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the welsh agenda

iwa

Autumn/Winter 2021
Issue 67

Coming together

Hannah Watkin and **Leena Farhat** on how the pandemic has affected families

Polly Manning on the housing crisis

Hamed Amiri on leaving Afghanistan

Image: Glenn Edwards

+ **Siriol Griffiths** on restoring nature | **Tade Evans** on growing up in the underclass | **Daryl Leeworthy** on adult education

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Editorial
Auriol Miller

Now 19 months into the Covid-19 pandemic, we hope the third wave of this cruel virus is diminishing. Over 6,000 people in Wales have died from Covid since March 2020 and life has been utterly changed for all those who have lost a loved one.

At the IWA, we think that a Wales Covid inquiry should be established with clear, formal links to a UK wide inquiry. We think the purpose of an inquiry should primarily be to identify opportunities for a better preparedness for the next crisis, and to address the long term impact of Covid-19. Any inquiry undertaken without the knowledge or incentive to consider past and future uses of devolved powers cannot achieve this. We firmly believe there is still scope to make a real difference to the victims of Covid by looking forward as well as back.

Since we last published *the welsh agenda*, we also have a new Senedd – our sixth – with a sizeable intake of new Members, of whom great things need to be expected. Data suggests that only 40-45% of eligible 16-17 year olds registered to vote for the first time in a Senedd election – so yes, another milestone to mark, but one from which we would hope to progress further. We have a new Welsh Government too and the jostling to succeed Mark Drakeford as First Minister is still a little way off. In Cardiff, we celebrate the new Betty Campbell monument, and the significant leadership contribution that a Black Welsh woman made to our collective understanding of ourselves, our country, and our histories. A celebration long overdue on a number of counts.

What hasn't changed is the scale of the economic and climate challenges ahead, the need for all of us to keep our focus firmly on the big picture. We cannot allow a desire to return to 'normal' to guide our investments nor indeed our behaviours. At the IWA, what we're most keenly focused on is how we can – together – build a successful, clean, green and fair economy for Wales. An economy which ensures that people's everyday needs are met fairly and with dignity, and where the high quality jobs of the future are rooted in the places that people love and in which they want to live. Re-energising Wales through renewable energy driving our economy, strengthening the foundational economy, clarifying land use policy so that communities have more of a say in the landscape around them and the benefits accrue to them too, and identifying the skills needed to build our greener future.

We had hoped that turnout in the Senedd election would be higher, this year of all years, when it was clear that devolution had finally cut through to public consciousness with different decisions being made in Wales as to where we could go, what we could do and who we could meet. Aside from some essentials like Senedd and electoral reform and a better resourced Welsh media – which we clearly endorse – one way we might practically ensure better turnout is to work collectively to strengthen Welsh democracy, for example by involving people in Wales in intensely local deliberations about what is best for the places where they live and work, and enabling and funding this involvement. Our Welsh Places Charter, conceived in partnership with others, sets out how to do this. Another way is to delve into how people decided how to vote based on the information available to them at the time – and our recommendation for a Misinformation Inquiry is endorsed in this edition by Professor Martin Innes, a global expert in the topic.

Elsewhere in this issue, Polly Manning takes a hard look at Wales' housing crisis, Ellie Harwood insists we must listen to the voices of children in poverty, and we hear directly from Tade Evans about what it's like to grow up in a community that has indeed lost hope. And thinking – as we must – further afield, Peter Frederick Gilbey writes about how we can up our game on social solidarity at a global level. Meanwhile, as Mark Seymour explores how far Wales has to go to become a true Nation of Sanctuary, Hamed Amiri talks to Merlin Gable about leaving Afghanistan twenty years ago. It's all a reminder of just how much work is in front of us. Smart thinking, as well as compassion, will be required. **AM**

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HIGHLIGHTS

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ARTICLES

CULTURE

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Growing up in the underclass and what it taught me

Tade Evans *reflects on the challenges of growing up poor in Bettws, Newport*

The poverty threshold, nicknamed 'the breadline', is in 2021 calculated at £15,444 for a single parent with two children. Parties at both ends of the political spectrum have vowed to decrease or increase this 'living wage' – but politicians from right and left fail to understand the reality of living below this metaphoric line of doom

Bettws is an island. An isolated ring road situated off the dual carriageway from Newport to Cwmbran, hemmed in by streams and woods and Wales' most controversial section of motorway. A small congregation of council flats and state housing surrounded by waves of crushing relative poverty, self-doubt and insecurity. Its inhabitants, cast away by a government that has lost their trust, persevere as outcasts to the world beyond. This neglected corner of the country is where I call home and despite its glum and sorrowful appearance it is one of the most vibrant and inspiring places I have seen. There is so much to be discovered when acknowledging the stories of those who have been left behind in the widening wealth gap, those who have created their own community – full of culture and life – in the dark underbelly of a GDP-obsessed Britain.

Hailing from a single parent household, growing up in a council house and attending a state school all contributed to my sensitivity and perception of politics and its effect on me. Mum, a social care worker, battled with a stagnant wage and faced ignorance from a government that takes pride in praising NHS and social services in speeches come election season. As the first of her generation and the one before her to have a full-time job, she was labelled uptight and pretentious by family members for seeking a way out of dependency on benefits.

£15,444

The poverty threshold, nicknamed 'the breadline', calculated for a single parent with two children

This determination to do better and be better is something I have inherited. Being encouraged to exercise my love for reading and academia has separated me from cousins and friends my age. I too carry the labels of 'uptight' and even 'posh' – a ridicule expressed by a family member who, however jokingly, exclaimed: 'You don't belong to this family'.

Despite never going without, or being told I was in touching distance of the breadline, I still understood from a young age how money, or rather the lack thereof,

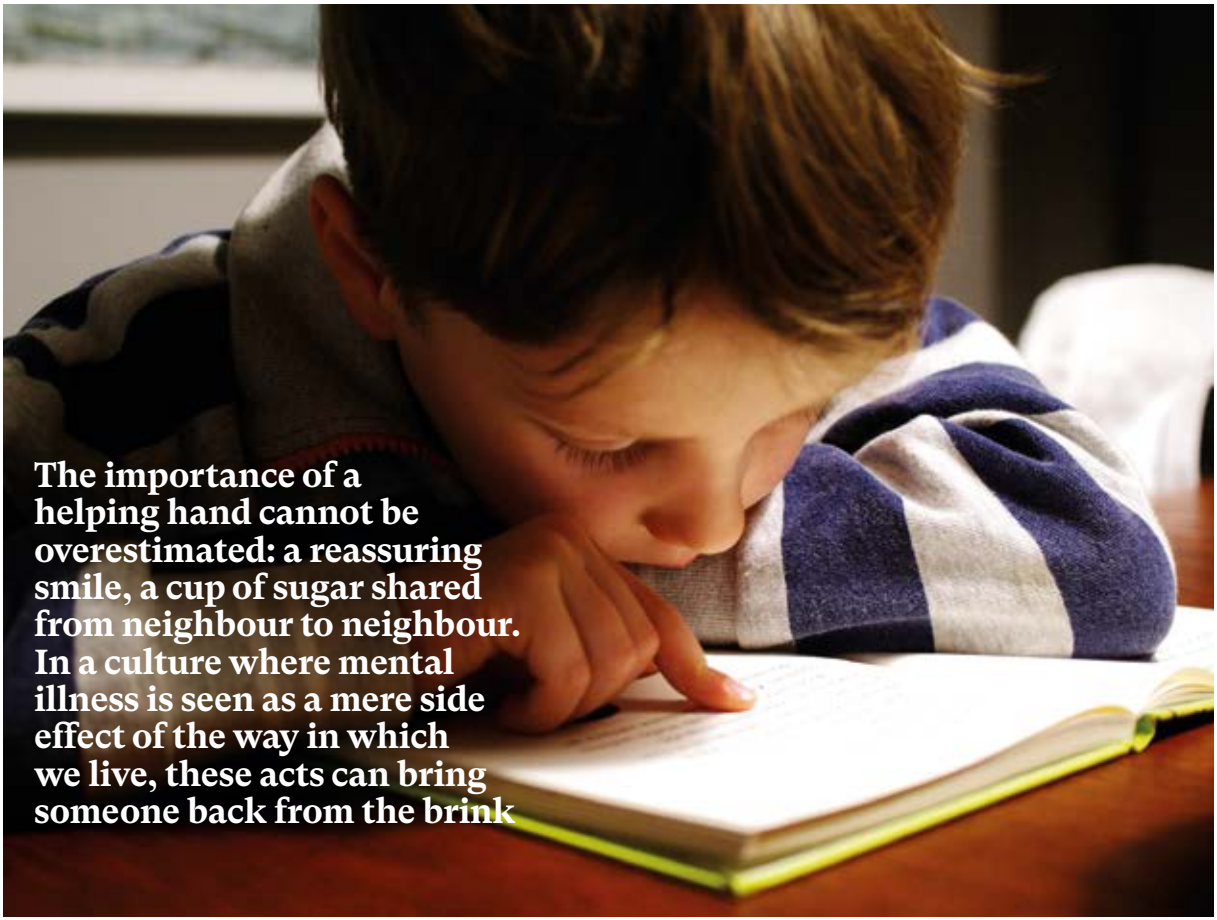
This neglected corner of the country is where I call home and despite its glum and sorrowful appearance it is one of the most vibrant and inspiring places I have seen

Bettws, Newport. Credit: John Grayson, Geograph

can disrupt quality of life. Growing up I was an onlooker, observing how a vicious cycle of drug abuse, mental illness, domestic abuse and a lack of self-motivation all contributed to the stalled economic and social mobility that parents inherit and then pass on to their children. Members of my extended family are still stuck in this cycle today, now with older children, no savings and less wealth, marooned on the estate and 'the dole'. Relative poverty is for the most part a generational system; despondent parents raise despondent children. Having been removed from this cycle I am able to view it from the outside and ask important questions: how did we get here, and how do we get others out?

Humility. The quality that many argue is key to finding fulfilment in an increasingly complicated and selfish society; the ability to step back and look at those around you free of preconceptions or prejudices. This is perhaps the most important lesson I have learnt in the presence of those not caught up in the spiral of greed and hedonism that is taking the country by storm. A strong sense of community has been instilled in me from a young age and I strive to transmit this to those I encounter, within and without the estate.

People in Bettws only have each other. With no consolation to be found in money or privilege, they are effectively dependent on humility and its power to bring us back to the surface. Without strong connections they would simply sink lower into despondency. The importance of a helping hand cannot be overestimated: a reassuring smile, a cup of



The importance of a helping hand cannot be overestimated: a reassuring smile, a cup of sugar shared from neighbour to neighbour. In a culture where mental illness is seen as a mere side effect of the way in which we live, these acts can bring someone back from the brink

sugar shared from neighbour to neighbour. In a culture where mental illness is seen as a mere side effect of the way in which we live, these acts can bring someone back from the brink.

Growing up here has shown me the value of enjoying the small things in life but it has also pushed me outward, inspiring me to reach further. Despite its homeliness and comfort, the fact the area lacks opportunity and prosperity does not go unnoticed. For me, as a budding politics enthusiast, there is no need for politics here. Under Conservative rule in Westminster, this small urban suburb has become disinterested in the policy that controls them, given up the voice so ardently won and grown suspicious of those who consistently undermine and label them as a burden.

I will be the first member of my family to seek out a higher education. It could be said that we are finally beginning to see a change in the cycle of petty crime, drugs and mental illness that has for so long barred us from breaking that glass ceiling. Whilst it is improving, the lack of parental support and enthusiasm affects children in a devastating way, leaving them indifferent to education, aspiration and learning. But who can blame them? Generation after generation have felt the same weight on their shoulders and have grown tired of trying.

Policy after policy, many ill-informed or downright elitist, have left their mark on my community. The 'Right to Buy' scheme – a prized heirloom of Thatcherite politicians – has seen many people I know

shooed down to the bottom of housing lists, paying extortionate rents or, when left with no choice, moved into temporary accommodation that is often in poor condition, far from a family network they rely on. The infamous Universal Credit system saw families wait months for money they so desperately needed. This 'revolutionary' legislation was supposed to help those who needed it stay afloat – but instead left them penniless, consumed by unnecessary admin and met with indifferent responses from support workers. These are just two of the systems that have worsened relative poverty in the UK. It is a sad truth that many people living here will never own a house, never look forward to an annual holiday abroad, nor amass any wealth that will help their children build lives of their own. My experience here has taught me that relentless council cuts, a lack of educational opportunities and frankly a fear of change has made the middle-class lifestyle, a standard for most Brits, inaccessible to those living in the underclass.

As an aspiring politician and journalist, I hope to give communities like mine an accurate representation in the media and in the minds of the wider population. I think it goes against the traditional British values so many of us revere to let some of our own suffer. However far my career takes me, I aim always to remember the knowledge passed down to me from those who remained stoic when the world was plotting against them. I believe we can all admire and learn from the hardships found in a section of society often so conveniently forgotten.

Tade Evans is a Year 13 student and Head Boy at Newport High School

Can we 'poverty-proof' the school day?

Credit: Annie Spratt

Ellie Harwood *says that too often, the voices of children in poverty are the least likely to be listened to*

Recent analysis by the End Child Poverty Coalition found that Wales has the highest child poverty rate of any UK nation. Child poverty exists in every community, from the valleys to the coast, in rural villages and our urban centres. Despite two decades of strategies, plans and Senedd inquiries, families continue to face real hardship, surviving on incomes that simply don't stretch to cover the full cost of raising children.

The Children's Commissioner for Wales recently stated that 'child poverty is now the Welsh Government's biggest challenge'. Despite this, it doesn't receive a single mention in the latest five-year Programme for Government. Digging deeper into policy portfolios, it seems that education has once again been tasked with most of the heavy lifting when it comes to ameliorating the impact of poverty on Welsh children's lives.

For two decades, we've had a plethora of educational policies focused on closing the attainment gap between less-affluent pupils and their better off peers. Despite this, Estyn has said that socio-economic disparities in attainment have failed to reduce. There are now well-justified fears that the pandemic has widened educational inequalities even further. And while we should all be concerned with disparities in outcomes, there is equally worrying evidence that low-income learners also have a poorer school experience, with a notable socio-economic gradient in measures of mental health and wellbeing.

There is no doubt that we need fresh ideas in order to galvanise and redouble our efforts to build an inclusive education system that supports families with the cost of living and fully realises children's rights. But where might these fresh ideas come from? A good place to start would be to ask children and young people themselves.

The UK Cost of the School Day programme aims to 'poverty-proof' education systems in Wales through a participatory children's rights approach. Over the last year, Child Poverty Action Group have been working in partnership with Children North East to poverty proof the school day in settings across Wales. We talk to learners about costs and money, and how it can prevent them from joining in and being happy at school. As a ten-year-old Youth Parliamentarian said: 'Education is supposed to be free, but a lot of things at school are not.'

Our work provides a vital insight into how child poverty is experienced in contemporary Wales, tuning in to the voices of children who are living through it right now. As well as a pragmatic focus on costs and money, we also delve into the relational and socio-emotional aspects of growing up on a low income. Children and young people tell us what it feels like to have less than others and which parts of school life cause them to feel most excluded and unhappy. For many children, the events that are supposed to be fun or celebratory can actually be the most difficult to deal with.

Take non-uniform days. Wearing clothes from home can be a treat that allows children to show off their favourite clothes. As one child told us: 'Sometimes we'll say, if you're wearing something nice, *I like your kicks, butt.*' However, these events can also lead to children being stigmatised because they don't have the most desirable clothing, with another child in the same school telling us: 'People are mean about clothes; they say you should be in uniform instead of your own clothes.' Sometimes children tell our practitioners that they are teased because they can't buy new clothes or accessories for each new school year. 'Someone said my bag looks like a baby bag because I had it in Year 1.'

Low-income learners have a poorer school experience, with a notable socio-economic gradient in measures of mental health and wellbeing

Fundraising is another area of school life that can prove very challenging for children who have less money at home. For some children, even affording a token donation is simply impossible. Child poverty is currently so severe that the Trussell Trust food bank network distributed 54,000 emergency food aid parcels to children in Wales in 2020/21. These children, and their families, simply do not have a penny to spare.

Many schools host at least one charity fundraiser a term, with pupils telling us they were asked to bring in money to support causes including 'Poppy Day', 'Red Nose Day', 'Christmas Jumper Day', 'Pudsey Day' and coffee mornings. Schools often sell merchandise on behalf of charities, with slap bands proving particularly popular among children in Wales. When children are unable to buy the merchandise on sale, they tell us they sometimes feel sad. 'If someone is generous in [your] class, they'd probably give you the money for one.'

Of course, most of these activities and events are 'optional extras' and there is no obligation to contribute. Sometimes schools arrange events or ask

As a ten-year-old Youth Parliamentarian said: 'Education is supposed to be free, but a lot of things at school are not'

Listening to children reveals a different perspective towards things that can seem like innocuous fun to many adults

learners to dress up or wear clothes from home as an alternative to buying branded merchandise. However, that does not remove the very real consequences for the child if they are unable to join in. Talking about school discos, children told us 'you have to pay for everything, the £1 is just to go, you don't get anything'. Another said 'most people would be dressed up [at the disco], you'd be embarrassed if you wore your uniform.'

Children who cannot afford to pay will sometimes pretend they forgot their donation, while others rely on the kindness of friends, saying 'it's okay to forget [your money] because you can share things with your friends.' However, children are highly perceptive and seem to understand that poverty at home could be one reason why their friends are not taking part. Listening to a group of Year 3 and 4 learners talk, they noted: 'Some people can't buy the stuff that's sold and some others can'; 'Some people might feel left out', 'They may be living in poverty' and 'That is true for some people in [our] school.'

Children often tell us that their schools help to remove stigma and discretely support participation – for example, by asking for anonymous online donations, planning free activities that all children can take part in, or focusing on raising awareness of the charity and the issues it tackles instead of raising money.

Ultimately, listening to children reveals a different perspective towards things that can seem like innocuous fun to many adults. Too often, the voices of children in poverty are the least likely to be listened to. It can be difficult for children in poverty to access some existing forums, and some face multiple barriers to being heard. In a recent report into secondary school councils in Wales, a workshop participant in a BAME youth group says: 'the school council do not listen to dinner ticket boys.'

The new curriculum will require schools to develop more robust pupil voice mechanisms, in order to create opportunities for learners to help shape what they are taught. Curriculum for Wales offers great scope for enrichment, but also risks perpetuating existing socio-economic inequalities unless schools take proactive steps to understand the specific needs and experiences of pupils in poverty. ▸

Ellie Harwood is Wales Development Manager at Child Poverty Action Group

For resources to support the implementation of ideas in this article, visit www.cpag.org.uk/costoftheschoolday

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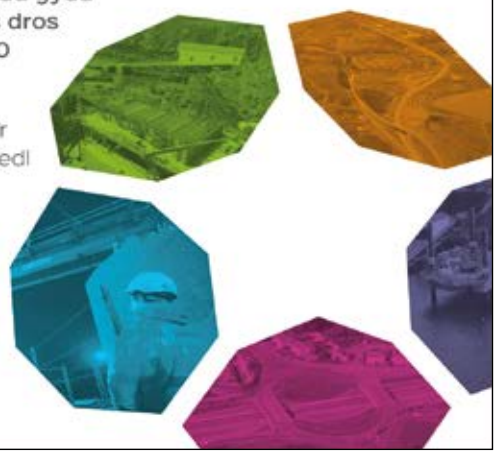

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Credit: Cymdeithas yr Iaith

Is Wales for sale?

