as safely possible, to return to normal: many venues, and particularly the West End, who were served very well by the performing arts world of six months ago, surely must number amongst these. For others, coronavirus has made apparent the longstanding structural issues in the sector and the difficulties grassroots and less profitable art forms have long experienced. Is this, I ask him, a moment for WNO to think differently under new leadership?

'The simple answer is firmly the latter… and that's probably why I got the job! We've just finished crafting a very different mission statement built on the thought … [that] art is a fusion of emotion and thought. Opera has emotion in spades, but if it doesn't have a parallel level of idea and thought it is just the old cliché of large Italian gentlemen sweating profusely and bawling. But actually when it does, that's when it's potent. You hear the statement that art can transform lives and you go *yeah, it sounds great, but how?* and actually I think it's very simple if you understand that the opera experience isn't the doing it, the opera experience is actually that meeting, that Michelangelo charge between the audience receiving and the performance giving. Somewhere in the middle, in the space between the stage and the audience or the classroom – wherever it's happening – that's the moment of connection.'

Opera is a long game, with productions often commissioned years in advance, and it would normally take several years before Lang's leadership would begin to show in WNO's programming choices. But of course, these are not normal times. The pandemic has shuttered the Wales Millennium Centre, WNO's home theatre, and all its other normal touring venues. Two seasons have been cancelled entirely, and Spring 2021 must surely be in the balance.

WNO Digital Experience, A Vixen's Tale. Credit Sioned Birchall

Who are performing arts organisations working for? Who is their audience and what is their community? How do these organisations work and who is included or excluded?

WNO Family Concert 2016. Credit: Kirsten McTernan

WNO North Wales Youth Opera. Credit: Mandy Jones

This presents an opportunity, Lang thinks, to bring together the main scale operatic work WNO is largely known for and its youth and community engagement work. It's all too easy, Aidan agrees, to do 'shallow' engagement work, where no lasting relationship with a community is built. The aim instead, as he describes, is to structure engagement activities firmly 'around productions and in that way I think you begin to lift the discussion to being beyond just the sort of intellectual discussion about the content, but actually open it up to far more people. And that is the way in time an arts organisation can really embed itself.'

But for WNO, Europe's largest touring opera company, this is not so simple a task. The company, based in Cardiff Bay, tours to eight locations across Wales and England. WNO is Butetown's opera company, Cardiff's opera company, Wales' opera company, and the opera company of all its touring locations. The company's 'hub' structure aims to address this by focusing on a continuous engaged programme of activity in Cardiff, north Wales, Birmingham and now Plymouth. 'At least we can begin that work as well to find those connections. But I think that is the way forward: to programme to a fusion of thoughtful work but also supplement that with a whole range of other work which is equally valid and for the people who attend that, that is their experience of WNO. Long gone is the idea that we do that in order to turn people to become lifelong Mozart fans. It's not the point at all.'

I bring into the picture the second elephant in the room. At the time Lang and I spoke, the USA and the UK were being rocked by rolling protests under the banner of the Black Lives Matter movement. Cardiff saw its largest demonstration in years. Although the protests have largely subsided, they have placed issues of representation, staff diversity and precarity in the performing arts industry front and centre, and many are suddenly posing much more fundamental questions too. Who are performing arts organisations working for? Who is their audience and what is their community? How do these organisations work and who is included or excluded?

Lang is certainly conscious of these issues, and of opera's long and chequered history with regard to both race and class. To him, it's an issue that the sort of thoughtful, thought-provoking programming he described above may help address. 'That's exactly the sort of stuff we were doing in Seattle. It wasn't just a performance. Take *Madame Butterfly*, which certainly in America now is a difficult piece. We went to the Japanese–American community – on the west coast, of course, there is a very large Japanese community – and opened up the forum to the experience of Asian performers. We didn't moderate; we weren't even on the platform. We gave a platform to that community to speak and we just listened and won huge respect… And in that way I think you begin to lift it beyond the aesthetic or intellectual discussion about the content but actually open it up to far more people and that is the way that in time an arts organisation can really embed itself within a community.' All this, Lang asserts, can still be achieved in the case of WNO with its many different communities. It can, he thinks, also begin to shift the notoriously older demographic of opera audiences: '[in Seattle] the word went around that we were an organisation with a social conscience rather than just chucking out productions of Wagner… It was much more about an awareness that the company wanted to be part of the dialogue within the city, rather than being slightly aloof from it.'