Polly Manning *predicts a bleak future as Welsh Government fails to get a grip of the housing crisis*

Wales is a country so familiar with crises – of health, poverty, the environment, to name but a few – that it feels almost cruel to throw another one on the pile. But in recent years, the extent of the housing crisis in Wales has become clear.

In June, 88 year old Norman Thomas made national headlines. He was the last remaining Welsh speaker resident in Cwm-yr-Eglwys, a 'picturesque' village on the Pembrokeshire coast. In fact, of the fifty homes which comprise the hamlet, only two house permanent residents; the other forty-eight are holiday homes.

Cwm-yr-Eglwys is a fairly typical example of the accelerated eradication of rural Welsh communities, not an extreme anomaly. In a recent letter to *The Guardian*, Liz Saville-Roberts – the MP for Dwyfor Meirionnydd – pointed out that half of all houses sold in her constituency in 2020 were sold as holiday homes.

However, whilst class conflict often corresponds with fault lines of national identity in Wales, there

exists a popular misconception that this is the foundational conflict of the housing crisis – instead, its true roots are indeed in class. Concerns regarding second homes are accused of expressing a xenophobic nationalism which casts England as the enemy. It is a straw man argument, promoted by those who either lack understanding of the interrelationship between class and national identity, or who seek to purposefully muddy the waters.

To their merit, even activist groups traditionally seen as single-issue collectives are taking strides to centre class within their campaigning on the issue. One such collective is Cymdeithas yr Iaith Cymraeg, a group campaigning for the promotion and protection of the Welsh language in everyday life.

In July, Cymdeithas held a 'Nid yw Cymru ar werth' ('Wales is not for sale') day of action at the Tryweryn dam, to protest government inaction on the impact of the housing crisis on Welsh communities. Hundreds came out to show their support for the campaign and to listen to Cymdeithas chairwoman Mabli Siriol speak. Addressing the crowd, she criticised the Welsh Government's lackadaisical approach: 'What we've got from them is vague and unambitious promises – more consultations, more pilot projects – that will take years to make a difference, which is time we can't afford to waste.'

Mere days before, the Government announced a new series of consultations and pilot schemes to 'determine how we tackle this issue now and into the future.'

The announcement was a vague one, and familiar – the crutch of lengthy consultations as a means of postponing action. In her statement, Julie James MS, the Minister for Climate Change, whose brief includes housing issues, took care to remind the press that Wales was the only part of the UK to give councils the power to introduce a 100% council tax premium on second homes. However, research published by Cymdeithas indicates that at least eight county councils have not used these powers to increase taxation on second homes. It begs the question as to why the Welsh Government would introduce this as an *optional* approach to local authorities when the crisis is already so pronounced? Their refusal to institute structural measures reflects their deferral-of-responsibility approach to governance – as well as a lack of commitment to their own policies. As part of the 'Cymraeg 2050' project, they outline a strategy to increase the number of Welsh speakers in Wales to one million by 2050. To not take action to quell the disintegration of Welsh language communities currently happening under their noses represents a blatant hypocrisy.

Siriol emphasises that such a governmental response is the result of putting the priorities of capitalism above all else.

'Everyone has a right to a home in their community,' she says, speaking some weeks after the rally. 'But governments in the Senedd and at Westminster over decades have treated houses as property for making a profit, rather than homes, and prioritised capital over communities. The consequences have been devastating for the working-class people of Wales, our communities and the Welsh language.'

To Cymdeithas, the exacerbating factors in the rural Welsh housing crisis are clear: Airbnb; a proliferation of second and holiday homes; and landlords buying up swathes of housing stock, further inflating house prices and exploiting tenants who are forced to pay extortionate rent.

Siriol notes, however, that these damaging processes are symptoms of a wider, structural political framework. 'In the long-term, we need a total rejection of the current neoliberal approach to housing policy, an approach that harms ordinary people, communities and the Welsh language in all parts of our country.'

Certainly, in no context has the Welsh Government's neoliberal favouring of capital been more dangerously pronounced than during the peaks of the coronavirus pandemic. In April 2020, Drakeford called the notion of banning people from fleeing to their holiday homes in Wales a 'draconian step', urging a consideration of the 'human rights' of second home-owners. Notwithstanding the 'human rights' of those who will be made homeless by his Government's decision to rescind the eviction ban at the earliest viable opportunity, his comments reflect a Welsh Labour instinct to bow to the property-owning middle classes at any cost.

Siriol emphasises the need for long-term solutions. 'We're calling for a Property Act that will cap the number of second homes in any given community, change the definition of affordable housing and control house prices and rents… democratise the planning system and give local communities control over the housing market.'

In the short term, she says, the Government must consider introducing new taxes on landlords' profits, tourism, second homes and Airbnb. A new programme returning social housing to public ownership should be established and reassurances made that a substantial amount of new housing will be within public ownership. Cymdeithas also want a permanent ban on no-fault evictions. Action must be urgent and radical, says Siriol, as 'tinkering around the edges is not enough.'

This 'tinkering' approach has certainly been felt in urban Wales, where symptoms of the housing crisis are distinct. A lack of affordable housing has pushed more people than ever into the hands of the rental market, where they are frequently subjected to extortionate fees and poor living conditions. The effects of gentrification in cities like Cardiff and Swansea disproportionately affects Black and minority ethnic communities, who already face a greater threat of housing insecurity. Many of those on low incomes must live with the ever-present threat of eviction, and with Universal Credit squeezed to an ever-smaller pittance, the line between housed and homeless has never been so thin.

In May, Shelter Cymru published a report detailing the impact of the crisis upon the Welsh population. Their research showed that one in six people in Wales couldn't afford to heat their home over the winter months, and that one in three live in unsafe or unaffordable housing – with numerous families forced to choose between buying food and meeting rent or mortgage payments.

In response to these findings, a Welsh Government spokesperson said, 'the Renting Homes (Wales) Act 2016 will require all landlords to ensure the properties they rent are fit for human habitation, tackling the poor conditions in some rented properties.'

Perhaps the obvious response to their pledge to make all rental properties 'fit for human habitation' in 2016 (the legislation will not come into force until 2022) is that Welsh Labour has been in power for *seventeen years* before deciding to legislate on this barest of minimums. At the beginning of August, the Welsh Government gave further details of plans to build 20,000 low-carbon 'social' homes for rent by 2026. However, the Senedd's own research has shown that over 8,300 new homes are needed in Wales each year for the next five years in order to make up the housing deficit. One method devised to supplement this void is a Private Rented Sector 'leasing scheme', in which local authorities will lease empty properties on behalf of landlords. This subservience to the 'necessity' of landlords is one which betrays the Welsh Government's ultimate deferral to the demands of capital.

However, this failure to even consider a progressive alternative to landlordism betrays a capitalist realism which is not unique to – albeit enacted by – the Welsh Labour Government. Arguably, the Welsh political

Credit: Lluniau Lleucu

class are, across the board, primarily concerned with protecting and promoting class interests. This is perhaps most blatantly represented by the significant number of Members of the Senedd who own second homes and tenanted properties. It is difficult to provide an exact number due to the inconsistency of the information submitted by MSs to the Senedd's Register of Members' Interests. However, available information reveals that at least twelve Members own rental or holiday-let properties (and that several own second or third homes) – they span Welsh Labour, Plaid Cymru, and the Welsh Conservatives. It is little surprise, then, that the Senedd as a whole is willing to pander to capitalist interests, given that so many of its members are themselves agents of capital – an expression of personal interest which intersects with class interest.

Not only this, but the Welsh Government regularly bolsters the crisis via policy introduced under the guise of 'radicalism'. The Housing (Wales) Act of 2014 removed priority need status for prisoners in Wales, despite clear evidence that homelessness is endemic amongst prison-leavers. In 2019, it was revealed that 47% of prisoners released from HMP Cardiff each month had no accommodation to go to. All the while, towers of PBSAs (purpose-built student accommodation) increasingly dominate the skylines of Cardiff and Swansea, despite a demonstrable lack of demand. Indeed, many have mysteriously transformed into residential properties, allowing developers to avoid regulations, including section 106 contributions designed to mitigate development impacts on the local community and infrastructure, and to cut costs.

In recent years, ACORN has become a prominent voice on these issues. A tenants' union, ACORN was founded in Bristol in 2014, and has since developed branches across the UK, including in Cardiff and Aberystwyth. Much like Cymdeithas, their approach is one which bases activism upon an acknowledgment of the intersecting issues surrounding their core concern – the rights of tenants. ACORN groups in Cardiff and Aberystwyth have adopted a grassroots approach, employing direct action to pressure local HMO owners, letting agents, and landlords to – amongst other things – improve the conditions of their properties, return tenants' deposits, and charge fair fees.

Dan Edwards, chair of ACORN Cardiff, emphasised to me the hurdle posed by the Welsh Government's inaction on these issues.

'As much as our union's day-to-day work is coordinating member defence to shift the balance of power from landlords to tenants, we appreciate that sticking plasters over the wounds caused by the housing crisis is something we can only do on a limited scale.'

Credit: Acorn

He notes that the Welsh Government have repeatedly ignored calls from ACORN and other groups to give Rent Smart Wales – the regulatory body for landlords – the ability to blacklist dodgy landlords and agents. Their lassitude 'means that rogue landlords dictate the housing landscape in Cardiff.'

There have been some wins, though.

'Our policy team repeatedly called on the Welsh Government to rethink the Tenancy Saver Loan Scheme, which served little purpose other than boosting the coffers of landlords when it was in fact tenants being hit the hardest by the pandemic,' he says, speaking in August 2021. 'Our calls led to the introduction of a £10 million Tenancy Hardship Grant which, crucially, doesn't require tenants to repay money awarded.'

'Engendering structural change as a union will be difficult without a major change of tune from the Welsh Government, who simply cannot continue to defer the blame down the M4 to Westminster.'

Edwards argues, however, that whilst the Welsh Labour government 'has the tools to rectify aspects of the crises', even in the best-case scenario government action is not enough. 'Our goal as a union is to build cohesion in our communities and flip the balance of power in the favour of ordinary people.'

In the face of thriving corporate ownership and agglomeration, however, the extent to which this bottom-up approach will be effective remains to be seen.

In Mark Fisher's seminal *Capitalist Realism*, he argues that a key tenet of capitalism is its ability to engender in the entire populace an assumption that there are no alternatives to capitalism and, by extension, the way things are. It is and always has been the only natural, feasible state.

The work of grassroot-organised groups such as ACORN and Cymdeithas represents a hopeful cry against this hegemony. Activists in Wales seem now to benefit from the ability to frame their work within the context of the neoliberal state, and as such recognise the cruciality of 'the community' – the kryptonite of capitalism.

Despite relentless calls, however, the Welsh Government has refused to utilise the powers at their disposal to take radical action to tackle the housing crisis, or sustain progressive policy introduced during the Covid pandemic: promising funding, for example, to ensure that every homeless person found accommodation at the outbreak of the Covid pandemic (around 100%) would not have to return to the streets – with no comment when a few months later, nearly a quarter were.

Now, the question is not so much whether local activist groups can enact powerful change in the face of an inactive Government, but whether they can triumph over the capitalist realism embodied by said Government – and which infects every aspect of society. Whilst Cymdeithas and ACORN are able to present an alternative, viable vision of housing in Wales, we must ask ourselves how sustainable such opposition is within a public sphere whose horizons are so narrowed by capitalism that alternative solutions are unthinkable – and which drip-feeds this inconceivability to the Welsh public in a process which lowers their expectations. The ability of this realism to lurk just below the surface, unnamed because it is so 'obvious', exerts a pull on the national consciousness which local activist groups will be hard-pressed to counter.

The bleakest sign of what is to come, under the current trajectory, is perhaps best represented by young people's experiences of the housing crisis. Indeed, vast swathes of young people in the global West are painfully aware of the effects of capitalism and the housing crisis in their everyday lives. They make memes about the 'landlord special' (slopping cheap white paint over every available surface area), vent about poor living conditions on social media, and even use the language of class-consciousness and anti-capitalism to frame their experiences. However, these are expressions of discontent which come ultimately from acceptance. The ability to express these frustrations in the form of jokes and anecdotal experiences is a low-impact/high-relief process which speaks to the fact that housing insecurity is now woven into the very fabric of their existence.

As Fisher notes, for young people 'in Europe and North America, the lack of alternatives to capitalism is no longer even an issue. Capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable.'

The future, then, is somewhat bleak.

Polly Manning is a writer based in Swansea. Her work focuses on the experiences of young people in rural and post-industrial south Wales

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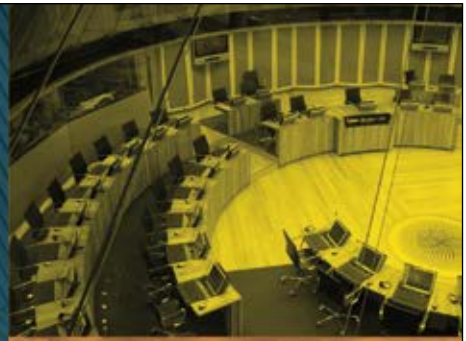

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Left to right: Gwen, Sarah, Bella, Harry and Wyn Griffiths
Photo: Glenn Edwards

Has the pandemic helped bridge generational divides?

Online, in print, and in person, generations are often pitted against each other, and the pandemic has provided us with plenty of opportunities to consider generational divides. But during many of its toughest moments it has also united us. To explore how the pandemic has affected people of all ages across Wales, **Leena Sarah Farhat** and **Hannah Watkin** visited two families whose members span various generations.

Firstly, Hannah Watkin caught up with the Griffiths family, Cardiff-based parents Sarah and Wyn Griffiths, two of their three children 17-year-old Harry and 12-year-old Gwen, and their Abergele-based Nain, Gwenfai Rees Griffiths.

What was the biggest effect of the pandemic on your family?

Sarah Losing all the things that you take for granted, like having the freedom to see people and to travel to do that. Having that suddenly severely limited was really tough.

How did the pandemic restrictions affect your daily routine?

Wyn There were fewer distractions so you could do more work. Our routine had been quite busy, so it was quite nice not to have as many activities to organise around and travel to.

Sarah The worst thing after a while was the lack of geographical freedom. We made a point of going out and walking a local walk every single day of lockdown, but there's only so many local walks you can do before you start going a bit crazy!

To Wyn, a company director, and Sarah, a former journalist and media trainer:
How was your work affected by the pandemic?

Wyn Two weeks before lockdown, we implemented our SARs action plan [devised in order to react to the potential of SARs arriving in the UK] by splitting staff up to work in separate locations to try and prevent possible Covid cases cross-infecting our workforce. After lockdown was announced we had to wait and wait for news about furlough. People kept saying *something's got to happen*; but every business was worried. It was a relief when furlough was announced.

Sarah The media training I do went online. Before, I had to travel or the trainees had to travel to me. Suddenly, without travel I could do training for four different people in four different corners of Wales, which was great.

To Harry and Gwen:
How did school closures affect you?

Harry The change to assessments rather than exams has been interesting. We have a lot more of them, but they're a lot smaller than exams.

Gwen I quite liked online schooling, but as a family we were lucky because we had a couple of laptops so it was possible for us all to do our work.

Harry It's definitely harder to keep motivated and engaged in class when at home, in the same chair, staring at the same computer all day.

Gwen As things went on for longer I did start to think, *am I going to catch up?* Transitioning to Year 7 was weird too.

To Gwenfai:
How challenging did you find the change to digital communications which lockdown required?

Gwenfai At the beginning, I thought I would never use Zoom. I'm a Quilter and on the committee for the Quilters Guild, and years ago we were told we could have meetings via Zoom rather than travelling to meet. We always said no. Now though, Zoom's just part of life, and will probably stay so.

How did changes to restrictions affect your ability to meet as a whole family?

Sarah Having no family locally became a big issue for us.

Gwen Most of my friends' grandparents live within half an hour away from them. It was weird when I could see all of my friends and they could see all of their family, but we still had to wait much longer to do that.

It's definitely harder to keep motivated and engaged in class when at home, in the same chair, staring at the same computer all day

Would you say the pandemic has brought you more together, or increased generational divides?

Gwenfai We got on with things – we're that kind of family. I do think it's been the hardest for the younger people though, not being able to go to school and university the same way we all did.

Wyn I'm not sure if generational divides were really what made the pandemic harder for people. I think it was more how much money you have. Poorer people definitely had a tougher time. Even stereotypically age-related things like technological ability are really more dependent on how affluent you are.

Sarah asked what people thought would be the biggest change to their lives which would carry on after the pandemic.

Harry Going forwards I want to keep up having a better routine.

Gwenfai My main takeaway is the attitude that *if you're going to do something, just do it.* Life's too short and unpredictable to not take opportunities when they're available.

Left to right; Anna, Eliza, Helen, Ron, Eleanor, Mark and Oliver Williams

We had to work hard sometimes to help people to understand that [Covid] was really serious

Leena interviewed the Williams family from Borth: Mum Helen, General Manager of the Borth Community Hub; Dad Mark, a former MP and current Acting Head of Llangorse Primary School; and children 21-year-old Elinor, 18-year-old Anna, and 15-year-old twins Eliza and Oliver.

Revealing some truth about the generational divide in technological knowledge, Grandad Ron Williams was sadly unable to join the interview after finding it difficult to get connected on Zoom.

What most worried you at the beginning of the pandemic?

Mark For me, it was the worry that I might pick something up while teaching at the school, and bring it back home to my 91-year-old dad across the road. I was petrified.

Helen It was really stressful trying to keep the older people in the community safe, and ensure they had the basics, not just in goods, but in emotional and mental health support too.

Anna For me, not knowing how or if I was going to have my A-Levels and not being able to go and look around possible unis was all a worry.

What do you miss most about life pre-pandemic?

Elinor Before, you could be more spontaneous. If you wanted to go out with family or friends, you could make that decision only an hour before you leave.

Mark I miss the freedom to travel without worry. I've got to go to London tomorrow for a meeting, and I've worked out how I can walk from Paddington to Whitehall. Before I wouldn't have hesitated to get on the tube, but now I'm going to walk just for peace of mind.

To Mark and Helen:
How was it looking after the older generation in your family and community?

Mark Communicating with my father was very restricted. Talking through windows and doors obviously wasn't the companionship that we would have provided and been a part of in the past.

Helen A lot of the older people I cared for in the community were very brave. They were like, *we'll be fine; we got through the war*. We had to work hard sometimes to help people to understand that [Covid] was really serious.

To Mark and Helen:
How was it looking after the younger generation in your family?

Helen I worried for Anna having to make decisions about universities without being able to properly see them. And I think it's very sad how everyone missed out on experiences like Scouts and the Duke of Edinburgh Award.

Mark I really appreciate how they've sacrificed doing some things, just to keep the older generation safe. Part of being a teenager is communicating, and although I know most communication is done through social media these days, I'm worried about them missing in-person social interaction with their friends.

To the children:
Do you feel older generations understand the effect of the pandemic on the young?