Aiden Lang. Credit: Gareth Iwan Jones

Lang's main focus here is on diversity as a question of audience, programme and image, but he explains to me that WNO also has a diversity action group in place before he arrived which aims to raise diversity and access issues in the organisation. The company's senior management team and board of directors is largely white, however, in common with many other arts organisations. I observe that *Migrations*, its upcoming new opera by Will Todd 'exploring the theme of migration' also has a white senior creative team, with 'writers from diverse backgrounds' brought in to contribute to specific stories in the narrative. I ask Lang if WNO's responsibilities go further here, not just to presenting diverse stories but also working to bring people from different backgrounds further up its management structure and into more senior roles in its creative teams.

'I just add a rider that the skill level to put on a… when you see *Migrations* you'll realise what a large scale work it is. And actually you don't entrust that to someone who has never done an opera before. But we've set up – and we've got funding for it – a programme where we bring on some young diverse directors… to work with them, to help them find a voice through the medium of opera. And again, not just drop them, but to develop a team of directors who we can work with over time in order to bring them up to the level where they have the nerve to put on a large opera. And it's important to remember there is a skill level to do that, in order to have the tools to bring across what you want to say… It's important to understand from a professional point of view that if you want to make a statement you want to make sure you have people who technically know how to make clear what they want to say. So really our job is to make sure we consciously bring on a generation of directors. And it doesn't take long; it's not like being a singer… you can learn a hell of a lot over one production if you're smart. Providing those entry points is, I think, the first step we have to undertake.'

Looking now towards the coming autumn and winter we have at once a degree of certainty regarding what *won't* be possible – packed theatres and business-as-usual touring. Yet although the futures of portfolio organisations like Welsh National Opera have been assured by the Arts Council of Wales, it remains a time of great uncertainty in the arts. We do not know when and how performances will return, nor what they will look like once they do. Speaking to Aidan Lang it also became clear there are opportunities and some light in the darkness for a different sort of art to come out of this time. 'We would be very foolish not to use this moment to re-examine ourselves – and actually we are doing it.'

Merlin Gable is Culture Editor of *the welsh agenda*

Just So You Know

eds. Hanan Issa, Durre Shahwar and Özgür Uyanik
Parthian, 2020

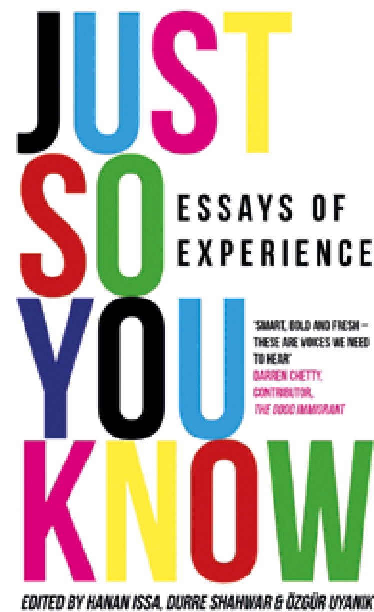
Shaheen Sutton

Just so you know, this book got under my skin, eliciting a spectrum of emotions

It is not often I pick up a Welsh publication and find a glimpse of myself: and I see shards reflecting my life in most, if not all, the sixteen narratives that make up *Just So You Know*. Throughout the text feelings resonate, be it in experiences sometimes very different from my own. Just so you know, this book got under my skin, eliciting a spectrum of emotions from me throughout my reading.

This collection presents as a mosaic of marginalized yet dynamic and courageous fresh voices. These are articulations of personal experience, and covering topics from Welsh language, bilingualism and language politics, visible and invisible disability, cultural heritage, and to issues of self-identity around the themes of 'race', religion and im/migrant experiences.

These are topics too often ignored, rarely spoken about in the open; or when they are, often as an equality, diversity and inclusion consideration, rather than part of the mainstream normative narratives. This constant 'othering' is hindering and damaging our understanding of each other, exacerbating our lack of humanity (towards each other). The narratives are exemplified by the times we are in.



Just So You Know is not filtered to make the reader comfortable, but personified – with visceral vulnerability, brutal and sincere honesty and sharp wit to provoke reaction and invoke reflection and consideration around how we approach the inclusion of some and exclusion of 'others'. These narratives will make you sit upright with discomfort and take notice of some uncomfortable truths.