Oliver I think most older people are quite sympathetic, imagining how it would be if they were young. But I do think the young became a bit of a scapegoat for the blame when things went wrong,

Eliza Yeah, and when it came to the issue of people going out and spreading Covid, the middle generation also went out and contributed to the problem. Everyone did. It wasn't just the young.

Did any of you experience tech exhaustion during the pandemic?

Oliver I didn't really get bored of being on technology all the time, but I definitely enjoy being outdoors more now than I did before.

Would you say the pandemic has brought you more together, or increased generational divides?

Elinor I think in our area, most of the drama has been around tourists breaking the rules to come here rather than between generations.

Helen Yes, a huge fear of people bringing Covid in from outside the community developed. But generation-wise, we all came together. The older people were supportive of the younger people, and the younger people were supportive of the older people.

Mark wondered how far out of the pandemic we really are, and whether we can really look back yet as Covid continues to affect so many in the country.

Mark I think the sad thing is, we are becoming immune to it. We've become numbed to the deaths and the tragedy of Covid.

Elinor Definitely. At the beginning, the news that the first person in the UK had died from Covid was such a shock. Now, 100 people might die in a day, and we don't even see that as being a big figure.

Hannah Watkin is a journalist and member of *the welsh agenda's* editorial group; **Leena Sarah Farhat** is a Technologist and a trustee of the IWA

Opposing Welsh Labour: The worst job in Wales?

Theo Davies-Lewis *looks at the current state of the opposition parties and the way forward for each of them – with Nick Bourne, Leanne Wood and Peter Black*

More often than not, being Leader of the Opposition in any democratic country is often described as the 'worst job in politics.' In Britain, the position is a rather strange one, particularly if we consider how out of the fourteen in the last fifty years, ten never entered Downing Street as Prime Minister. Lord Adonis, writing for *Prospect* in April 2021, suggested therefore that a manual was needed to explain how to do the job successfully.

Such an advisory text is certainly well overdue in Wales, where unlike any other country in the democratic Western world, the opposition parties by-and-large stay the same. Welsh Labour has left the other three traditional parties – the Welsh Conservatives, Plaid Cymru and the Welsh Liberal Democrats – standing in their shadow. Rarely are parliamentary terms characterised by Labour defeats either. Instead, the party has become accustomed to cruising from election to election, and to working across political lines to secure budgets and deliver legislation.

This year's election was unpredictable at first, but as the votes were counted it became obvious that Welsh Labour, in their twenty-second year in power, would remain dominant – gaining one seat on their 2016 share: a working majority of 30. The Welsh Conservatives set expectations high. (Too high, it turns out.) But the Tories' 16 seats are still the highest tally they have held in devolved electoral history. Plaid Cymru, meanwhile, failed to deliver what was promised by their leader, being pushed into third place, with 13 nationalists in the Bay. And Jane Dodds is the only Welsh Liberal Democrat sitting in the Senedd.

As attention continues to focus on the leadership of Mark Drakeford – and his potential successor later this Senedd term – what about the parties trying to challenge his government? That's the question I set out to ask senior figures across the opposition parties. Party grandees, if you like, who have some advice for the new generation taking on the worst job in politics: opposing Welsh Labour.

Clear blue water?

Nick Bourne advocates a distinctly Welsh approach to conservatism

Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth
Credit: Chris McAndrew

No leader knows this role better than Nick Bourne, now Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth, who led the Welsh Conservatives throughout the first decade of devolution. In 2007, his party came close to unseating Welsh Labour with a dramatic 'Rainbow Coalition'. Alas, the outcome was really no surprise: Welsh Labour found a way to win, again.

Bourne represents a distinct brand of *Welsh* Conservatism that was hard to identify ahead of 6 May. There was a swift cull of Liberal Conservatives and the long-forgotten shadow of devo-scepticism returned in the weeks leading up to the campaign but did not pay off electorally. For the former leader, the results were admittedly a 'mixed bag'. However, 'that shouldn't obscure the fact that we're still very much the second party in Wales and we did go forward,' Bourne adds.

But why weren't high-expectations met? 'I think it's fair to say that against the background of Covid-19, Mark [was] very much [the] politician answering the call of the nation,' Bourne says. 'He responded very well. In my view – and I'd try to strip this of any party political perspective – he didn't approach it in a party political way. You talk to people and they feel he had a good pandemic... I think he did.' He adds that his party 'probably' should have been more supportive and constructive with the First Minister throughout the pandemic, rather than 'carp on about pubs' opening sooner in England.

Bourne reaffirms that the Welsh Conservatives, now and in the future, should get behind the devolution project. For too long, the party has been 'reactive' in the Senedd as well. It now needs to be positioned as an alternative party of government, Bourne says. 'We really need to be coming up with positive ideas of our own about what is good for Wales: on climate change; the Welsh language – linking that in terms of how good it would be for the economy; we need to have our own policies on homelessness. A whole range of issues.'

And what of the challenges, I ask? There is some danger, and plenty of evidence, that Andrew RT Davies is becoming the leader of 'Boris's bloc' in the Senedd – consumed just as much as Welsh nationalists on the constitution. 'Coming back to that fundamental about constitutional change, there's a great danger for everybody that we get caught up in an endless circular discussion.' Bourne adds that it is not on 'top of people's shopping list' and the constitutional question won't be the central issue of the next Senedd election. But the party does need 'distinctive policies' for Wales, he emphasises. 'We do need to show that we're different from Westminster, different from Labour in the Senedd as well.'

A uniquely Welsh approach from the party, as ever, is crucial. This is something that was missing in the pandemic, but it's what the public wants. 'They want a distinctive, successful Welsh approach,' the former Welsh Tory leader states. 'And that's why Labour did well; we need to carve out policies for a strong private sector, but also for ensuring that we have compassionate conservatism for policies... And also something that recognises the importance of the Welsh identity based around the culture, language, and community, where things are different from England.' Clear blue water, perhaps?

Connecting with communities

Leanne Wood says Plaid Cymru must get out and listen

Bourne has been far from the Welsh political frontline after losing his seat unexpectedly in 2011. Someone who has only just started adjusting to life beyond the Senedd is Leanne Wood, arguably the most dominant figure in Plaid Cymru over the last decade.

The self-proclaimed 'Party of Wales' is in a precarious position after an election result demoralised the party faithful. Adam Price, painted for so long as the great saviour of Plaid Cymru, was simply outmanoeuvred and drowned-out by Drakeford-mania. All as the wider independence movement seemed to self-destruct, with the future of YesCymru still unclear. I asked Wood, speaking to me from the Rhondda, about what the party should do next.

In short, it's to 'come up with a strategy that can increase our support in those areas of Wales where we haven't traditionally either done very well, or where we have done well but then not maintained the vote share.' Wood adds that Plaid Cymru's approach has 'to speak to people in the former industrial areas, and the cities of Wales as well.' She admits that breaking through there, like Wood did in the Rhondda, is a 'big challenge.'

I suggest that this strategy, or indeed any other tactics, would have been impossible to deploy in an election dominated by Mark Drakeford. 'Nothing's ever impossible,' is the typical retort. Covid-19 played a part, as did the First Minister's newfound profile, in knocking Wood's party into third. Brexit still featured too, the former Plaid Cymru leader insists. 'I don't think that was taken into account sufficiently, really.'

Perhaps the biggest elephant in the room for Plaid Cymru at the election, and going forward, is independence. 'It's got to be presented in a way that people understand it's going to improve lives and make things better for people,' Wood tells me. Not all questions have been answered, aside from those technical ones around holding the referendum in the first instance. 'But it's those questions around things like: "How will this affect my pension? What will it mean for social security benefits? How will it impact the number of jobs we have? What will it mean for money?" Those kind-of questions that impact on people's day-to-day lives.'

Lessons are also to be learnt from the SNP too – particularly how to get into government – but it is imperative for Plaid Cymru to work from the ground up. Activities in the Senedd are perhaps not as significant as what happens outside Y Siambr. 'It's more about connecting with people,' I am told. 'Getting into those town hall meetings, into those community centres, speaking with as many people as possible and really listening to them and really taking on board what they're saying.'

Indeed. No matter if you agree with her politics, Leanne Wood was the most skilful Plaid Cymru politician in connecting with 'forgotten' Welsh communities. She has more time than before to do that. No doubt for the party, her absence from the frontline is a great blow for its chances to connect with the same industrial areas where Wood once sought to build Welsh nationalist strongholds.

Leanne Wood
Credit: Senedd Cymru

Perhaps the biggest elephant in the room for Plaid Cymru at the election, and going forward, is independence

Getting ourselves noticed

Peter Black believes the Liberal Democrats can recover

And then there was one. Really. The Welsh Liberal Democrat vote collapsed in May, with party leader Jane Dodds clinging on to its sole seat in the Senedd via the regional list. Bar the critical commentary around Plaid Cymru, the Welsh Liberal Democrat leadership has faced the staunchest wrath of unhappy members and grandees. One of the most vocal commentators has been Peter Black, a veteran of the (then) Welsh Assembly.

Black, who represented South Wales West from 1999 to 2016, has denounced the party on his blog. Speaking to me, he is just as cutting. The Welsh Liberal Democrats 'didn't actually carve out a distinct identity or a distinct message' in the Senedd election, and should have 'focused elsewhere' rather than just trying to hang on in mid Wales, where the Conservatives performed strongly. There is, in addition, the haunting episode of the Cameron-Clegg coalition: 'We haven't recovered from that situation,' Black admits.

One opportunity for the party to reshape its reputation will be the local government elections next year, which the party's 'agenda fits quite nicely into' and there is the chance to 'gain quite a few council seats in mid Wales.' A good result would be to have a net gain of seats, Black says. Another potential differentiator for the party is the constitution, apparently.

'Labour is very, very conservative when it comes to constitutional issues,' Black tells me. 'Plaid Cymru: everything seems to boil down to independence for them. And I don't think people are ready for that… Talking about empowering people, talking about empowering communities, talking about how we can use our influence in the Senedd… is one way of maybe getting ourselves noticed.'

Peter Black
Credit: Senedd Cymru

I suggest getting noticed is difficult without one particular figure: Kirsty Williams. The party was Kirsty; Kirsty was the party. Are the Welsh Liberal Democrats *anything* without her? 'I think the party's bigger than any one individual,' Black states. 'I'm yesterday's man and Kirsty is now yesterday's woman… Kirsty was very important to us as a party, but she stood down… I don't think Kirsty was a huge electoral asset outside of Brecon and Radnor – she was an asset – but certainly wasn't one which is going to have the sort of difference which left us struggling to compete.'

Rebuilding from the grassroots will be critical for the party if it is to form a smaller group after the next Senedd election in 2026. But Black is optimistic. 'If we start to build up our organisation; if we start to develop a distinctive message; if we start getting candidates in place who are seen as competent; and if the federal party starts to build its support back up as well, then I think we can win seats again.'

The worst job in politics

There is no doubt that opposing Welsh Labour – the most dominant political party in Europe – is the worst job in politics. In fact, there is probably little that each party can do to loosen their grip. Our country has not been Conservative since the nineteenth century. Plaid Cymru are outmanoeuvred continuously, on the constitution and other policies. Welsh Liberalism is on its lap of honour.

Opposition in Wales, therefore, is probably a hopeless task – certainly if the last twenty years is anything to go by. All opposition politicians can do is put forward policy, work constructively and scrutinise the Welsh Government, as well as develop a distinctive identity. Then wait for the next election and tell their members they did their best to oust Wales' national political movement and natural party of government. Will someone please write a manual on how to help them cope? ➤

Theo Davies-Lewis is the chief political commentator of *The National Wales*

What might a 'national conversation' look like?

Credit: Jordan Ling

It's time to give citizens and communities a meaningful say on Wales' constitutional future, say **Anwen Elias** *and* **Matt Jarvis**, **Noreen Blanluet** *and* **Mike Corcoran**

Following its victory in May's Senedd elections, the new Welsh Labour government has made constitutional reform a priority of the next five years. Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic have put unprecedented strain on the relations between the UK Government and the devolved nations, and the Welsh Government is apparently intent on reforming the union and strengthening Wales' place within it.

Welsh Government's *Reforming our Union* document sets out detailed propositions for achieving this. Most of these are aimed at improving how the existing devolution settlement works. They include suggestions for improving co-operation between the UK's devolved and central governments, a new funding formula for the devolved institutions, and proposals for further devolution in the area of policing and the administration of justice.

There is, however, also a more ambitious aspiration to radically rethink what a future union might look like. Ultimately, the Welsh Government thinks this should be done by a UK-wide constitutional convention where the devolved institutions and citizens can have their say on how the UK should be governed. In the meantime, it is establishing its own independent commission to consider Wales' constitutional future, to be informed by a national civic conversation.

Such a conversation has the potential to bolster the democratic legitimacy of Welsh politics. Constitutional structures determine what and how political decisions affecting our daily lives are made, but individual members of the public rarely have a meaningful say in discussions about how we should be governed. But what might such a national conversation on Wales' constitutional future look like in practice?

As part of the Constitutional Futures project, hosted by Aberystwyth University's Centre for Welsh Politics and Society, we are piloting innovative ways of getting people to talk about constitutional issues. Over the summer we've hosted online discussion groups and poetry workshops and will be using other creative approaches to engage with different community groups over coming months. This is still work in progress, but we've already learnt a lot about the challenges and opportunities of having a national conversation on Wales' constitutional future.

The biggest challenge is that of involving people beyond the 'usual suspects' of politicians, political commentators, think tanks, and academics

The biggest challenge is that of involving people beyond the 'usual suspects' of politicians, political commentators, think tanks, and academics. We deliberately set out to talk to individuals and communities that are typically not considered to be very politically engaged. In this respect, so far, we haven't achieved what we had intended: those who signed up to our initial events have been white, mostly middle-aged, highly interested and – in many cases – already active in politics. For these people, online discussions and workshops worked well: it made participation easy, and the informal and open nature of the events gave ample space for those present to decide the content and the direction of the conversation. However, the online format doesn't work for everyone, and we are trying to address this problem by having follow-up conversations with community organisations and networks to get a sense of how to better engage with a wider range of citizens.

The kind of national conversation that we're advocating here is not one that can be had quickly or on a budget

Thinking about the terms in which a national conversation on Wales' constitutional future is had is also crucial: constitutional issues are highly complex and are typically discussed using technical and legal languages that can easily alienate people. We've tried to anchor our conversations in the issues that matter to people in their everyday lives; that's why we've started our conversations by asking 'what kind of Wales would you like to live in, and how can we get there?' It's a question that's worked well in giving plenty of scope for people to bring to the discussion the issues and values that are important to them, allowing clear themes to emerge as the basis of a vision for a future Wales.

It's much more difficult, however, to move from such exploratory conversations to more concrete discussions of, and proposals for, constitutional

Communities should be supported to hold their own conversations, kitchen table discussion style, in their own spaces

change. Part of the problem here is the limited understanding amongst the broader public of the current constitutional arrangements in Wales and the UK: a basic understanding of the specific nature of the constitutional status quo is necessary in order to consider how it might be reformed.

A successful national conversation on Wales' constitutional future thus has to create spaces in which three things can happen. First, it must give the wider public places in which people can develop an understanding of current political structures in engaging, accessible and relevant ways. Second, it needs to permit a collective imagining of what a future Wales might look like. And third, it has to connect people's visions for the future with the necessary translation into technical recommendations for constitutional reform – reform that is crucially faithful to those initial visions. Doing all this requires different approaches at different stages of the conversation. But the key challenge is to make sure that people's voices are present all the way through, although this will look different at each stage.

The kind of national conversation that we're advocating here is not one that can be had quickly or on a budget. It has to empower the people that we involve, and especially those whose voices are seldom heard in this type of debate. And it must enable them to bring their strengths and the voices of their lived experience to the conversation, to work in partnership with politicians and others who are keen to shape the constitutional debate.

A genuinely inclusive conversation will need to deploy a repertoire of innovative methods for inviting dialogue. Creative arts approaches can help in this respect: by their very nature they generate a different kind of invitation and conversational space, and the creative outputs can be shared widely to extend the reach of engagement. Equally, working directly with the communities and groups that we want to engage with will enable co-created conversations in the spaces where people already meet and in ways that are relevant to them. A successful national conversation is one that engages different people, in different places, in a variety of different ways.

Our recommendations, based on our exploratory work, are to have initial discussions with people already working in, and with, local communities; to develop events and formats in response to input from citizens themselves as to how and where the conversation should be held; and to enable citizens to come up with their own points of focus within the broader topic of constitutional futures. Communities should be supported to hold their own conversations, kitchen table discussion style, in their own spaces, to feed into the wider debate.

The community involvement approach in itself won't be enough to arrive at a blueprint for Wales' constitutional future. But for any such blueprint to be legitimate it has to start with – and put centre stage – the citizens who are impacted by, but rarely involved in, constitutional debates. It's the only way to give citizens a meaningful say in what a future Wales might look like and how it might operate. ➤

Anwen Elias is Reader in Politics and **Matt Jarvis** is Senior Lecturer in Literature and Place, both at Aberystwyth University; **Noreen Blanluet** is Director and **Mike Corcoran** Associate Consultant with the Co-production Network for Wales

To find out more about the project, visit www.constitutionalfutures.aber.ac.uk

The Ballymurphy Precedent

Gwion Owain *tells the story behind The Ballymurphy Precedent, a film detailing the struggle for justice of families who suffered one of the worst atrocities of the Troubles*

In January of 2017 I was contacted by the executive producer, Christopher Hird, who was looking for a producer and production company based in the nations that could put together a finance plan for a film to be based on the Ballymurphy families' struggle for justice. The director, Callum Macrae, had been nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize for his previous film *No Fire Zone: The Killing Fields of Sri Lanka* which had won several prizes as well as drawing praise from voices as diverse as Barack Obama, David Cameron, and the rapper M.I.A. *The Ballymurphy Precedent* would premiere at the Soho Curzon in August 2018 with an

The Ballymurphy Massacre unfolded over two days in a series of incidents that were neither caught on camera nor accurately reported in the press. It became the 'forgotten massacre' of the Troubles

opening night discussion chaired by Jon Snow and simulcast to fifty other cinemas. The television version titled *Massacre at Ballymurphy* was nominated for RTS, BAFTA, and Broadcast Magazine awards.

For a small one-man-band company in Caernarfon to be trusted with a flagship project from Channel 4 was a huge vote of confidence for my company Awen Media. Public service broadcasters in the UK are under a regulatory obligation to promote companies from the nations and regions. Channel 4, it must be noted, is one of the most proactive in this respect and we have seen indigenous companies from Wales, Scotland,

The Ballymurphy Massacre

The ninth day of August 2021 marked a tragic anniversary for the people of the Ballymurphy area in West Belfast. It was fifty years to the day since soldiers of the Parachute Regiment, as part of Operation Demetrius which introduced Internment without Trial to the already febrile and incendiary politics of Northern Ireland, marched into the Ballymurphy Estate and in a series of incidents over two days shot dead ten unarmed civilians. Another victim, Paddy McCarthy, died from a heart attack shortly after a confrontation with Paratroopers when he had ventured out to deliver food for the children of the Ballymurphy Estate. In the maelstrom of violence, hatred and murder that engulfed Northern Ireland during the 'Troubles' the Ballymurphy Massacre is significant both as a catalyst of further violence but also as an augur of another equally tragic but more notorious incident.

The events of 'Bloody Sunday' in Derry, six months after the Ballymurphy Massacre in January 1972, were brought to the attention of the public due to the presence of news cameras at the civil rights march in Derry. In the years between Bloody Sunday and the twelve-year-long and £200m Savile Inquiry the tragic events in Derry became part of the public consciousness of the Troubles. It was a high watermark of barbarity and failure of British policy in Ireland, the very worst atrocity visited upon the Catholic and Nationalist community which energised two decades of synaptic violence and killing.

By contrast the Ballymurphy Massacre unfolded over two days in a series of incidents that were neither caught on camera nor accurately reported in the press.

It became the 'forgotten massacre' of the Troubles. However, in the festering abyss of early 70s Belfast the significance of the events at Ballymurphy that August were far too easily dismissed by the authorities as Paratroopers defending themselves against IRA gunmen. Indeed, both the British Army's internal reporting processes and their press liaison operation were at best woefully inadequate to assess and record an incident of this magnitude; at worst, they were designed to protect soldiers and the Army hierarchy from any accountability for their actions.

The key figure in any appreciation of British policy is Brigadier Frank Kitson. He had arrived in Belfast from Kenya where he had been directing operations against the Mau Mau. He was considered an innovative military strategist at the time for his expertise in 'low intensity' operations and tackling insurgency. The one element of this original thinker's tactics was to scare and even attack the local populace to induce them to give up those playing an active role. The impact of Kitson's strategy in Northern Ireland cannot be underestimated in any history of the Troubles. If the lessons of Ballymurphy had been heeded it might have been possible to avoid 'Bloody Sunday'. Whilst it is too fantastical to suggest that it might have been possible to avoid the resulting decades of bloodshed the road to peace would have been immeasurably easier and quicker.

On May 11 2021 Mrs Justice Keegan delivered the verdict that the victims of the Ballymurphy massacre were entirely innocent of any wrongdoing. The narrative that the British Army had promoted that the victims were IRA gunmen was shown to be completely false.

Photo: Awen Media

Northern Ireland gain commissions where the centrifugal tendency of the production industry would always favour London based companies. This does not mean that the quota obligation is a sop to nations and regions or a hand hold; on the contrary, some of the best programming on television originates in the nations and the viewing figures and awards roster clearly support this.

What must be borne in mind is that independent producers working outside the M25 face several challenges. In an industry where personal relationships are often key to engendering trust the geographic distance can work against suppliers outside London. Add to that the metropolitan pull to London for talent and the ease of social and work relationships and the barriers to compete become ever more difficult for nations producers. Conversely, nations' indies are generally more adept at piecing together what are often complex finance plans from several sources which need to dovetail in terms of geographic spend and other requirements. The financing of Ballymurphy on the scale and ambition we felt was necessary to do justice to this story would not have been possible without the support of Ffilm Cymru and the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland and tax credits on both sides of the Irish Sea.

Producers in the nations are now facing the very real possibility that this delicate ecology, which allows creative and entrepreneurial businesses to exist and thrive, will be damaged and even destroyed. The UK Government's plans to privatise Channel 4 raise the

Photos: Awen Media

very real spectre of a gradual erosion of its remit to support nation indies. It will also almost certainly lead to less creative risk taking and fewer programmes with genuine social and political impact such as *Ballymurphy*. The current DCMS Consultation also raises the spectre of in-house production replacing, or at least partially replacing, programme supply from the independent sector.

It is worth looking at this in full appreciation of the context. There is no compelling argument for Channel 4 to be sold or privatised. It is self-funding in terms of advertising revenue and programme spend. The investment in the independent production sector has been key to the growth and innovation in the sector since the Communications Act 2003 which granted producers secondary and tertiary rights previously retained by commissioning broadcasters. The privatisation proposals are not simply an attack on one broadcaster but a whole cultural, economic and public service ecology. The television export sector is one of the few economic sectors left where UK Plc still enjoys some form of globally competitive trading position in a post-Brexit world.

A project of scale, ambition, and impact of the nature of *Ballymurphy* would be almost impossible to contemplate within a privatised Channel 4. The lessons of consolidation of the ITV franchises and the loss of national and regional hours should also be heeded. Privatisation will lead to a gradual but interminable loss of remit and the impact will be felt hardest in the Nations. In the short time left the Welsh Government should leverage all the influence at its disposal to support Channel 4. ➤

Gwion Owain is Managing Director and Producer at Awen Media

From Rewilding to Restoration

Siriol Griffiths *explores the concept of 'rewilding' – and why it is better to talk about the restoration of nature*

Rewilding got off to a rocky start in Wales. So much so that nowadays high profile environmental charities and organisations won't even use the word for fear of a backlash. There isn't a single instance of it on the Welsh Government's website either. But with Wales languishing sixteenth from the bottom out of 240 countries in an international nature league table, how do we move on from sometimes divisive terminology in order to see our natural environment thrive once more?

First coined in 1990 by the group Earth First!, in recent years the term 'rewilding' has provided the spark which has, despite its issues, undeniably ignited renewed interest in nature and conservation. In the UK, much of that stems from the writings of the activist George Monbiot. His 2013 book *Feral* is an influential work for the rewilding lobby. In it Monbiot writes: 'Rewilding, to me, is about resisting the urge to control nature and allowing it to find its own way.'

However, in scientific terms, the term carries no single meaning. In fact around a dozen definitions have been identified and 'rewilding' can mean anything from not mowing a patch of lawn in order to let wildflowers grow to removing human beings from the land in order to reintroduce species such as beavers, wildcats and wolves. The vagueness of the term is one of the things that makes it so polemic.

Much of the ill-feeling towards 'rewilding' in Wales began when the Summit to Sea programme was developed in 2017 on land around the north of Ceredigion and west Powys. It was awarded £3.4m via the Endangered Landscapes Programme, a collaboration between the University of Cambridge and numerous biodiversity conservation organisations. The main partner and lead in the venture was Rewilding Britain, a registered charity founded in 2015. Some of the other partners at the time included WWF Cymru, the Marine Conservation Society and RSPB Cymru.

Major concerns from the local community began to surface soon after its inception, with people insisting that plans ignored cultural, linguistic, social and economic factors. After several partners quit the project, Rewilding Britain eventually departed in the autumn of 2019 with the entire budget being returned.

RSPB Cymru then took up the reins and Summit to Sea started again from the beginning, and is once more in a developmental phase. Former Ynys Enlli warden Sian Stacey is its Project Development Officer. She says: 'We are in a better position than we were two years ago. People are speaking to us and certainly we're moving in the right direction. But these things take time and you can't just develop faith and trust overnight.'

'With regard to nature though, we need to act now – or yesterday in fact. And to me, the term "rewilding" was closing doors [when] what I needed was to open them with a slice of bara brith and a cup of tea in hand in order to talk to people. The way I work is [to] find what the common ground is amongst the community.

'Now we're in a period of co-designing the project *with* the community. Nobody is dictating terms. The term "rewilding" hasn't come out favourably here so we don't refer to it. It's actually a damaging term because it's not what the community wants.

'There isn't an easy catch-all word for what we are trying to achieve together, except for describing it as "restoring nature", which is something we all want to see.'

Meanwhile, bubbling away in the background has been an all-encompassing crisis involving biodiversity loss and escalating pollution, according to the UN Secretary-General. Speaking in May 2021, António Guterres said that humanity was 'waging a war on nature' – and that biodiversity is declining at an 'unprecedented and alarming rate' with one million species currently facing extinction.

A month after Guterres' speech, the Senedd became one of the world's first parliaments to declare a nature emergency. Delyth Jewell, Plaid Cymru MS for South Wales East, who introduced the motion said: 'We now have an obligation to reset biodiversity targets and to back those up with investment, with plans for nature-based solutions, projects to centre on species recovery and changes that will prioritise healthy green and blue habitats across Wales.'

Supporting her motion, Mike Hedges, Labour MS for Swansea East, said: 'The danger is a dystopian future, with the only mammals surviving being pets, farm animals and scavengers such as rats.'

What often gets lost in the discourse, however, is the fact that teams of ecologists and scientists have been working away quietly for years to restore biodiversity and reintroduce species. They've done it uncontroversially, without any buzzwords and often with very little funding. The results of their work are frequently cherished by the general public because they're embedded within our culture, both modern and historic.

After being reintroduced in England in the mid 1990s, the much-loved osprey made its way across to Wales, where it is now breeding in several locations. Numbers are on the up. The breeding pair Monty and Glesni at Cors Dyfi near Machynlleth even had starring roles in the BBC's Springwatch programme in 2013.

The pine marten was once one of our most common woodland carnivores, thriving amongst the trees and shrubs that blanketed much of Wales. The elusive and

What often gets lost in the discourse is that teams of ecologists and scientists have been working quietly for years to restore biodiversity and reintroduce species... uncontroversially, without any buzzwords and often with very little funding

Credit:
Jason Hornblow

opportunistic mammal even features in the ancient sixth-century Welsh nursery rhyme, 'Pais Dinogad'. Their numbers declined dramatically during the nineteenth and early twentieth century as a result of continued habitat loss and an increase in predator control. A tiny number persisted in the Cambrian Mountains, Sir Gaerfyrddin and Eryri.

Between 2015 and 2017, 51 pine martens were captured by the Vincent Wildlife Trust in Scotland and relocated to the Cambrian Mountains where they continue to thrive to this day. Visitors to the area can walk upon pine marten trails and visit the Pine Marten Den at Pontarfynach to learn more about the rare mammal.

David Bavin is the Senior Carnivore Project Officer for the Trust and was the Project Officer for the duration of the Welsh Pine Marten Recovery Project. He specialises in ecosystem restoration and more specifically in species reintroductions and environmental conflicts: 'The word "rewilding" was one that we avoided when we did the pine marten reintroduction. To us as biologists and ecologists, it was an ecosystem restoration and a species conservation project. What came out through conversations we were having locally was that rewilding was seen as a very threatening agenda.

'In terms of how we move on from that conflict generally, it's important to recognise that there is agreement within the agricultural community, traditional land-owning community, and rewilders in that they all want a healthy environment, and they don't want to lose biodiversity. Of course, there are different ideas about what is and what is not desirable biodiversity. But on the whole, people don't want to see a loss of nature. So there's consensus there.'

'What we have is a gap in communication which needs to be improved on and people from all corners need to be listened to.'

'It may seem bizarre to be debating the definition of a word but when it comes to policy making and funding, it becomes important'

Dr Craig Shuttleworth, Bangor University

The Victorian era saw grey squirrels introduced to Britain from North America. Since then, this invasive species has surged to a population around 2 million while red squirrel numbers decreased dramatically. By the end of the 1990s, the red squirrel population of Ynys Môn stood at a mere 40.

At the beginning of the millennium, ecologists who were determined to reintroduce and maintain red squirrels on the island began a mammoth effort. The current population of more than 700 continues to survive but needs constant monitoring and care, supported by a legion of fans and volunteers who share squirrel sightings and photographs across social media daily.

Dr Craig Shuttleworth from Bangor University has spent 28 years working to restore the red squirrel population of Ynys Môn. Last summer he began to re-introduce the pine marten to areas surrounding Bangor. He has written extensively about the pine marten and red squirrel as well as concepts surrounding rewilding. Dr Shuttleworth argues that it is a meaningless term because it cannot be quantified, and for scientists that is problematic: 'Scientific discourse requires precise language. So that's why the word "rewilding" is meaningless.

'It may seem bizarre to be debating the definition of a word – but when it comes to policy making and funding, it becomes important. Even more so if you're alienating a large proportion of the population. We need to bring people along, not shun them and cause anxiety.

'The idea of letting things run wild is also nonsensical because it's not that easy. Human beings have had an enormous effect on the landscape for thousands of years. We now have invasive species such as Japanese knotweed, signal crayfish and the Asian hornet here. That requires management by human beings.

'Rewilding is a marketing term essentially, and it's good that the general public's interest in conservation and ecology has been ignited by it. But equally, we need to move on from it and describe it as the 'restoration of nature', which is what it is. And I think we already have done to a large extent in Wales.'

Siriol Griffiths is a freelance multimedia journalist exploring Wales' environmental issues

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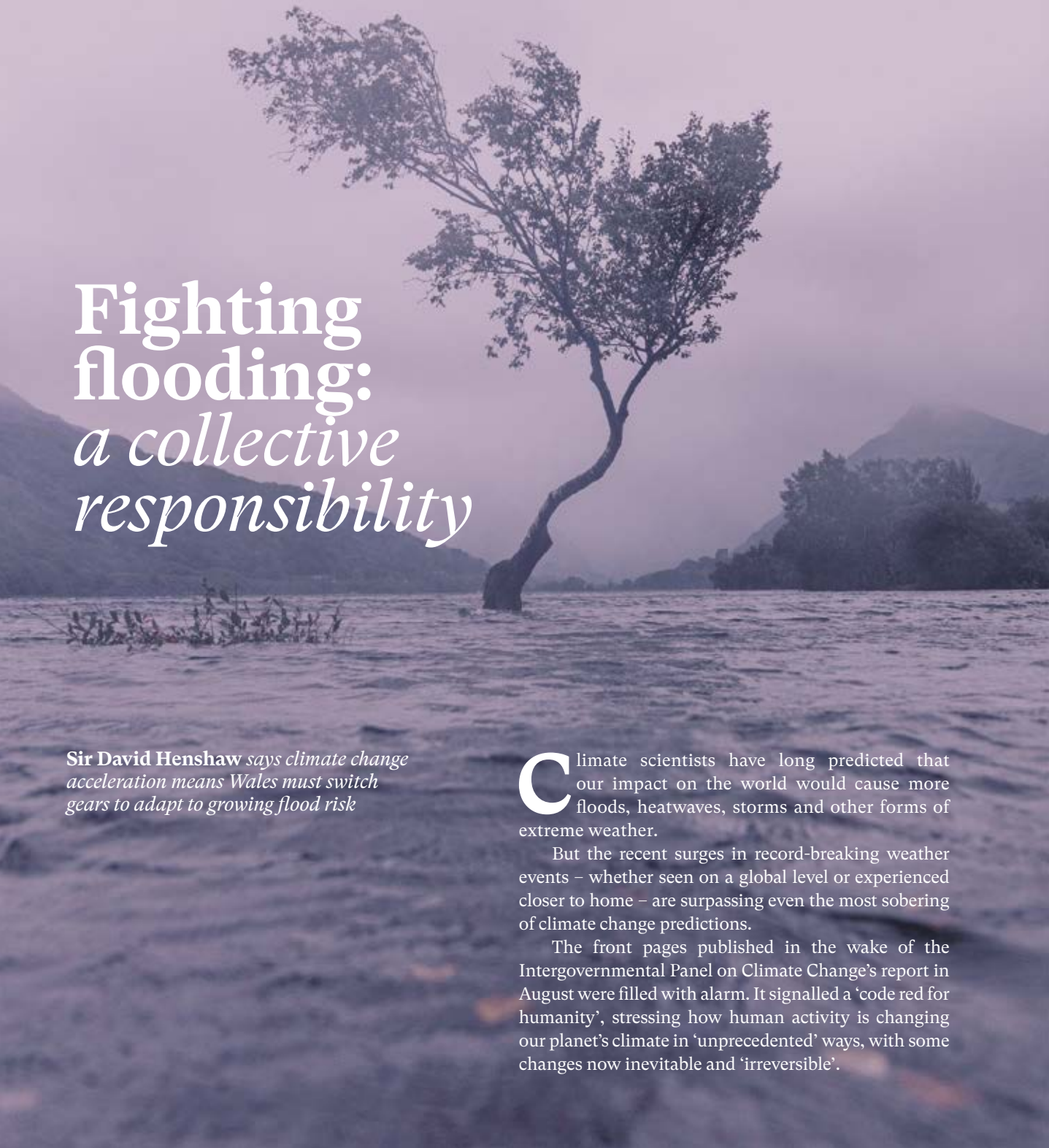


Fighting flooding: *a collective responsibility*

Sir David Henshaw *says climate change acceleration means Wales must switch gears to adapt to growing flood risk*

Climate scientists have long predicted that our impact on the world would cause more floods, heatwaves, storms and other forms of extreme weather.

But the recent surges in record-breaking weather events – whether seen on a global level or experienced closer to home – are surpassing even the most sobering of climate change predictions.

The front pages published in the wake of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's report in August were filled with alarm. It signalled a 'code red for humanity', stressing how human activity is changing our planet's climate in 'unprecedented' ways, with some changes now inevitable and 'irreversible'.

It left us feeling in no uncertain terms that this is not a tale of science fiction. It is an issue for the here and now.

As the UK prepares to host the UN Climate Change conference (COP26) in November, the stakes for how we tackle the climate emergency are now higher than ever.

For those who experienced the overwhelming impacts of some of the most significant flood events seen in Wales since 1979, you will know that the climate shockwaves are already being felt right on our doorsteps.

In February 2020, we saw the devastating impact of record rainfall and flooding caused by Storms Ciara, Dennis and Jorge. By the end of the year, four other storms had hit UK shores before Storm Christoph arrived to unleash its deluge in January.

We saw how disruptive the rising flood waters can be for people, homes and businesses, and how the distress and costs can last far beyond the subsiding of the waters.

By the time the year had drawn to a close, the record books had been torn up. February 2020 was the wettest February on record, and the fifth wettest month since records began in 1862. It was also the fifth wettest winter on record.

One of Natural Resources Wales' (NRW) primary roles is to reduce and manage flood risk from main rivers and the coast in Wales. We do that by improving awareness and access to information on flood risk, advising on planning decisions and by building and maintaining flood defences. We also warn and inform when flooding threatens, deploying our teams on the ground to work with partners to mitigate against flood impacts in communities.

Our defences quietly protect hundreds of thousands of people in 73,000 properties across Wales around the clock. Investments made to these crucial pieces of infrastructure since previous major flood events have improved our resilience significantly, meaning thousands more properties are now at lower risk of flooding.

During Storm Dennis, our defences were effective in the protection of an estimated 19,000 properties. Our flood management scheme in St Asaph, built to protect 293 homes and 121 businesses in the city, prevented a repeat of the devastating flooding experienced in 2012.

But just as climate change and flood risk is progressive and layered with uncertainty, how we invest in and manage our defence options also requires flexible responses, accepting that we cannot build our way out of the risks we face.

From its steep-sided valleys to exposed coastal areas, Wales' varied terrain poses significant challenges when it comes to managing the consequences of heavy rainfall

From its steep-sided valleys to exposed coastal areas, Wales' varied terrain poses significant challenges when it comes to managing the consequences of heavy rainfall.

When considering how to defend areas most at risk, NRW will always work with local communities to identify the best combination of measures that tackle the specific threats.

Take Fairbourne in Gwynedd as an example. Defending this low-lying coastal village from potential tidal flooding from the Mawddach estuary and river flooding is a growing challenge. NRW's £6.8m defence scheme on the estuary was completed in 2015 and helps reduce the risk to over 400 properties in the area.

But while protective seawalls and defences can reduce the risk for communities located in places prone to coastal erosion and flooding like this, they can soon become unviable if the risks – like those precipitated by climate change – escalate over time.