The beauty of this book also is that you can start from anywhere (like I did) as each contributor has their own subjective take on their experience.

We learn about Dafydd Reeves' experiences of Bipolar Disorder. This is reimagined through the character Rhwngdaubegwm, meaning two polarities, 'a bard [who] also suffered from changes of mood, from the most soaring euphoria to the most miserable pits of depression'. Reeves provides unique insight on how the medium of fairytale, folklore, mythology and religion can shed light on mental health from the perspective of the person experiencing Bipolar Disorder in the moment. Reeves' work is a provocation to those gazing in on that moment – so that we can learn to show compassion.

Josh Weeks comes to a realization that he must take ownership of his OCD and begins writing letters to 'Dear O' as a way of acknowledging and embracing an intrinsic part of him. Weeks also shares the analogy of the snail and the stone as a way of explaining mental disorder to others 'the amygdala is far too overactive… every time you feel danger or anxiety you crawl back into your comfort zone' – again giving the reader some insight.

Kate Cleaver, as a mixed race person, opens up about her autism, dyspraxia and dyslexia and the numerous challenges she has encountered. This is depicted through her experiences of riding a trike. Paralympic medalist and member of Team GB, Ricky Stevenson, who lives with cerebral palsy, recognises the quiet satisfaction of being in a unique position as a marginalised person practicing an overlooked sport: boccia, but this comes at a cost.

No matter what part of the world we hail from, the romanticised imagery of the woman of the water is familiar to us all (think Ophelia, or the Lady of the Lake, or of 'mermaids, sirens and selkies'). Kandace Siobhan Walker's mythical narrative on this theme takes a sharp turn as she unravels her own reality of domestic abuse: 'something about me had the look of a lady of the water,' she opines. This melodic essay entwines Welsh and Kenyan folklore – it will captivate your heart and leave you utterly breathless.

The theme of water continues as Grug Muse cleverly 'muses' on the fact that the language of 'water is changeable'. Our relationship to water depends on where we are with it – whether 'drinking from it, sailing on it or even drowning in it,' or as 'ice', but she also relates it back to her own experience of 'swimming' between languages. Muse beautifully and effortlessly also introduces us to the metaphor of 'drowning' and how it is used in the Welsh language with the most powerful example in Wales of the drowned Welsh village that hauntingly reveals itself and reconnects its significance to the recent upsurge in debate around Cofiwch Dryweryn.

The theme of being between languages continues. Isabel Adonis recollects whilst she was growing up that there was no distinction between speaking English or Welsh. It was just a blend of 'language without real borders' but her relationship to bilingualism changed upon entering academia and the division between Welsh speakers and the others became apparent and unnecessary. Adonis also observes how 'children [are] inadvertently being taught how to be nationalist to identify with being Welsh', thus creating a series of others – the English and the ethnic minorities. This process exacerbates racial bias and tensions - un/knowingly, un/consciously, but also unnecessarily – which is a huge concern in our current climate of them and us.

Bethan Jones-Arthur semi comically shares an essay about coming out in a pub in the valleys. She delivers with great humour, but also tentatively, cautiously and with trepidation. Intoxication - drunken or otherwise - can either make people bold and brave, or vulnerable and powerless. No matter what your desired outcome, your guard is down ready for acceptance or rejection: the reader cannot help share in the pride and the elation.

Dylan Huw offers deep reflections on queer history. He explores how a gay person has privilege to be free as others in the past did not, but that many still do not have that freedom continues to agitate and perturb him. He sees 'faces of white middle class gay men in the media and prestigious public life all the time… I am no more minoritised than a straight person who otherwise shares my demographic profile'. I've not heard anyone recognise this privilege of freedom contrasted to those who are still not free so clearly. It is powerful to read.

Privilege is also echoed in Derwen Morfayel's essay. Morfayel observes that white Europeans experiences [in Wales] for the most part have been positive, at least until the EU Referendum. 'The difference is that I, Invisible Immigrant, can choose,' she states. By immigrant 'they always mean another foreigner, one who dresses differently or has darker skin, a heavy accent… There is a hierarchy of nationalities when it comes to foreigners, where certain nationalities are more tolerable'. The privilege of invisibility, of whiteness, Morfayel demonstrates, affords you insight into the bigoted and conscious biased minds and prejudiced attitudes of those who say 'we don't mean you'. The notion of invisibility ties nicely to a long literature of black identity.