Such issues are not confined to this village. While we continue to work closely with Gwynedd Council and residents to manage the fight against rising sea levels in Fairbourne, there are other communities right across the UK that will face similar risks and difficult decisions around their viability over the next century.

Further south, our urban areas also face their own challenges. The Crindau area of Newport has a long history of flooding. Backed by the Welsh Government, our £14 million Crindau Flood Management scheme

Sir David Henshaw

was completed in February and designed with climate change and predicted sea level rise in mind. The scheme can be adapted as necessary in future, and includes community benefits such as new footpaths, cycle paths and seating areas.

Finding a flood risk solution for the village of Dinas Powys in the Vale of Glamorgan that was acceptable to all parts of the community formed part of an extensive consultation process. The village is at high risk of flooding from the Cadoxton river and its tributary the East Brook, yet a viable scheme that has broad community support has yet to be found.

Options to build flood walls in the village or to develop an upstream storage system were not favoured for reasons including potential impacts on woodland and walking routes in the area and cost.

However, the option to deliver smaller, natural flood management measures across the catchment was favoured by many. While this approach will not provide the same level of flood risk reduction as the other measures put forward, NRW is committed to working with the community to explore this approach further and to move forward positively in the ambition to reduce flood risk in this area in future.

But we all have a responsibility to know our own flood risk and to take personal responsibility to protect ourselves and our property before the rain starts to fall.

Advances in the range of services available on our website means that people can now identify their flood risk simply by entering a postcode. It also includes information on what to do before, during and after a flood, how to sign up to NRW's free flood warning system and steps to take to develop a community flood plan.

But regrettably, it often takes major events to force us to reflect on how prepared we really are for more extreme weather. A year ago, we published our reviews into the February 2020 floods where we called for a seismic shift in how Wales responds to climate challenges and increased flood risk. We stressed that difficult conversations needed to be had, and complex decisions had to be made. We have been working with the Welsh Government and our partners to do what we can to move this crucial process forward.

We must accept that we will never win the war against the forces of nature. But there also has to be a fundamental consideration by governments, flood risk authorities and communities of the very stark choices before us on how the risks are managed and delivered within the resources.

Flood defences will always be at the heart of managing the nation's risk. But we need to accept that in some cases, there will be flooding. We need to build or convert properties to be more resilient to flood water, so that people and businesses can bounce back quicker when the waters start to rise.

We also need to adapt to the changing climate. We'll need to be more innovative and look at new approaches to work more effectively with landowners to make space for the huge quantities of water we are seeing during floods. This includes taking a wider catchment approach to looking upstream for new ways to store or slow the flow of water, and how we can embed natural flood management measures where they can have an effect.

These can be difficult, expensive issues with no silver bullet solutions. Wales will need to shift gears urgently to ensure we adapt and become more resilient. NRW will continue to invest in our people, technology, infrastructure, systems and processes to undertake our flood risk duties, but we cannot do it alone.

The impact of climate change is something for all of us to tackle as a collective and it must be tackled without delay. ➤

Sir David Henshaw is chair of Natural Resources Wales

GETTING STARTED IN...

Teaching

Hannah Watkin *explores the effect of the pandemic on student teachers in Wales*

Since the Covid-19 pandemic hit the United Kingdom in March 2020, students of all ages – from nurseries to universities – have had their teaching severely disrupted by the restrictions imposed upon society. As a result, student teachers have had a particularly turbulent start to their careers in the education sector.

Maudie Hughes is a mature student now moving into her third year of a BA in Primary Education with QTS (Qualified Teaching Status) at the University of Wales Trinity St David (UWTSD). She was in her first year of training when the pandemic hit.

'I remember worried lunchtime conversations. [The week before lockdown] staff frantically put together information packs that could be sent home with the children, anticipating there'd be some sort of lockdown. But I don't think we had any idea that it would be as long as it was.'

Following the announcement of lockdown, all of Maudie's teaching moved online. She told me she hasn't visited UWTSD's campus in 15 months. 'I've missed the ability to interact with people face-to-face during lectures. You can do it on Teams, but you can't bounce off each other and pursue conversations in the same way. However, the way in which access to additional learning opportunities has been increased through being online has been great.'

Matthew Hobbs, a 21-year-old recent graduate from Bangor's BSc in Design Technology with QTS, was in his second year when lockdown was announced. Covid restrictions made learning to be a secondary school Design and Technology teacher tough. 'Teaching DT requires many specialist tools and equipment which aren't available at home. There was a massive disparity between what students could do – some could easily complete our junk-modelling challenges, while others would struggle to find a piece of paper. Even after we got back into school, most of the practical work still couldn't be taught as it requires you to be in close proximity to the students in order to help show them how it's done. Because of social distancing, that remained impossible.'

Maudie also explained how Covid restrictions affected teachers' connections with students when teaching in-person. 'It's challenging being masked all day. Kids, especially the younger age groups, respond to facial expressions. And even though they might not

‘Having survived teacher training in the middle of a pandemic, we’re probably going to be able to cope with anything that comes along in the future’

Maudie Hughes, trainee primary school teacher

Clockwise from left:
Maudie Hughes, Matthew Hobbs, David Stacey

have trouble hearing, they need to see your mouth move to know you’re talking to them.’

She went on to say rules regarding who could socialise with whom owing to school bubble restrictions also meant there were fewer opportunities for student teachers to learn from other staff on the job.

UWTSD tutor David Stacey explained how the department’s close relationship with the schools to which they send students on placement helped solve some of the preliminary problems the pandemic had thrown both of their ways. ‘Our students created mini online teaching resources which were put on our social media for schools to link to parents who might have been thinking *what on earth am I going to do with my child today?* From this our students gained teaching experience while being a valuable help to the teachers working out what to do in the schools.’

Matt told me how disheartened he was by the false assumption that teachers weren’t having to work hard during the pandemic. ‘I remember some articles suggested teachers were having an extended holiday because all the schools were shut. Truth is, we’ve worked throughout the whole thing. Curriculums,

‘The pandemic is going to affect teachers’ workloads for a long time. Some students just haven’t been able to engage with online learning, and certainly regarding practical subjects [there is] a huge skills deficit’

Matthew Hobbs, NQT in Design Technology

'Some of our students had to cope with family members who were ill, and who in some cases even passed away from Covid. As tutors, we've had to think quite hard about how we support everyone on an individual case to case basis'

David Stacey, teacher training tutor at UWTSD

certainly in creative subjects like DT, have basically had to be rewritten from scratch, and GCSEs and A Levels have still had to be assessed, even if in a different way.'

'The pandemic is going to affect teachers' workloads for a long time. Some students just haven't been able to engage with online learning, and certainly regarding practical subjects, students who might want to take them at GCSE or pursue them as careers currently have a huge skills deficit which will need addressing. Teachers are going to have to catch everyone up.'

Maudie also emphasised the amount of work teachers have had to do during the pandemic. 'One of my coursemates had to create lessons and load them onto the online classroom even after they returned to delivering lessons in the classroom, because there were still some children who were not attending school physically. It almost doubled her workload. We often hear how teachers are flexible, adaptable, and creative, and Covid has probably given more opportunity for the profession to demonstrate that. But it's not always been easy. It's certainly been quite trying at times.'

David stressed how tutors have been very sensitive to recognising what a tough a time this has been for students. 'Some of our students had to cope with family members who were ill, and who in some cases even passed away from Covid. As tutors, we've had to think quite hard about how we support everyone on an individual case to case basis, and have made sure that we've supported everyone in the best way that we can.'

Key to this has been avoiding dwelling too much on what has been lost during the pandemic, and focusing instead on celebrating what has still been gained, despite the confines. 'It's really easy to slip into this deficit model, and focus on how students haven't had this experience, or that. And yes, students exiting our current programmes have not had as much face-to-face teaching experience in the classroom as students have had in previous years. But they've also had opportunities which they never would have had before.'

'Our students now understand digital learning far better than any year group in the past. So there are also positive conversations to be had about what we've been able to achieve in the last 18 months, and what we'll want to keep in the course, going forwards.'

However, a lack of face-to-face teaching experience is still a big worry for recently qualified teachers.

Matt told me about one PGCE student who recently turned down a job offer owing to fears they weren't ready to enter a classroom, and another who is vexed about having had no placement experience because of having to shield throughout the pandemic.

Of his own experience applying for jobs, Matt said: 'There were a lot of online interviews, and then an in-person teaching aspect. I felt very underprepared for that, as not only was I going in to teach a lesson as a newcomer to the school, but also as someone who hadn't actually done an in-person lesson properly for about a year.'

However, Matt's application was successful, and he started teaching in September.

Despite the challenges and missed opportunities of the pandemic, most student teachers remain hopeful about their futures in the sector.

'Quite a few of us have taken the view that having survived teacher training in the middle of a pandemic, we're probably going to be able to cope with anything that comes along in the future,' Maudie concluded, reflecting the admirable resilience and optimism her cohort of students have shown this last year. ▸

Hannah Watkin is a journalist and member of *the welsh agenda's* editorial group

Suicide Prevention and Future Generations

Sarah Stone *says we need to embed a preventative approach*

People who experience multiple adverse childhood experiences as children often raise their own children in households where adverse childhood experiences are more likely

Samaritans Cymru exists to reduce the number of people who die by suicide. In order to work toward this goal, we have to operate within a broad spectrum – one which encompasses preventative and early intervention models alongside crisis care and mitigating risk in high-risk locations such as bridges. On one end of the scale, we believe it is crucial to reach those who may be at risk of suicidality early on in childhood, and one of the most important areas of work within our focus on children and young people is the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) agenda and exploring methods of prevention and early intervention.

Our policy focus includes an emphasis on children and young people as a priority group in order to safeguard against suicide risk in the future. There are many external factors in a child's life which can increase their risk of mental illness and subsequent suicide risk. ACEs are stressful or traumatic events which occur in childhood and significantly affect people's health and wellbeing. These include verbal, mental, sexual or physical abuse, emotional or physical neglect, growing up in a household where there are adults experiencing substance misuse and having a member of the household in prison.

Since 2016, Public Health Wales has produced a number of studies which have explored the effects of ACEs on adults in Wales. The first report – published that year – indicated that 47% of adults in Wales suffered at least one ACE and 14% had suffered four or more. A history of ACEs can underpin a whole range of detrimental behaviours which can begin in adolescence and carry on in later life. These include poor educational attainment, criminal behaviour and mental illness and suicidality. Perhaps most significantly here, people who experience multiple adverse childhood experiences as children often raise their own children in households where adverse childhood experiences are more likely. This creates a cycle of inequality and adversity which can be difficult to escape. A key message is that we need to support individuals and policies which help to break these cycles, share the many examples of good practice which are doing this and build on them.

In 2018, Public Health Wales released another study on mental illness and ACEs. This study found that compared with people with no ACEs, those with four or more were 3.7 times more likely to currently be receiving treatment for mental illness, 6.1 times more likely to have ever received treatment for mental illness and most significantly, 9.5 times more likely to have ever felt suicidal or self-harmed. This equates to 4 in 10 people with 4 or more ACEs reporting that they had felt suicidal or self-harmed in their lifetime.

Within our own service, we offer support to children and young people in a number of ways. We support schools, college communities and other youth settings across Wales and the UK through our postvention service (Step by Step), lesson plans (DEAL – Developing Emotional Awareness and Listening) and school talks. These services aim to support children and young people through early intervention – by helping them recover from a suicide within their school and through dedicated lesson plans on coping strategies and

Self-harm

Self-harm is a sign of serious emotional distress, and while most people who self-harm will not go on take their own life, studies have found it is a strong risk factor for suicide. We also know self-harm is more common among young people. Research suggests that 1 in 4 young women and 1 in 10 young men have self-harmed at some point in their life.

Earlier this year, we launched a report called 'The right support at the right time? Improving the availability and quality after self-harm in Wales'. This report presented a number of findings based on various methodology including a survey of people who had self-harmed, our service data and a Wales research roundtable.

Self-harm often emerges during adolescence. Over two-thirds (70%) of survey respondents in Wales had self-harmed for the first time aged 17 or under and 44% were between the ages of 11–15. For the period 2007-2016, age specific self-harm admissions regardless of suicidal intent in Wales showed the highest rate among females aged 15–19 years. There has also been an increase in self-harm rates amongst those aged 10–17 in Wales. There is no conclusive evidence to explain why self-harm is increasing. It could be attributed to reduced stigma, meaning more people are being recorded as presenting with self-harm because seeking help has become more normalised. This is possibly alongside improved management of self-harm in young people. However, this is unlikely to explain all the increase.

Schools and universities, and in particular secondary schools, have a key role to play in providing early, preventative support to people who have self-harmed before their needs escalate. However, in our survey, people were less likely to seek support from schools, universities or work, compared to some other sources, both over their lifetime and following their most recent experience of self-harm. Self-harm is complex, and there are many factors particularly affecting young people that are associated with an increased risk of self-harm, such as academic stress, worry about sexual orientation, or history of sexual abuse. Adolescence can also be a time of major change. Many people move away from home to live at university or start work and this can cause a gap in support, for example registering with a new GP, reduced contact with family or changing friendship groups. Offering children and young people the right support and equipping them with the skills to cope with distress can act as a preventative measure and can help break cycles of self-harming behaviour. It can also help children and young people develop alternative ways of coping

We also need to recognise and promote understanding of the ways in which young people have been hugely affected by the restrictions resulting from the pandemic, both socially and economically. Our callers discussed self-harm with us once every two minutes in 2019. We have seen an increase in the number of contacts about self-harm during the pandemic, though evidence suggests rates of self-harm have remained relatively constant over the past year. Young people who self-harm already struggled to access support before the pandemic, and there were initially steep falls in UK hospital presentations for self-harm during the first national lockdown. Although these have begun to return towards pre-pandemic levels, we have significant concerns about how young people who self-harm have coped during this time. Young people have told us that lack of access to mental health support is a major issue. Similarly, young people's reduced access to community support services or networks, such as support provided in schools, social activities, or physical activity groups, was a common cause of distress. Our volunteers suggested that young people saw the loss of these support structures or coping mechanisms as a key driver for the decline in their mental health.

Early research suggests that young people, particularly young women, have experienced much greater declines in their mental health during the pandemic, compared to others. Our research adds further evidence that more young people may be struggling as a result of the pandemic.

identifying distress. These outreach components of our service are hugely important but in policy terms, we continue to work in collaboration with organisations and sectors in Wales to increase awareness of suicide risk in children and young people.

In our conversations with young people four key themes emerge: access to mental health and self-harm support, family tensions, lack of peer contact and negativity about the future.

We must therefore embed a public health approach to poor mental health and adversity experienced by children and young people by placing a primary focus on prevention rather than cure alone. Investment in prevention and early intervention can reduce human, social and economic costs. Since the Donaldson review in 2015, we have continued to call for statutory mental health education in schools. Emotional health programmes in schools should be viewed as a form of promotion, prevention and early intervention which could reduce pressure on Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), reduce specific mental health problems, increase academic achievement and reduce exclusion. We believe the new curriculum, which places a focus on mental health on the face of the bill, provides us with a unique opportunity to reach children and young people early on. This can be viewed as a downstream intervention and one which we have not had such clear access to before.

Emotional health programmes in schools should be viewed as a form of early intervention which could reduce pressure on CAMHS, reduce specific mental health problems, increase academic achievement and reduce exclusion

We also need to recognise and promote wider understanding of the link between ACEs, mental illness and suicidality. ACEs are too often part of a self-perpetuating cycle in which inequality is entrenched. Intervention to reduce ACEs can have a major effect on health, poverty and educational attainment and must be developed and promoted through public and professional awareness. Schools, local health services, local authorities, public services and the wider public sector must invest and work to reduce ACEs, their impact on individuals and, most significantly, understand the benefits of intervening in the cycle of ACEs.

When approaching suicide prevention, we must always remember that the causes of suicide are complex. There is rarely one cause or reason. However, we know what the risk factors are and significantly in this area, we know there are opportunities to intervene early on. To minimise suicide in Wales, we need to cast our net wide and this must include children and young people. We must act now to protect our future generations. ➤

Sarah Stone is Executive Director for Samaritans Cymru

Levelling-up global solidarity

Peter Frederick Gilbey *says it's time for Wales to step up on international development*

Wales has a long tradition of global solidarity. In 1936, newly released from prison for 'riotous objection' to a fascist meeting in Tonypandy, miner Harry Dobson promptly asked: 'How do I get to Spain?' Dobson went on to join around 200 other volunteers from Wales to fight for the Second Spanish Republic against fascist forces.

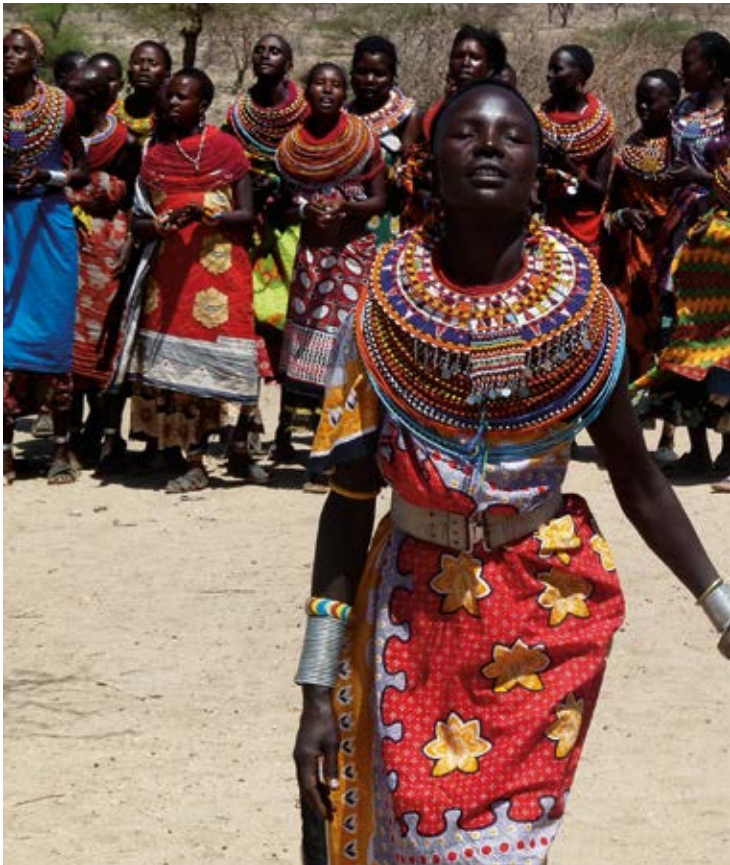
In 1944, Polish-Jewish refugee Josef Herman arrived in Ystradgynlais and found a home. 'I stayed here because I found all I required. I arrived here a stranger for a fortnight; the fortnight became eleven years', he said. Herman gained the affectionate nickname Joe Bach from the community.

More recently, as the Covid-19 pandemic hit, citizens across the country stepped up to provide support to those in need and shielding from the virus in their communities. As a nation, we also stepped up for the global community, donating surplus personal protective equipment to our partners in Namibia, via the Phoenix Project at Cardiff University.