Taylor Edmonds focuses on the intersections of her identity between her sexuality and being a person of mixed heritage. She reflects on a pivotal moment in her life when she had to tick an ethnic monitoring form at school to herald her diversity and select a box. She realised on appearance she was 'mostly white, but not completely'. Edmonds also divulges with sincerity on benefitting from 'white

passing' privilege afforded to by her light skin in a way some members of her family or other black and non-black people of colour are not. She has found her voice through her writing and performing poetry as a way to dissect and interrogate the marginalisation of LGBTQ+ people of colour.

Nasia Sarwar-Skuse recollects what home means to her. Hers is a common diasporic sentiment. She is forced to reflect on compartmentalised childhood memories, and on experiences of racism and prejudice from the Thatcher years that are resurfacing once again within post Brexit Britain. As a child she 'didn't have the language then to tell them that different was not wrong', but now finds a voice through her writing. She examines how precarious a notion citizenship is for im/migrants, especially for Black and non-black people of colour. As the Windrush generation are finding out, the spectre of the revoking of citizenship reminds you still never quite belong.

Identity is the key theme of the remaining works. I felt the knot in my stomach twist as I wrongly preempted the direction of Iraqi Welsh writer Ruqaya Izzidien's narrative. I was truly blown away, and though it did not echo what I was expecting, it resonated. The 'projection' people have of you in your childhood and the continuous imposition of that stereotype can shape, impede and render your development, your direction, your dreams and potential. She writes 'I mourn who I could have been had my identity not been forced upon me, what would I have done with

I felt the knot in my stomach twist as I wrongly preempted the direction of Iraqi Welsh writer Ruqaya Izzidien's narrative

that freedom to choose'. Indeed, what has Wales lost out on?

In Ranjit Saimbi's heartfelt examination of Sikh culture, religion and identity politics all collide. 'What if, when you explain something to me, I still disagree?' Saimbi ponders: 'What if to me, it feels like I am becoming a lie'. Saimbi is caught between two different worlds, an exile from where those you love are, but from where you don't quite want to belong. This resonated with me profoundly.

Sarah Younan, born in Germany, of mixed European and Middle Eastern heritage, recounts her upbringing in Kenya where she was viewed as *mzungu* (Swahili word for white person). However, she comes to the realisation whilst at a German School in Nairobi that she wasn't quite White either. In learning how to navigate the complexity of her identity and sense of belonging, Younan garners valuable and astute insight into the residual effects of post colonialism. This lingers and is demonstrated, for example, in the actions of tourists, or in those who purport to immerse themselves into 'African culture'. Younan's narrative certainly makes for interesting reading around the concept of 'white saviourism'.

Finally, Özgür Uyanik is a Turkish writer based in Wales. Uyanik speculates on his early gravitation towards Turkish literature written by women. He examines his relationship with his father posthumously and his reconnection to wider Turkish literature. As a writer he highlights his vehement refusal to pander to the expectations of publishers in becoming tokenised as 'the other' simply in order to get publication like numerous Black Asian and minority ethnic people before him. He refuses to be a diversity quota. He is not criticising the writers who pursue this route, but the publishers who dilute authentic artistic and creative expression for white mass consumption. He refuses to become ornamental, occidental and incidental.

Just So You Know - of which Özgür Uyanik is one of three co-editors - is an emblematic book that has unearthed uncut gems. It is time for publishers to platform and amplify authentic voices that have always been here: or should I say 'hear' in case you were just not listening…

Just So You Know is compelling reading for those with a genuine interest towards building a truly inclusive Wales. ▾

Shaheen Sutton is a community activist with 20 years' grassroots experience working mostly in the voluntary sector, including health, heritage, advocacy, employment and law. She has published two pieces to acknowledge landmark events in Welsh history: the 180th Chartist Anniversary and Black Chartism, and the 1919 Race Riots

The Estate Agent's Daughter

Rhian Edwards
Seren, 2020

Rhian Elizabeth

A couple of years ago, around the time my debut novel came out, I received an online message from a stranger. They had written to tell me how much they had enjoyed my book.

I was chuffed. It's always nice to get a message from someone telling you that they appreciate your work. I was positively basking in the glory on my way to Asda, skipping down the terraced streets of the Rhondda which now, despite the grey drizzle and the chewing gum dotted on the pavements, shone golden and clean. I was feeling wonderful. Revered. Admired. Famous. A legend. Fans all over the place, me.

By the time I'd got back with my shopping and checked my phone, there was another message waiting for me in my inbox. It was the stranger again. Clearly one message was not enough for her to convey my brilliance – she'd needed to add more! But this message contained no more praise, only an apology. The stranger was sorry… she had meant to message Rhian *Edwards*. The book the stranger had enjoyed was *Clueless Dogs, Edwards'* prize winning debut poetry collection, not the recent novel by me, Rhian *Elizabeth*. A mix up of surnames. How amusing! Easily done!

I had never truly known the meaning of 'kick in the tits' until that moment.

And from that moment I have harboured a deep resentment and hatred towards Rhian Edwards. But I will try not to let this bitterness influence my review of her latest collection, *The Estate Agent's Daughter*.

I must say, in all seriousness, that I have been looking forward to this book. Edwards' previous *Clueless Dogs* deserved all the awards it got. And all the messages of praise and admiration sent to correct and incorrect Rhians and all their inboxes. It also has to be admitted that *The Estate Agent's Daughter* has been worth the wait. From the off the title poem has you hooked. Edwards describes herself as a house 'on the market', 'semi detached' with 'all mod cons' and 'juliet balcony in state of disrepair', a witty spin on her return to the family business as well as her Dad's desire to marry her off.

While *Clueless Dogs* took you along on the ride through childhood and into adolescence,

this collection sucks you into the epicentre of the hurricane that is a failed first marriage but also, from that, the birth of a much loved child and then the quest for a new relationship. In 'The Larsen Trap (Four for a Boy)' the trapped and caught bird, tricked by the romanticised stranger from another country, perfectly and beautifully tells that textbook story of the allure of the foreigner, that familiar lust and desire and excitement for the 'other'. And then, later, the reality of the cage. All the bird poems here are beautiful and lyrical.

Edwards has a gift for the confessional. 'Argos Wedding' is a particular sad and funny highlight. A broken marriage is really shit but Edwards comes out of it the other end, wiser and funnier, it seems, and with a shit load of really good poems, as well as a child. The most enjoyable poems in this collection, for me, are the ones that chronicle the whole date experience. The good, the bad and the disgustingly ugly. I found myself laughing and cringing and shaking my head and smiling and wishing and hurting and longing. These poems are always close to the bone and honest, tender and self-depreciating.

He is the kind of man who brings
two mugs of tea to bed in the morning,
both of which are for himself.

It's easy to see yourself and your own experiences in these words. Edwards has a talent for hitting the nail on the head when it comes to portraying the world of love and dating and the successes and

I found myself laughing and cringing and shaking my head and smiling and wishing and hurting and longing. These poems are always close to the bone and honest, tender and self-depreciating

failures and absolute horrors and delights you come across along the messy way.

Will I get used to your flung shoes
tripping over one another?
Your books
bogarting every surface,
your clothing
in molehills, nothing (ever)
returned to the fridge?

Another poem, 'Circling', about an AWOL lover, perfectly describes the frantic anxiety that comes with being ignored and ultimately, on reflection, the hilarity, and the again head shaking patheticness, it brings out in you. I could've written it, albeit not so expertly, myself.

But perhaps the greatest, truest love of Edwards' life is her hometown. Bridgend is her soulmate and her relationship with it, explored in these poems, is the most important and complex relationship of them all. She sees its flaws and its many problems, but she can't help but love it all the same.

The sky is quick to bag the role
of the once woven screen
the virgin skin to the twitching
tattoo of Pen Y Bon tar Ogwr
a foolhardy town unreeling itself

Edwards writes about the locals, family members, work colleagues and people watched through windows and along streets. Her ability to observe and capture the mundane and turn it into often wry and witty, sharp and precise poetry, is this collection's main strength.

Fragments of his dinner
swim like plankton
in his glass of Malbec

Man, this is a really good book.