Charities and individuals across the country are continuing this tradition of global solidarity through partner-led projects in low and middle-income countries across the world. In Monmouthshire, Bees for Development are supporting local partners in Ethiopia to promote sustainable agriculture. Jamie's Fund, based out of Flintshire, works with partners in Uganda to improve the provision of healthcare and mental health services. The North Wales Africa Society works with the African diaspora in Wales to achieve a vibrant inclusive society. In 2006, Swansea-based Interburns began as a link between health professionals here and in India. It aims to transform the way care for burn injuries is delivered. Since then, it has grown into a global organisation leading transformational improvement in burn care provision across the board according to a recent study published in the *Journal of the International Society for Burn Injuries*.

Through the Welsh Government's Wales and Africa Programme, Hub Cymru Africa supports the sector in Wales to grow, mitigate risks, enhance quality, network and improve inclusion of the African diaspora. But we can and must do more.

The Wales Act 2017 sets out that 'international relations, regulation in international trade, and



Spend on international development, as proportion of budget

Scottish Government
2.5%

Welsh Government
0.42%

international development assistance and cooperation' are reserved at Westminster with the British Government. However, in 2005, the then British Secretary of State for International Development, The Rt Hon Hilary Benn MP, signed a 'letter of comfort' inviting the Scottish Government to engage in international development formally. This invitation followed a request from the then Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport in the Scottish Government, Patricia Ferguson. This was done under the provision of the Scotland Act 1998 in which 'assisting a Minister of the Crown' allowed the devolved authority to act in a reserved competence.

It was not until the Wales Act 2017, when our conferred powers constitution was replaced with a reserved powers model, that the potential to align with Scotland in this way became possible. The new Wales Act contained similar provisions where matters of foreign affairs are not reserved to Westminster if the matters are 'assisting' British Ministers. As yet, no letter of comfort has been requested by nor given to the Welsh Government.

Wales is, however, responsible for sustainable development and all it encompasses, being the first country in the Western world to have a duty to promote sustainable development explicitly stated in our founding constitution, the Government of Wales Act 1998. It is from this section of the Act that the global solidarity sector has grown and been promoted by the Welsh Government, thus far.

The Welsh Government has set some noble targets and aspirations to promote global solidarity within Wales. In 2002, we were co-developer and an original signatory of the *Gauteng Declaration* – where representatives of 23 sub-state governments and several associations of sub-state governments met in Johannesburg during the *World Summit on Sustainable Development* and committed themselves to sustainable development.

Now is surely the time for our new Minister to present our international strategy to the British Government, and to request our own 'letter of comfort'

In 2006, following intense public pressure and the Make Poverty History campaign, the *Wales for Africa Programme* was launched by the then First Minister, the late Rhodri Morgan, to develop 'a distinct Welsh contribution' to global development. The programme was borne out of an expectation from the people that there should be a Welsh internationalist response to the disasters of the early 2000s, including the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami.

Wales became the world's first Fair Trade Nation in 2008 following a two-year campaign by the Wales Fair Trade Forum (precursor to Fair Trade Wales) and in 2015, the Senedd passed the Well-being of Future Generations Act. This seminal Act set out seven well-being goals for the nation – the final goal being Wales' global responsibility.

In pursuit of this goal, the global solidarity sector can play an even more integral and major role. Currently, the charities and organisations here operate on a micro-scale, directly with partners, not via national governments. The sector is supported through a much appreciated grant from the Welsh Government and to a lesser extent, the British Government. However, compared with our partners in Scotland, the sector is operating on a much smaller budget and resources.

The Scottish Government has committed £10 million per year to international development, supplemented by £1 million to humanitarian emergencies and £3 million to global climate justice; in total about 2.5% of their total annual budget. By comparison, in Wales, £925,000 is committed to international development; 0.42% of the Welsh Government's annual budget.

With the appointment of a dedicated Minister for Social Justice in the Welsh Government, and an election in which three-quarters of voters backed parties who want a stronger Senedd with more powers, now is surely the time for our new Minister to present our international strategy to the British Government, and to request our own 'letter of comfort'. It is a fundamental strategic priority for the Welsh Government's maturing international presence. The sector is ready and eager for this next step. A step that is becoming an existential necessity after the past year in which traditional fundraising routes for many Welsh groups were blocked and financial support from the British Government was indefinitely cut – a broken manifesto promise and a devastating blow to the world's poorest.

Our national parliament was set up to bring decision making closer to the people and to inspire better decisions. Since then, it has grown in strength and scope. The Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015 is a logical consequence of that inspiration for better decision making. The Wales Act 2017 allows for the logical progression: a 'letter of comfort' enabling our Welsh Government to 'assist' UK ministers in international development.

In July 2021, Prime Minister Boris Johnson told the House of Commons: 'It would be a travesty if honourable Members were to give the impression that the UK is somehow retreating from the field of international development or lacking in global solidarity.' He then went on to push through a vote confirming huge swinging cuts to the overseas development aid (ODA) budget – a budget that already faced a reduction, being pegged to the UK's gross national income. As a result, 'Global Britain' is the only country in the G7 to cut its ODA budget during a global pandemic. That was a bad decision. Let's make better decisions, conscious that the choices we make will have profound impacts beyond our borders, and beyond our lifetimes. ➤

'Global Britain' is the only country in the G7 to cut its ODA budget during a global pandemic

Peter Frederick Gilbey is Communications Manager at Hub Cymru Africa. @freddygilbs @HubCymruAfrica

The irrefutable weakness of federalism

John Ball *argues that federal 'solutions' would never work in a UK context*

In the Spring/Summer 2021 edition of *the welsh agenda*, Glyndwr Cenydd Jones articulated some timely and thought-provoking ideas on the future governance of Wales.

His arguments for some forms of federalism were persuasive, but ultimately failed the acid test – what is the best way to drive the nation forward?

Whatever might happen, the status quo is not an option. There are federalists and 'home rulers' in the Labour Party and the Lib Dems, some Welsh Tories and whatever Plaid Cymru might say in public, its policy is also federalism. This enthusiasm is a response to Boris Johnson's clear dislike of devolution, but more so the phenomenal growth of YesCymru and the growing debate on independence. But for how long, and indeed how genuine, is this enthusiasm for federalism going to last?

And indeed, what exactly is the federal alternative? In his article, Jones suggests three alternatives, each with its own strengths – but all lacking clear, full legislative and executive powers for any future government.

Devolution

Jones touches on this. As presently structured, devolution within the UK is piecemeal and confused with the four constituent nations having different powers. And powers that *prima facie* appear to be more localised are often divided. The Senedd, for example, lacks powers over planning and operational issues involving green energy, and there is no control over the police or any form of judiciary. These powers – and others – differ between the devolved administrations of the UK.

A major responsibility of the devolved administrations is economic development – but without full and appropriate powers this remains a real weakness. Assistance with loans, grants and business services are clear duties of the Senedd but have limited scope. Devolved taxation powers are confused and limited to some influence over income tax and minor taxes. These powers too differ between the devolved administrations,

A major responsibility of the devolved administrations is economic development – but without full and appropriate powers this remains a real weakness

as do borrowing powers. Any tax revenue raised from these sources is offset against the annually awarded block grant, further illustrating the reluctance of the centre to ease political and financial control.

There is no overarching macroeconomic policy. Fiscal and monetary policy; the ability to use or amend taxes, issue currency, amend interest rates, raise further or international finance, exchange rates and balance of payments – all of which are instruments of economic policy – remain with the UK Government.

In summary, devolution as presently constituted across the nations of the UK is inconsistent, in many ways illogical, and almost certainly unsustainable.

Federalism

As presented by Jones, this would require a written constitution – a massive leap of faith as Westminster governments of all shades, over centuries, have resisted – indeed taken pride in – not having a written constitution. This will not change.

As a democratic device which brings democracy and decision making closer to the people, federalism clearly has some attraction in its explicit recognition of the existence of the four nations that currently constitute the UK.

But the UK would remain a unitary kingdom and it therefore follows that even with substantial federal functions, the most important levers of policy and the economy would be reserved to the centre: the central bank; fiscal and monetary policy; the main sources of and rules on taxation, currency and legislation seen as relevant to the UK. Such reserved powers would mean that the centre (London) would, as today, have an advantage over the federal states.

The idea of a four-nation federated state within the UK is sometimes seen as a way forward both to satisfy national aspirations and to decentralise government. The reality is that the existing devolution model clearly shows that any serious attempt to establish such a system will meet with resistance from the centre.

Confederal and Confederalism-Federalism

Jones presents these two forms separately, but however titled, these options are similar. Each has an attraction in reflecting, in a significant way, the reality of the four nations that currently constitute the UK whilst contemporaneously retaining the UK as a unit.

Such structures assume each nation within the confederation exists on a basis of interaction between essentially sovereign states with separate governments.

Any arrangement would be through treaty and most activities of government would be within each nation's powers although any agreement is likely to be complicated.

These systems require some form of overarching central body made up of the four nations in parliamentary form. Although in theory the four nations acquire substantial self-government, and notwithstanding significant decentralised power, the federated states remain part of the UK.

Jones suggests that confederal-federalism provides such a strong status to the home nations that each would have a seat at the UN; quite how this fits with the UK or indeed UN policy is unclear. It remains the case however that major policy decisions on defence, international relations, the economy, monetary and exchange rate policy would apply to the entire UK. Ultimate sovereignty remains with the UK.

All of the above would improve decision making and bring democracy closer to the people, however whatever advantages federalism might present – and indeed, whichever model were adopted – there would remain insurmountable basic obstacles.

The first is the one which supporters of federalism find useful to disregard: power is retained at the centre. The UK government remains the ultimate final arbiter, able to amend or revoke powers previously decentralised. This power can be used to change the relationship, invariably in favour of the centre, so clearly illustrated recently by attempted power grabs from the Johnson government.

The second follows the first: the centre retains control over the most important legislative and economic instruments of government. Therefore no decentralised federal administration is truly in control.

Whichever way this is dressed, Wales remains a part of the UK, the empire mentality, a holder of nuclear weapons and without any power to influence international events. The Westminster bubble elite would remain and investment in England would remain the priority, whatever the written constitution might say.

There is an irrefutable weakness behind the argument for a UK federal structure. Countries with a successful federal structure such as Australia, Canada and Germany are *single nation states*.

The UK state is not: it is made up of four constituent nations with their own distinct issues and problems, cultures, social values and languages, all of which would be of lesser importance under any form of federalism.

Finally, and fundamentally, federalism however dressed is not – and never will be – about improving government, democracy or any of the suggested benefits. It is ultimately about retaining the existence of the United Kingdom.

Dr John Ball is a former lecturer in economics at Swansea University

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Disinformation: *is Wales at a greater risk?*

Professor Martin Innes *argues the Welsh Government and the Senedd must move to protect Welsh media and politics from disinformation*

During the afternoon of 24 July 2021, a crowd of over one hundred protestors gathered outside of the Cardiff home of First Minister Mark Drakeford.

The protest, which had started earlier in the day in the centre of the City, involved a coalition of anti-lockdown, anti-vaccine, and anti-mask groups, alongside some more established radical political entities. It came together as part of a coordinated series of events spanning a number of global cities, including London, Paris and Sydney

Although fortunately no violence occurred in Cardiff, it is the latest signal of how a toxic cocktail of digital disinformation and political polarisation online is translating into increasingly worrying offline behaviour.

The events in Cardiff demonstrate how the coronavirus pandemic and our collective responses to it have been especially susceptible to being influenced by a variety of conspiracy theories and disinformation. These have variously claimed, amongst other things, that vaccines cause infertility, and are part of a 'deep state' plot to monitor and track citizens' movements.

These ideas have underpinned the rapid rise of innovative and intriguing online conspiracy movements such as QAnon, as well as inducing vaccine hesitancy and resistance amongst some young people and minority communities.

Such concerns about coronavirus have been shaped and influenced by a wider climate of concern about how disinformation – defined as deliberately communicated false information – is having an impact across a range of domains of social life. This most infamously included the 2016 US Presidential election, where fake social media accounts run by operatives based in St Petersburg by the Russian state-linked Internet Research Agency were detected trying to manipulate voter opinions and behaviours.

Subsequently it has appeared that almost every high profile, contentious political incident has acted as a magnet for fake news, conspiracies, and rumours.

Set against this backdrop, for the past three years, my research team at Cardiff University has been engaged in a large-scale research programme seeking to understand the causes and consequences of disinformation upon social and political life, and tracking and tracing specific episodes of it, across a range of political and social domains, right across Europe.

This has included working on coronavirus and public health rumours, trying to detect attempts to subvert the integrity of elections, and how disinforming messages are used to amplify doubt, discord and distrust around major policy debates.

Key stories our work has informed include identifying a Russian state 'hack and leak' operation

using Reddit in the lead-up to the 2019 UK General Election; identifying over 400 fake accounts being run by operators in China seeking to influence the 2020 US Presidential election that were removed by Twitter; and most recently detecting a series of 'political clickbait' Facebook groups and pages mimicking the identities of political commentators that were then de-platformed by Facebook.

Less immediately eye-catching, but potentially even more troubling, is a trajectory of development we have dubbed 'normalisation and domestication'. In essence, this holds that the kinds of disinformation tactics and techniques pioneered by geopolitical actors are increasingly 'trickling down' to be integrated into the political influencing strategies of more domestically oriented political campaigns.

The most visible manifestation of this phenomenon has been the US Presidential election process last year. But we have also seen similar tactics being used in places like Moldova, the Baltic States, and currently in Germany, where the Green Party candidate Annalena Baerbock has been subject to a sustained series of rumours, smears and conspiracies.

In a 'threat assessment' report published a few weeks ago, Facebook highlighted some of the key trends they have been observing recently, including that between 2017 and mid-2021 they had detected around 150 covert information operations, originating from over 50 different countries; that those conducting such campaigns are increasingly sophisticated; that there has been a growth in those selling disinformation services for profit; and

Between 2017 and mid-2021 [Facebook] detected around 150 covert information operations, originating from over 50 different countries

that the line between legitimate public debate and manipulated media content is increasingly blurry.

Whilst some caution is required in translating these general trends and their implications for the Welsh context, equally we should not assume that Wales is immune from experiencing similar information pathologies. After all, those recent events in Cardiff suggest that coronavirus disinformation has a footprint within Wales.

Furthermore, there have been a number of recent stories, especially centred on female politicians and public figures in Wales, documenting how they are being subject to smear campaigns, hate and disinformation. For example, ITV Wales reported on the 'threats of physical harm, online abuse and death threats' against former education minister Kirsty Williams, which eventually led her to step down from office.

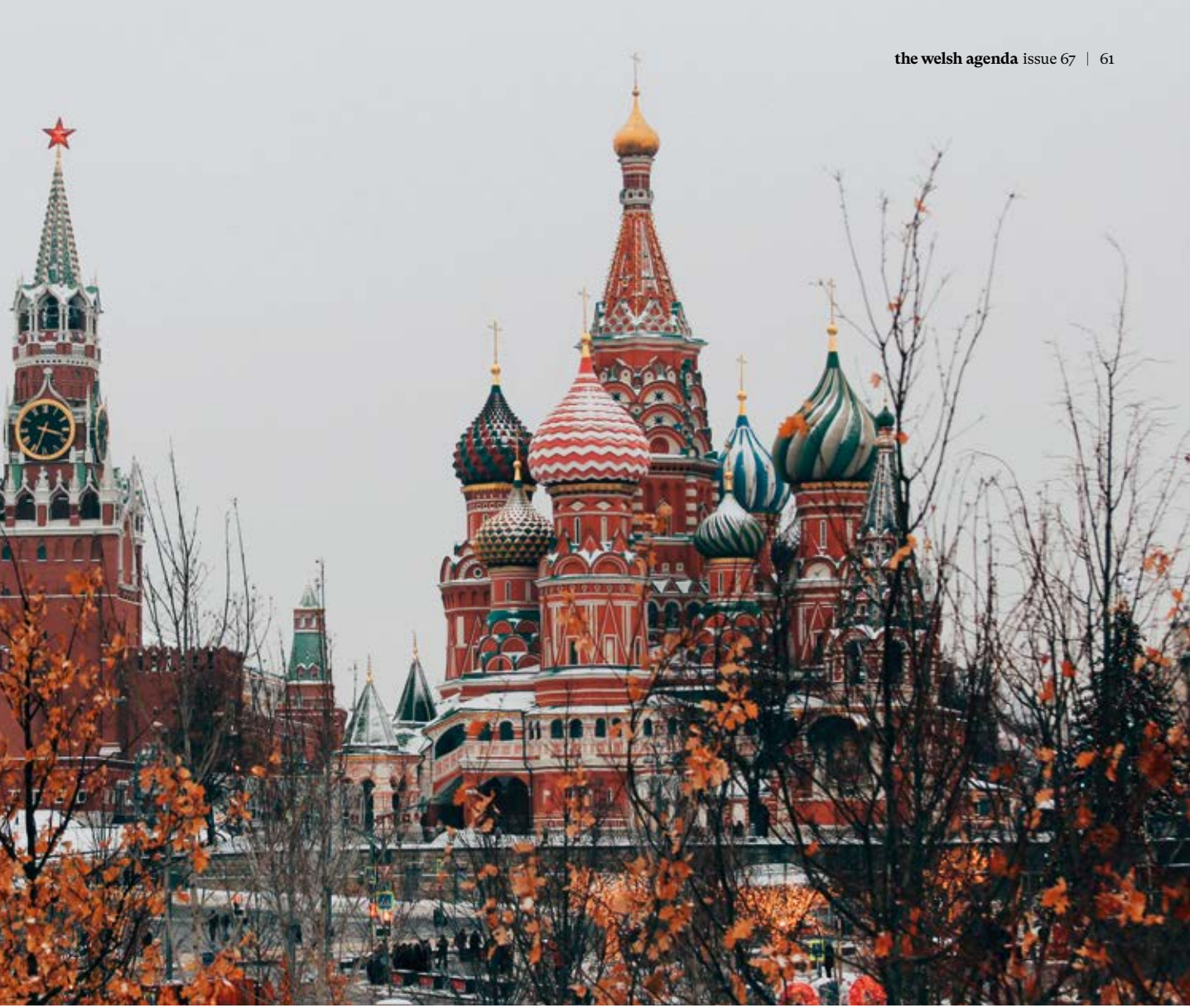
Even if these issues are not yet as pressing in Wales as they are in other countries, taking preventative action is probably wise.

After all, we know there are a number of conditions that make liberal democratic political systems and social orders especially vulnerable to influence operations and disinformation campaigns, both from within and without.

These include: situations where there were escalated political tensions stemming from uncertainty about the causes and consequences of contentious and emotionally charged issues; referendum campaigns and similar (the 2014 Scottish independence referendum vote was targeted by the Kremlin); and contexts where the media ecosystem can quite easily be manipulated and exploited in terms of authoring and amplifying false facts.

In light of the recent targeting of Welsh politicians, and the extent to which disinformation has impacted the effectiveness of the public health response to coronavirus in Wales, there are good grounds for launching a Senedd inquiry into these issues. These 'local' reasons are reinforced by the fact that some of the wider geopolitical trends are also being experienced in Wales. For example, the economic pressures on local news media sources, as audience consumption patterns shift increasingly

Our work... include[s] identifying a Russian state 'hack and leak' operation using Reddit in the lead-up to the 2019 UK General Election



towards social media based sources, have clearly impacted upon the Welsh media landscape.