Just a final note though to anyone who may be reading this. Next time you want to compliment her on one of her books, please make sure you email the correct Rhian. I don't think I could get over the disappointment, the hurt and embarrassment and rejection, again. Thank you. ▾

Rhian Elizabeth is is the author of *Six Pounds Eight Ounces* and *the last polar bear on earth*. She is a Hay Festival Writer at Work and Coracle International Resident in Tranas, Sweden

The Crossing

Dai Smith
Parthian, 2019

Rachel Trezise

New York based documentary photographer Billy Maddox is back in south Wales after a twenty-two year hiatus following a recondite phone call from Haf, who may or may not be his daughter. Bran, Maddox's ex, refuses to reveal the identity of the girl's father, (it could be Maldwyn or Ceri, old friends of Maddox both) yet Haf had definitely called him 'Daddy', so here he was. The 1980s Cardiff he remembered was '... dockers, railwaymen and steelworkers who [...] marked these streets with a confident workaday presence and crowded the brassy mahogany pubs… all letting go with an accent, peculiarly their own, which could slice through the thick tobacco blue smoke of saloon bars like wire through cheese.' The Cardiff he finds in 2007 is 'Student lets [...] judging from the bicycles piled up in their tiny low-walled fronts and the oblivious helmetless riders weaving in and out of the stuttering line of cars.' This is the first crossing referred to in the novel's title, the second being that of ocean liner RMS Lusitania's two-hundred-and-second passage across the Atlantic, its journey told by one of the passengers, Taliesin Arthur Lloyd, assistant secretary to DA Thomas, 1st Viscount Rhondda, travelling to America to acquire tracts of coal-bearing land he'll never fully develop. Lloyd, who survives the ship's sinking by a German U-boat on its return to Liverpool dock, tells the story between fragmentary memories from his deathbed and various notes and papers recently collected for deposition at the National Library.

In this way Smith manages to shrewdly tuck the past into the present, like an antique handkerchief in the breast pocket of a fashionable dinner jacket. The novel spans an entire area and era, the life and death of industrial south Wales, at its peak in the age of great transatlantic ocean liners adept at breeding world champion boxers like Freddie Welsh; at its demise a grim place reliant on EU development money, a far cry from the golden age of King Coal: 'An ersatz new world to anyone who had seen the real deal of any small American city.' The theme of decline is particularly pertinent when Smith writes about the town of Pontypridd, as much a character in the novel as Maddox himself, its bridge the subject of the book's cover. In his papers Lloyd remembers the unusual behaviour of his nonconformist father on his way home from the boxing match in which Ponty's famous son beat Jim Driscoll: '... he yelled out to the world and to anyone who passed us… *Cymru am byth! Champions of the world!*' But by the time Maddox comes back in the mid-noughties the 'architectural glory' of the railway station is 'lost to boy scout design' and '... the indoor market was more shoddy goods and plastic utilities than the piled-high stalls of fruit and vegetables and locally slaughtered meat […] it had once been.'

Don't however be fooled into thinking the novel is a simple practice in nostalgia. Smith has an astute eye (and ear) for goings-on in contemporary south Wales, not least the vernacular of the post-industrial valleys, expertly captured in a manner not previously encountered. Here's Bran explaining how she and Maddox's relationship had come to an end, fast-talking lazy sentences like a good 'un: 'That summer after the strike you got more and more, I dunno, miserable … melancholy. Even before you were down about everything and everyone. Worrying. Down.'

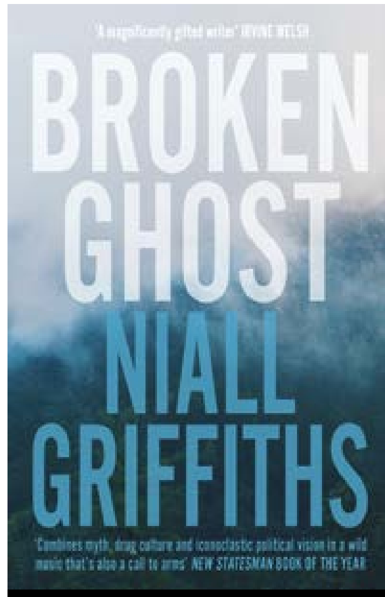
Ultimately Maddox comes to discover not just the answer to his question but another history he had no idea existed, tentative threads knitted together to build a new sort of bridge.

Rachel Trezise is an award-winning novelist, short story writer and playwright

Welsh Niallism; *or,* *the importance of being earnest*

Broken Ghost, Niall Griffiths
Vintage, 2020

Merlin Gable says **Niall Griffiths' Wales Book of the Year-winning** novel ***Broken Ghost*** suffers from favouring nihilistic bravado over commitment to sincerity



A man whimpers like a dog as he orgasms watching two men have sex with his wife. A woman's pubic hair is so matted that it cuts up her shit like chips. A character's accent is written out painstakingly phonetically. We can only be in one place. A Niall Griffiths novel.

Except we could be in many more. Such has been Griffiths's totemic influence on Welsh literature in English since his literary debut over twenty years ago that many aspects of this distinctive style have been transmuted into a literary aesthetic pervasive across much contemporary Welsh fiction. (Further, indeed, thinking of the vogue for Celtic noir crime dramas on S4C.)

His latest novel, *Broken Ghost*, revolves around the sighting of a spectral figure in the night by three individuals, variously intoxicated and high, and then follows their activities in and around Aberystwyth and elsewhere as the effect of this epiphany continues to bear upon their lives and views. Meanwhile, in post-Brexit referendum Britain, the story of the spectre goes viral and becomes a flashpoint for political and social tensions.

> The post-industrial malaise and the post-Brexit malaise are one and the same. This is one long crisis of community and of the soul

Except nothing changes for Emma, Adam and Cowley – not really. They carry on navigating a generic post-industrial neoliberal Wales of housing association flats, cancelled buses and neglected public infrastructure, slurping pints, snorting snot and swearing at each other. One conclusion to draw from this is that the symbolic, metaphysical and transcendental experiences of our lives – be they personal or political – rarely change the material conditions under which we live and that in many ways we retain little serious control over the course and meaning of our lives whilst our governments neglect us. Certainly Griffiths' novel seems to be ruminating, through its characters, on this point. What, it is therefore natural to ask, can a novel do, having made this reasonable diagnosis? My answer would be that it can advocate, it can reveal alternate political realities, and it can search for the emergent, guttering moments of hope that puncture our lives. And this is where *Broken Ghost* falls down.

The failure of the spectre in the night to act as a transcendental signifier – a symbol to bring meaning and cohere a fractured society – speaks to the wider failure in Griffiths' novel of understanding where real hope is situated. It is not in the personal epiphany translated to the natural or political (the anti-Brexit rave/protest/happening that the viral story of the spectre inspires) but in those things that are closer, more interpersonal and local. In the community that the world of Griffiths' novel so lacks. Characters here exist in constellations but none cohere enough to demonstrate anything like community.

> There are limitations to every perspective but there are responsibilities too in choosing how to render the lives of ordinary people and how to give them voice

But it is pointless to deny the continuing survival and importance of community structures even as the industries around which they formed fade into memory. Instead, in the absence of any acknowledgement of these structures, the writer's characterisation falls into an invocation of social positions and references to current affairs that at times can feel a little lazy, like in the instance of the 'pro-EU/anti-austerity rally in the town' (two political positions that are by no means easy bedfellows) where a woman 'was standing next to a trolley full of cans for the food bank'.

Many characters speak like imaginary working-class people monologuing over a pint (indeed, this is where a disproportionate number of conversations in the novel take place). It is unclear whether the specificities of accent and dialect with which Griffiths imbues their voices is there to produce a sense of affinity or, as will be the case for many readers (particularly those outside of Wales), a spectacle of difference. It's not inherently liberatory to have every facet of your accent and dialect noted down pseudo-phonetically for the world's readers to revel in the differences.

This remains a problem throughout the novel. The seasick transitions from dialect to balanced, poetic narration later in the novel reads much more like free indirect discourse and feels therefore much more like ventriloquy than handing the microphone to an unheard people. Get *him* to complain that 'it's privatisation. This is what happens. Fuckin Brexit n all' whilst *you* observe 'through the grey-streaked windows, the ruckles at the fringes of the central plain'. It is one way to represent class position, but it seems an impoverished way of trying to project any richness of interiority of the people and lives you wish to describe – of the hopes, fears and dreams with which we all live.

That said, the novel, as a piece of art, is hard to fault. The only exception might be in the renderings of online discourse, which confuse mid-noughties blogging with Twitter conversations with text speak (and nobody needs to use text speech anymore).