Consequently, a Senedd inquiry into disinformation or misinformation, such as the one the IWA called for in its report *Media Priorities for the Next Senedd*, should take as its starting point three main questions:

First, *'What evidence is there of misinformation and disinformation being used to try and manipulate political processes recently in Wales?'*

Second, *'How can a range of countermeasures be integrated into Welsh media and politics, to help protect people from malign information and influence campaigns?'*

Finally, *'What can be done to prevent Welsh media becoming increasingly exposed to sources of disinformation?'*

Professor Martin Innes is director of Cardiff University's Crime and Security Research Institute

How do we respond to the Afghan crisis as a Nation of Sanctuary ?

Mark Seymour *asks how the Welsh Government can put the terms 'Nation of Sanctuary' into action*

The awful events that we have recently witnessed in Kabul came as a shock to so many of us.

The desperation of people at the airport trying to flee the regime change of the Taliban after the withdrawal of US forces and their allies has brought home to many of us the reasons why people need to flee their home country as a refugee.

No one chooses to be a refugee; to have to flee, leaving behind everything that you once knew, in fear of your very life is something that most of us living in the UK will never have to contemplate. The Brexit narrative and the Nigel Farage-driven xenophobia of the last few years seem to be evaporating as there is a surge of support for Afghan refugees amongst our communities.

What would our policy on asylum be if it were to be determined by the Welsh Government? How would the Nation of Sanctuary function as a devolved power?

Kabul, Afghanistan

My charity has been overwhelmed by the generous and kind offers of support for the two Afghan refugee families relocated to Newport. They join other Afghans – and many thousands of others – who arrived as asylum seekers and are now settled in our cities and working and contributing to our communities here in Wales.

Our asylum seekers and refugees have always felt welcomed in Newport. One of my friends, a refugee from Eritrea, once said of Newport: 'I like it here, people smile at me'. Many of them have random Welsh friends who they have met at the bus stop, in the park, or at the school gate. I guess, as Welsh people, we know and understand what it means to be in a minority. It's also a national trait that we Welsh take people as they are, and treat anyone who shows themselves to be 'alright' as one of us. We would accept them as a part of *Cymru* – the brotherhood, in contrast to the name given to our nation by the Anglo Saxon invaders – *Walles*, which meant 'outsiders' or 'others', implying people on the margins of life.

The local community's positive support in Pembrokeshire lessened the impact of the dreadful conditions experienced by asylum seekers in the Penally military camp near Tenby. Compare the outcomes of the inspection reports of Napier barracks, near Folkestone, where local support was limited, with that for Penally. The noticeable difference is, I believe, down to the positive support from the rapidly formed County of Sanctuary Pembrokeshire, Oasis Cardiff, an established refugee charity who led outreach activities, and to the work of the Welsh government in mitigating the impact. It was by no means ideal, but the work of us 'locals' made it more tolerable for many of the men stranded there with little to occupy them.

And whilst many of us identify proudly with our Celtic roots, our DNA contains many traces of those who have joined us on our journey – Irish, English, Italian, Jamaican and many others intertwined within our heritage. The blood of immigrants flows through all of our veins. In Caerleon, where I live, the Romans stayed for 400 years. They intermarried with the local community. They included people from the Middle East, North Africa, and probably a few sub Saharan Africans, all part of the Roman Empire at that time.

I would hope that, if devolved, we would see a more orderly, open, transparent, efficient and fair system of deciding asylum claims than that currently administered from London

With the London-based Home Office controlling Asylum and Immigration, those competences are currently outside the remit of the Welsh Government. Yet the Welsh Government have pledged to make Wales a Nation of Sanctuary for those seeking war and persecution – a place of welcome and acceptance of outsiders who need our welcome and an invitation to join us and contribute to our evolving sense of nationhood.

This contrasts strongly with the London government's self-declared 'Hostile Environment' which actively seeks to deter those fleeing war and persecution from settling in the UK. Rather unexpectedly, this has in recent weeks turned into 'Operation Warm Welcome' as the Home Office actively welcomes those who worked alongside us in Afghanistan in our efforts to bring peace and prosperity to that long troubled mountainous country.

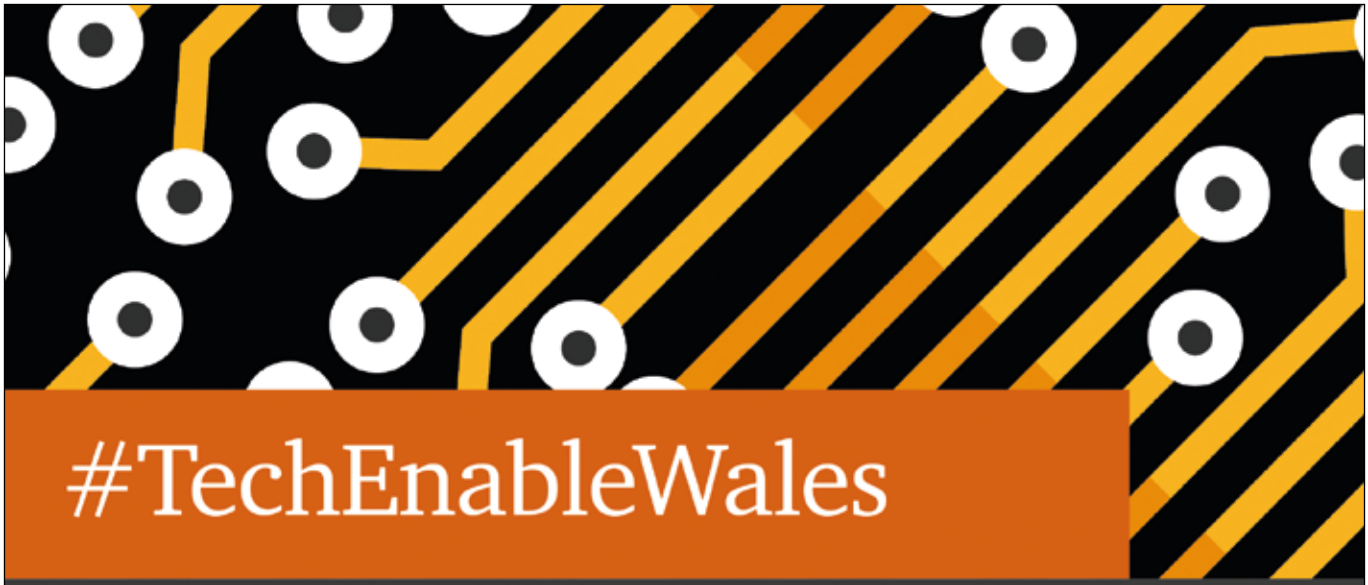
With the growing sense of confidence in the Welsh government for their handling of the pandemic, many are considering further powers being granted to our devolved governments in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland. All three may take different forms and paths. What would our policy on asylum be if it were to be determined by the Welsh Government? How would the Nation of Sanctuary function as a devolved power?

All 22 of our local authorities have pledged to take families fleeing from the Taliban, an approach unlikely to happen in our neighbouring counties across the border in England. The Wales-wide commitment to welcoming resettled families is to be welcomed and celebrated. Might our current established asylum seeker dispersal areas – currently Cardiff, Newport, Swansea and Wrexham and, very recently, a pilot in Caerphilly – be joined by other towns across Wales? Carmarthen, Llanelli, Pontypridd, Cwmbran, Pontypool, Neath, Aberavon, Bridgend, Abergavenny, Bangor, Aberystywth, Llandudno and Brecon amongst many others could all benefit from hosting asylum seekers in their communities.

And if the Welsh Government took responsibility for deciding asylum claims, how might that look? There is a stark contrast between the mindset, culture and availability of civil servants working for the Welsh Government compared to the civil servants currently working for the London Government's Home Office. I would hope that, if devolved, we would see a more orderly, open, transparent, efficient and fair system of deciding asylum claims than that currently administered from London.

It's been said that you should judge a nation by how it treats the most vulnerable. Let's continue being a compassionate, socially responsible nation. It's in our DNA.

Mark Seymour founded the Sanctuary, Newport, a project run by the charity The Gap Wales, which supports asylum seekers and refugees in rebuilding a sense of community and belonging



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Learning to Belong
Raymond Williams and the Social Democratic Skills Dilemma

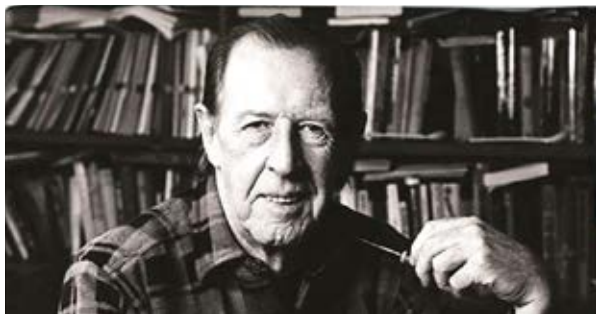
Daryl Leeworthy *revisits the philosophy, myths, history and celebrated practitioners of adult education in Wales*

We hear much these days about a 'lifetime skills guarantee' or, in the rhetoric of the Welsh Government, 'a right to lifelong learning'. But whatever the package, whatever the language used, whatever the selling points, the technocratic focus of government remains much the same. Adult education is an identified mechanism for developing skills for economic benefit – the individual and societal enhancements, often allied to material growth, come from better wages, higher personal spending, and so on. This was never the sole intention of adult education, however. Nor does it comfortably align with the thought of its most high-profile practitioners in the field, most obviously Raymond Williams (1921–1988). For him, and for others including Gwyn Thomas (1913–1981) and Elaine Morgan (1920–2013), culture and democracy rather than technocracy and skills were (and are) the *raison d'être* of all forms of education.

In a speech delivered at the Sorbonne in Paris in 2013, the President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins, argued that 'the task of developing a consciousness of engaged, concerned and responsible citizenship requires... an educational system that allows space for a critical awareness, allows democracy to educate and in turn democratises education'. His words, which have inspired this article, were firmly rooted in the ideas of Raymond Williams. Indeed, throughout their careers, whether as academics, public intellectuals, writers, or adult educators, and in Higgins' case a leading politician, both men have consistently focused on democratic values and advancement through culture and learning rather than through representative institutions and markets. The sorts of places where 'skills' are paramount and where democracy is curtailed by other interests.

What Raymond Williams had to say about adult education is often summarised by his most famous and memorable aphorism, 'culture is ordinary'. But his wider consideration of the field was multifaceted and based on practical experience as a tutor in English literature for the Workers' Educational Association and the University of Oxford's Extra-Mural Delegacy. It was in that context, teaching across the south of England after the Second World War and into the 1950s, that Williams gained a deep understanding of working-class knowledge of the humanities – its extent and its limitations. To remedy the latter, he developed courses on communications, thereby equipping students with the means of critiquing

Raymond Williams



the print media and contemporary broadcasting. 'We have in an understanding of language,' he argued before a WEA class in Eastbourne in 1946, 'a great weapon against the press'. No wonder that media studies, the direct descendant of the courses Williams created and taught, is so maligned by the press itself.

Those familiar with post-compulsory education and lifelong learning in Wales today will struggle to connect the technocratic programmes on offer with the sharply critical, cultural courses provided to students in the middle of the twentieth century by tutors like Raymond Williams and Elaine Morgan – she taught similar courses on communications and the press for the WEA in Norfolk and Greater Manchester. There has long been tension between forms of continuing education which provide democratic enrichment and cultural understanding, and those which provide remedial qualifications appropriate for the workplace. Employers want better-educated workers, governments want value for the money they invest and measurable outcomes, and workers themselves understandably want better qualifications to get better wages and lifestyles. What difference can literary analysis or a knowledge of history make in such a marketplace? As Williams himself characterised, 'there was constant pressure … you must improve academic standards, you must get written work … the effect was to tend to eliminate people without secondary education'.

The same demands are made today by officials and politicians, vice chancellors and college principals. Yet in a Future Generations Wales, a country ostensibly committed to social democracy, which itself falls short of Williams's own vision of a socialist society but is the best form of government we know, this technocratic model of adult education is clearly insufficient. 'To live as conscious citizens', argues Michael D. Higgins, again drawing on a metaphor employed by Raymond Williams, 'means becoming the arrow of our existence rather than the commodified target of the market and its agents'. That means, in effect, creating an adult education system enriched with a humanistic vision in which literature, history, art, music, and other forms of cultural experience and understanding are given equal weight and value to those which fulfil 'skills shortages'. In this way, students are equipped with the means to demystify societal relations of power: why things are as they are and how they can be changed. All with the aim of becoming fully participatory citizens in a flourishing democracy.

You will, at times, hear well-meaning advocates call for citizenship education, or 'civics' as it is known in the United States. In effect the transposition of democratic instincts into certifiable skills and qualifications. This is not the same thing as intended by Higgins or Williams. In fact, quite the opposite. Writing in 1961, in an article titled 'The Common Good', Williams observed that adult education had three core groups of practitioners and influencers which he called the 'old humanists', the 'industrial trainers', and the 'public educators'. The first were rooted in the idea of education possessing intrinsic value which should not be turned into an instrument for a system and needs no further justification for its existence. The second group, by contrast, saw education purely in terms of efficiency, obedience, and productivity, as a means of developing workers able to maintain a planned economy. The third were motivated by the belief that education was a democratic right with a democratic purpose and governments should intervene to ensure its promotion and availability.

Williams closely aligned himself with the public educators, rejecting the elitist position of the old humanists and the technocratic market-orientation of

Credit: David Hallam Jones, Geograph

the industrial trainers, whom he thought 'not likely to believe in adult education as we ordinarily use the term in this country'. More than half a century later, after gaining the upper hand in the 1960s and achieving near-total dominance in our own times, the old humanists and the industrial trainers still do not understand or believe. As Williams bluntly concluded, 'I do not think that adult education can draw much sustenance from the arguments of either of these groups, and this has been one of its difficulties'.

It is easy to romanticise. To paint a vivid and envious portrait of the intellectual world of the working classes on the cusp of living memory as one made up of communities of autodidacts who were as familiar with the intricacies of contemporary literature or history or politics, philosophy and economics as any well-to-do university student. That was never entirely true. Even in Williams' day many of the students were middle-class leisure seekers. 'There was nothing wrong with this', he explained to his colleagues, 'except that in socially mixed communities they induced a quite different cultural atmosphere'. This is the case in my own classes, too, where students tend to be retired teachers, local government officers, or journalists, rather than ex-factory floor or shop workers.

The problem comes from the assumption that culture – which is ordinary, we remind ourselves – is the preserve of relatively well-off retirees and leisured learners, the sort who require no more of life's paperwork, and are therefore of comparatively little interest to departments of education and the funding streams they possess. 'One could not expect, from an industrial trainer', Williams observed, 'adult education getting any kind of priority'. The objection to this might well be a 'skills guarantee' or 'right to lifelong learning' but one must ask to what purpose? The recently published report *The College of the Future for Wales* included the telling demand for 'strategically supporting businesses with skills and innovation by coordinating sector or occupation-focussed support through employer hubs, with colleges convening strategic support to employers, sole traders and entrepreneurs'. Meanwhile the keyword 'democracy' does not even appear once.

If, as I propose, we accept Williams' argument, which he adapted from one made by John Ruskin in the 1870s, that it is 'the first duty of government to see that the people can think', then we can make good on the promise of a right to lifelong learning and the Future

What difference between literary analysis or a knowledge of history in the marketplace?

Generations legislation *and* abandon for the sake of our social democracy the narrowing mindset of the industrial trainer. The new national curriculum, which is rooted in the distinctive *cynefin* of our various communities, offers momentum for the cause. But it is in adult education and lifelong learning settings wherein enabling people to think is paramount. It is, after all, an essential part of our cultural heritage. Consider the vast network of workers' libraries which existed in the valleys of Glamorgan and Monmouthshire a century ago. The number one author was not Marx or Lenin, or anything Welsh or in Welsh for that matter, but the author of *Great Expectations and Hard Times*. Dickens was closely followed by that spinner of Scottish fable, Sir Walter Scott.

Those were the writers Raymond Williams taught in his WEA classes and then examined in his famous books: *Culture and Society* (1958) and *The Long Revolution* (1961). Had he been at all enthusiastic about American culture, Williams might well have considered hard-boiled detective stories and westerns and the syncopated literature of the interwar years, too, and writers like F Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Damon Runyon or John Dos Passos. The kinds of transatlantic influences which shaped the novels and broadcasts of Gwyn Thomas and which, as numerous social observers noted, flew off the shelves of libraries and into working-class homes all over Anglophone Wales. In the face of the mid-century rush of Zane Grey, Raymond Chandler and Leslie Charteris, and with cinema, radio and television transforming popular appetite and interest, Dickens and his like, including many of the nineteenth-century European titans from Victor Hugo to Henrik Ibsen, increasingly took their chances as the 'book of the film'. They were the leanest of times.

But Williams was not as enthusiastic about America. Nor was he quite so committed to universalism. 'The gesture towards North America', Williams argued in a review of Dai Smith's *Wales! Wales?* (1984) for the

London Review of Books, 'sits uneasily beside the simple and heartfelt proletarian continuities'. Fair enough, perhaps, in the immediate aftermath of the Miners' Strike, but our Wales is a post-industrial one which, as I argued in *Labour Country* (2018), broke with that older heritage quite some time ago. What we have before us is a choice, nevertheless: between defending the inheritance of a capitalised 'South Wales' or rejecting it; between understanding the culture and literature and democratic expression produced by that universal culture or its rejection in favour of a particular culture prone to existential, introspective anxiety.

And if we do accept universalism rather than reject it, we must also accept that a revitalised, social democratic system of adult education – entirely shod of the industrial trainers who currently weigh it down – is the ideal means of providing widespread understanding of and a collective coming to terms with the almighty ruptures of industrialisation and deindustrialisation which continue to haunt Wales.

To put it otherwise, by way of conclusion, it is more than esoteric knowledge to know *why* alongside Liberal heroes like Henry Richard and William Gladstone, our nineteenth-century ancestors read as much as they could about Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Roosevelt. That their guides to the economic abuses of the early twentieth century were more likely to be Jack London, Mark Twain, Upton Sinclair and Sinclair Lewis, than any of the Bloomsbury or Oxbridge hoi polloi let alone Marx or Lenin or, dare I say, Lewis Jones (1897–1939) the Rhondda communist or the nationalist Saunders Lewis. That the New Deal of Franklin Roosevelt gave more hope to working-class people than a king declaring 'something must be done' from the hollowed-out shell of Dowlais steelworks. That as the Rhondda novelist Ron Berry (1920–1997) had it, with his mind's eye fixed on the Romanian-American actor and political activist Edward G Robinson: we belonged.

Daryl Leeworthy is the Rhys Davies Trust Research Fellow at Swansea University. His history of Welsh social democracy, *Labour Country*, is out now in paperback from Parthian

Whose Stories? Literary Representation in Wales

Grace Quantock *surveys efforts to diversify writing and publishing in Wales, and looks forward to a future when all of our stories are told*

The library's LGBT section is a cream metal stand with three short shelves of books. It's an undifferentiated mix of biography, history, poetry and novels. The only commonality is being out – be it characters or authors. But in the main biography and autobiography section, which runs half the length of the library under wide windows overlooking a grey wall, everyone is ostensibly hetero-cis, non-disabled and white. I count four biographies or autobiographies by people of colour.