The central thesis Griffiths aims to demonstrate is certainly true: the post-industrial malaise and the post-Brexit malaise are one and the same. This is one long crisis of community and of the soul. But that doesn't describe the totality of human experience – and this is as much a literary flaw as a political one. Griffiths is, whether it is a style one likes or not, a master of tone, deployment and timing and the novel reflects this. But the characters, whilst unerringly accurate as characters – that is, as types – lack the depth that the blend of hope and despair we all feel, and their complex interplay, brings.

Societies, arguably, are like the magical figure in the sky upon which the novel fixates. You see what you want to see. There are many different lenses through which a writer living in Wales can choose to see this country, and it is their choice which they deploy as the dominant mode of their fiction. There are limitations to every perspective but there are responsibilities too in choosing how to render the lives of ordinary people and how to give them voice.

In the instance of *Broken Ghost*, this falls wide of the mark. In the face of difficult times, intractable suffering and remorseless leadership, all with a voice and a platform are faced with a choice of whether to narrate and hold their hands up in defeat to this context, or to work within it, against it, to tease out narratives that might give us the building blocks – the resources, as Raymond Williams called them – for hope. 'Take away the heroin and the hard-ons return after a while,' narrates a Job Centre clerk. Take away the bravado and sincerity returns – after a while.

Merlin Gable is Culture Editor of *the welsh agenda*

Credit: Jon Pountney

Q&A

Us Here Now is a site-specific photographic project created by Jon Pountney and Common Wealth, a site-specific theatre company, with people who live and work in the CF3 postcode in east Cardiff. It's a celebration of people's stories, of power and agency; it's a journey into representation and what it means to be seen and heard. Jude Thoburn Price, a Trowbridge resident, was a participant in the project and answers our questions. Find out more about *Us Here Now* at commonwealththeatre.co.uk

CF3 contains a number of misunderstood communities. What is the real narrative of this place?

Sometimes it feels as though the world has forgotten you. There's not a lot of provision in the area for youth or older people, well anyone really. There seems to be a lot of funded services and provision happening in the surrounding areas but not here. Since the community centre was closed some years back, the glue that held most things together here seems to have evaporated. We've been left for many years with nothing to replace it. The new smaller community centre was built as a part of a new housing complex a few years ago, but it hasn't replaced what was lost.

People who live here really care about their environment, their friends and family, their community. We lack resources, funding and influencers to be able to regenerate and create opportunities in this magical place, for our future generations.

How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected how you feel about your place?

The world felt as though it stopped for a brief moment, birdsong could be heard in the new sonic landscape we found ourselves in without the sound of traffic and everyday life interfering.

People began to stop and say hello and good morning to others as they passed in the street, a sense of community was re-ignited as people started looking out for each other, and sharing the produce from their gardens and they were having conversations over the back fences, socially distanced of course!

With people now taking stock of their lives and what's important to them perhaps now is the time to start community based projects looking forward to possible futures for this place and its people.

What was it like taking part in *Us Here Now?*

This was a chance encounter after meeting with Common Wealth, a window of opportunity to get involved in the project and with their future work. I have a background in creative arts, performance, music and production so I get what they're trying to do here.

Us Here Now is a celebration of our community, a photography project that documented our summer, capturing the spirit and soul of CF3 and challenging the negative stereotypes about where we live. Jon Pountney took hundreds of photos, and then we as a community decided which ones we'd like to display in an outdoor exhibition, which is going up this autumn in St Mellons.

I had my photo taken; it was a big decision. I usually don't post selfies or such but as a celebration of making it through the first stage of the Covid-19 pandemic I thought I'd embrace the opportunity. I had my photo taken outside of my house in the street. It observed me in my environment, my connection to it and why it felt important to me. It felt like a declaration – this is who I am, this is my place, this is my community. An inspirational moment in time documenting social history, that's all too forgotten by today's academics and social commentators who mostly see our communities as social deprivation statistics and not the real essence of what's here right now.

What do you want people to know most of all about CF3?

What you see is what you get. People who live here are kind, they help each other, our sense of community is still here, strong, it hasn't fizzled out. When we connect as a community it makes things possible. We are proud of who we are, and our community. Also, watch this space and its possible future, through its people. Change feels possible.

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Fellowship

The IWA Fellowship has been developed as a special category of membership as a mark of recognition for those who have made, or are making, a significant contribution to the life of Wales. To discuss becoming a fellow of the IWA please call Auriol Miller on 029 2048 4387.

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