Maya Jordan, a working-class disabled writer in Newtown, Powys, started to question whose story gets read while studying for an Open University MA, funded by a Welsh Government package of grants and loans. When reading a novel for her course, Maya was struck by a character taking a year to clear out a late parent's home and possessions, the journey of grief woven through frequent sorting sessions and subsequent realisations. In Maya's literary magic realist novel (currently seeking representation), her character Helen has to clean out her father's house after his death. But as Maya points

out: 'In reality, the council only gives you two weeks to clear out a house.' She pointed out she had never seen such a dilemma in a novel, despite the clear narrative potential: 'The intensifying conflict, the time pressure – it's narrative gold. But I'm not allowed to say that, it's not what's written in books, is it?'

Maya argues that many books are middle class without declaring themselves to be so, yet represent a default white, wealthy, non-disabled world. 'We need working class people to tell our stories, because if we don't tell them ourselves, they tell them about us – and get it wrong.'

Literary change isn't only about who tells the stories, it's about what stories we allow to be told. This is a passion of writer and researcher, Durre Shahwar, co-founder of *Where I'm Coming From*, the first open mic collective to feature and platform writers of colour in Wales. Shahwar is also a co-editor of *Just So You Know* (Parthian Books, 2020), an essay anthology featuring underrepresented writers from Wales and is currently writing her first book of creative non-fiction about language, erasure, and belonging as a Pakistani-Welsh person. 'I think we take it

'The writing industries, from newspapers to publishing, shape our national culture. But if only a small section of society is getting to write then our national conversation narrows.'
Anna Disley, *New Writing North*

for granted that "diversifying" stops at putting Black and Brown faces on the covers of magazines and in books,' Durre says. 'That work is very, very important. But what is also important is a change in mindset to go with it. Are we still trying to make writers, underrepresented and marginalised writers, fit a certain pre-existing remit that was dictated by a white author or institution – or are we truly being inclusive by being open to new ways of thinking, doing, experimenting, writing?'

'Are we still trying to make writers, underrepresented and marginalised writers, fit a certain pre-existing remit that was dictated by a white author or institution – or are we truly being inclusive by being open to new ways of thinking, doing, experimenting, writing?'
Durre Shahwar, writer

The problem of inclusion stretches across major Western book markets. Just 12.6% of those working in publishing come from working-class social origins, compared with a third of the population as a whole. Anna Disley, Executive Director of New Writing North explains that this is why New Writing North founded 'A Writing Chance', along with Michael Sheen. It is a programme that Maya Jordan is on, designed to 'prise open an industry that is hard to access if you come from a lower income or other under-represented background.'

Disley, one of the programme's producers, elaborates: 'The writing industries, from newspapers to publishing, shape our national culture. But if only a small section of society is getting to write then our national conversation narrows.' The conversation is indeed narrow; in 2018, 89% of books published by major publishing houses like Penguin Random House were by white people. 90% of the *New York Times* best-seller list were white authored books in 2020 according to research by Richard Jean So, assistant professor of English and cultural analytics at McGill University and author of *Redlining Culture: A Data History of Racial Inequality and Postwar Fiction*.

The Welsh literature scene has been grappling with calls for equity and challenges to white supremacy out of the Black Lives Matter uprisings in summer of 2020. However, Literature Wales communications manager Miriam Williams explains that data is something lacking in Wales. 'There are many worthy research papers which reflect upon the diversity of publishing in the wider UK – but we are lacking a comprehensive research and analysis of literature, in all its forms, in

Social justice comes when we begin to question such unquestioned pillars of parties. Do we need to serve alcohol? Why not forget a dress code? Maybe it can be on the ground floor?

Wales.' Literature Wales and the Books Council of Wales are conducting research about, respectively, public perception of literature and representation in the Welsh publishing industry, which will contain data about the writers themselves and the contents of their work. Williams says that 'for too long the teaching and advancement of our literary culture, in both languages, has been homogeneous and not truly reflective of the range of voices and experiences within Wales. We must do more to platform and promote the exciting diverse talent we have so we can be proud of a vibrant writing culture that flies the flag for Wales' varied communities.'

Literature Wales are working to redress these issues. They are about to launch their second phase of Representing Wales: Developing Writers of Colour programme, launched with the announcement of its cohort of participating writers in March 2021. It supports twelve writers in developing their work through financial assistance and mentoring, as well as by demystifying the writing profession and providing networking opportunities and masterclasses with established writers and commissioners. As Miriam Williams describes, 'it shines a light on exceptional, diverse voices representing the best of modern Welsh culture, and each one has the potential to transform our culture for the next generation.'

Özgür Uyanık is a writer, film director, a PhD candidate in Creative Writing at Cardiff University and the author of the dark comic satire novel, *Conception*, (Fairlight Books, 2020) which explores who and what determines the value of art. Uyanık spoke of his experiences as a Turkish-born writer of colour in Wales: 'There is a very vibrant and relatively open writing community that is being supported by Welsh independent publishers and local grassroots schemes that are helping to create and maintain opportunities for cohorts of under-represented writers across Wales.'

If diversity is making sure we've invited everyone to the party, as facilitator Desiree Adaway, author of *Diversity is an Asset* teaches, then inclusion is ensuring the party attendees have power. They can choose the music, invite other people and be participants, not just recipients. Social justice comes when we begin to question such unquestioned pillars of parties. Do we need to serve alcohol? Why not forget a dress code? Maybe it can be on the ground floor? Can we offer childcare and a quiet sensory space? Shall we hold it after sunset, if we are meeting during Ramadan?

There is potential for literary change in Wales and Wales has the potential to lead the wider literary world on inclusion and the creative innovation that arises from new talent, new voices, new stories. Uyanık spoke of the hierarchy being changed to distribute resources more equitably and increase opportunities at every stage of the publishing chain as they are currently 'all too often seemingly ad hoc'. There's a vision for international focus, emphasising the universality of under-represented stories – to connect them to a wider audience, beyond local markets. 'The nation's literary culture can thereby become a potential model that can spread far wider.'

Durre Shahwar addressed the Welsh focus on literary change. 'In Wales particularly there is still a severe lack of editors, publishers, agents... from underrepresented backgrounds. Be that race, sexuality, disability, low income. And this matters because it inevitably affects the culture of an organisation. I also think many underrepresented writers find themselves in really precarious contracts that limit the work they can make. We need to subvert this in order to ensure that change is lasting and not temporary.'

Many writers and readers in Wales and beyond look forward to the time we break out of the 'special' shelves – and when books are about all of us and all of our experiences. ➤

Grace Quantock is a writer, psychotherapeutic counsellor and non-executive director. She is one of the winners of A Writing Chance programme with Michael Sheen. Grace is a member of *the welsh agenda* editorial group

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The Boy with Two Hearts

Hamed Amiri *talks to* **Merlin Gable**
about his new play, based on his family's experiences fleeing Afghanistan, settling in Wales – and coming to terms with the death of a beloved brother

On the greasy pole of Welsh theatrical hierarchy, the Wales Millennium Centre stands at the top. Its place there was preordained, part of a period of conscious nation-building as the era of devolution and the new millennium began. And sure, it represents only one type of success that some producers, writers and performers may eschew – but it stands there nevertheless, on the southern edge of the nation, looking out to sea as a symbol both of Cardiff and of performing arts in Wales.

It's therefore no mean feat for a writer to score a production there, regardless of the stage of their career. It becomes even more impressive when it is their very first production, or their very first piece of writing at all. But that is where Hamed Amiri finds himself.

Last year, his memoir *The Boy with Two Hearts* was published to widespread acclaim. It quickly became a Radio 4 Book of the Week and was serialised for radio. Then came the news that it would be the first production that the Centre would produce and stage upon its long-awaited autumn 2021 reopening.

Amiri, he is quick to tell me when we sit down together in a side room high up in the curved frontage of the building which will shortly house his play, did not ever consider himself a writer. He is softly spoken but talks with energy – in his eyes and in his voice – and with a mild but discernible Cardiff accent.

We knew nothing about Cardiff. But it was the first time, coming out of the minibus and seeing volunteers waiting, that I saw a genuine smile from someone who wanted to make us feel welcome

'I never saw myself as a writer, or even someone creative,' he says. 'Two years ago, I'd never even been to the theatre before.' This elicits a wry laugh at himself as he now discusses his involvement in the production of his own play. 'For me, the reason I wrote the book and the play was to get my emotions on paper. I admitted things that I thought I'd take to the grave with me to protect my loved ones. It's something I've never done, but something I needed to do.'

Indeed, sometimes it takes extraordinary circumstances to compel someone to write. Life-writing, Amiri's chosen form, is so often the product of necessity – and of deeply significant personal experience – rather than just the desire to tell a good story. Amiri's story is of his family fleeing Afghanistan in 2000 and travelling, over eighteen months, to the UK as refugees. He 'always wanted to write a book about us leaving home and coming to the UK', but it took the death of his older brother Hussain in 2018 – whose childhood heart condition prompted their leaving of Afghanistan in search of medical treatment – to compel him to put pen to paper. 'Then I knew what the story should be. It should be the story of us leaving home and why we did, the journey across the world to the UK and to Cardiff, and eventually it should land on how my older brother lived his life and how he helped others.'

The story of seeking asylum is one that is as familiar as it is alien to the vast majority: familiar as one of the most significant phenomena of modernity but something that in practice many of us can distance ourselves from – through headlines, figures, TV or phone screens – without having to confront the specificities of individual people's journeys. Yet Amiri speaks with surprising levity about it.

Left to Right: Dana Haqjoo, Farshid Rokey, Ahmad Sakhi, Géhane Strehler, Shamail Ali
Photo: Jorge Lizalde

It's a surreal experience seeing someone play my older brother... when someone passes away you rarely if ever get to see or feel that essence of them again

'We always knew we'd have to leave. By 2000 my brother had had two operations already and a specialist said there were two places that could properly treat him: the US and the UK. So we had a plan to leave but not a proper plan – we just knew we had to find a way. At the same time my mum was getting frustrated everyday by what she was witnessing under Taliban rule with women's rights and equality. Eventually she decided to give a speech to local people to raise some hope and to raise some awareness. It was a successful speech but it was also an execution order. So the plan of leaving home instead of taking months or years had to be done in a few days. We had to sell everything, borrow money from family, and pay human traffickers to get us out.'

He glosses over their eighteen-month journey – perhaps out of a desire to avoid painful detail, or maybe just not to ruin the story. He picks up upon his family's arrival in the UK.

'Initially we were in Kent, in Margate, for a few weeks. Then they told us that our chosen location was Cardiff – this city elsewhere. We knew nothing about Cardiff. But it was the first time, coming out of the minibus and seeing volunteers waiting, that I saw a genuine smile from someone who wanted to make us feel welcome. That was the first time in a long time we felt at home.'

Memoirs like Amiri's are at once highly personal and, in the act of sharing through writing, deeply communal. They often suggest ways that we can understand wider truths about our world through the lens of individual experience. The writer Helen Buss describes them as 'the personalising of history; the historicising of the personal'. Amiri is aware too that as specific as his family's story is, it also shares a common thread with the experiences of many seeking asylum from instability within their own country.

'My story is a representation of many stories. It's my journey, and the focus on my mother and my brother is unique, but along the way we met so many other refugees with so many stories. So this story is also a representation of *a* refugee story. We hear about resettlement programmes, we hear about people leaving their home countries, but this story gives you an insight about what that *could* look like, or *may* look like for some people.'

'And the other side of it is: what happens when they do get here? There's integration with the language, the culture, the weather, the new world you live in – that's all detailed in the play. In my character you can see how I struggled at school due to the impact of what had happened to me. How do we cope in this weird environment? You've been taken from your city, from everything you've known. So the play is a representation of my story, but also of what so many others have experienced.'

But, Amiri is keen to tell me, this is as much a story of hope and a story of Wales – his family's acceptance here and their relationship with the NHS. When they first arrived, he describes how 'my brother Hussain had a lot of tests, initially in Heath Hospital in Cardiff, and in a way the NHS became my extended family. We spent so much time on wards B1 and C1, the staff knew us.'

Hussain later became a board member for local NHS bodies in Cardiff and in Bristol and he helped many others financially and emotionally. 'Some things,' Amiri muses, 'we only found out after he passed away.' Amiri's younger brother, Hessam, is also an NHS board member, and Amiri himself is a governor of Coleg Gwent in Newport. All this, he says, is intimately linked to their experiences and the welcome they found in Wales.

'Somewhere along the way I realised that this is the place that gave me hope, safety, a roof over my head, a change: having an education, and the least I can do is give something back. I am constantly going to schools and universities trying to raise the aspirations of the younger generation. It's my home – and I'm proud.'

It is clear from the way that he speaks about it how personally Amiri has invested in the book and in this production. He speaks of his brother with huge pride but there is clearly also great emotion behind that about his loss. How then does it feel to adapt a story so personal to the stage? To see himself – and his brother – speaking through other bodies?

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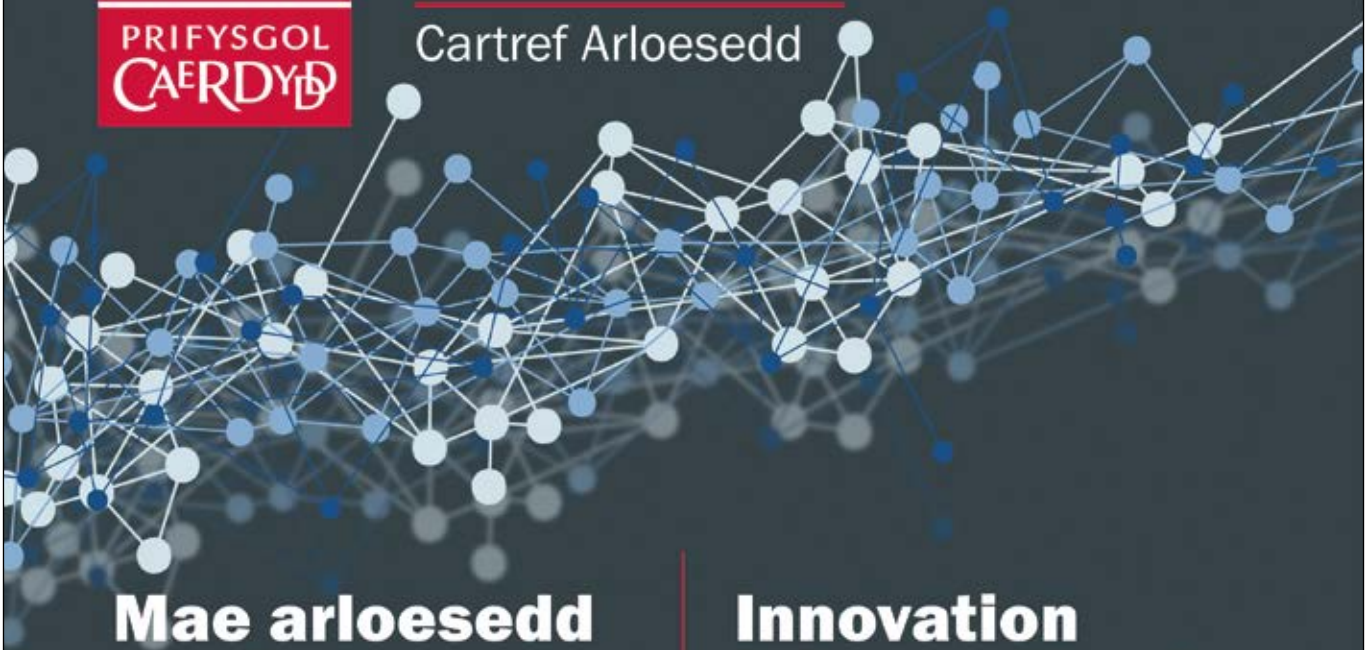

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'Weird is definitely one word for it – because you get to see how you're being perceived. It's weird to see people acting the way I did when I was younger. I've got used to it now because I've got to know the actors. It's a surreal experience seeing someone play my older brother but also when someone passes away you rarely if ever get to see or feel that essence of them again. The guys there when they're playing me and my brothers I genuinely feel that. It's hard to watch, but I also enjoy it. I'm going to go and watch all twenty-three shows. I get to relive those moments that I'll never get again. Somehow, I've got a bug for it – I can have an opinion and it turns out that it's a good opinion! It's been interesting because I never thought I had this aspect in me.'

When the play was first commissioned, and certainly when the book was written, there was no indication that we would find ourselves watching in horror as the Taliban swept across Afghanistan once more in the face of US and UK retreat.

On the day Amiri and I spoke, they announced their new government, absent of women or non-Taliban figures, and the drip-drip of stories suggesting the worst of the repression of their five years of rule twenty years ago may return has continued since.

'I was hoping that when the play came out I'd be telling a story from twenty years ago. But in reality I'm telling a story that could be happening right now. When the play comes out in October, with everything that's going on in Afghanistan, it makes it even more relevant for people to know what that journey looks like, what a Taliban government could look like.'

'But I don't want it to be a sad story, I don't want it to be a pity story – I want it to be a story of hope. I still have hope and belief that in my lifetime I will see peace and prosperity in Afghanistan. I have to be hopeful that it will become a place of safety again.'

Once again, Amiri points out that this is where the personal and the political are intertwined – in the reaction of the audience.

'It makes it more important to say it now because people will be wondering about what happens, what happens to refugees here, what does integration look like. This performance gives you very vivid details of a family navigating that. If you don't understand the reasoning behind how people experiencing this feel, you can make misjudgements. It could be work, it could be school, it could be in a bus stop. This gives you the insight.'

Amiri is clearly passionate about his story and the impact it seems to be having – as well as mildly astounded. 'It still hasn't fully hit me… this is one of the biggest houses in the UK.' But that doesn't mean he's stopping here. After the already grand achievement of a book and a play in the Wales Millennium Centre, he enthuses to me about future plans: film rights and prequel and sequel stories that tell further stories about his family and their extraordinary experiences. Certainly these are important stories to hear – not least for Wales, which purports to be a nation of sanctuary – and ones that we will see only more of on the stage of the Wales Millennium Centre again in the future. ➤

Merlin Gable is Culture Editor of *the welsh agenda*

The Boy with Two Hearts *by Hamed and Hessam Amiri was at the Weston Theatre, Wales Millennium Centre between 2 and 23 October 2021*

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A Call to Action

Marine Furet *reviews* The Boy With Two Hearts, *a Wales Millennium Centre original production*

At a particularly tense juncture in his family's journey to reach the UK, Hessam Amiri (Shamail Ali) stops to consider the role of luck in a refugee's fate: 'One bit of luck, he ponders, makes all the difference.'

It takes a singular strength of character to give luck even the benefit of the doubt after being forced to run away from your country by the Taliban. Yet Hessam does.

Before becoming a play, *The Boy with Two Hearts* – the Wales Millennium Centre's latest production – was a book written by Hamed Amiri, Hessam's brother. It is based on their own story, which started in 2000 after their mother Fariba (played by Géhane Strehler) was struck with a death warrant by the Taliban for giving a speech championing women's rights.

As a result, the whole family was sent on the road: three sons, Hamed, Hessam, Hussein (Ahmad Sakhi), and their parents Fariba and Mohammed (Dana Haqjoo). The eldest son, Hussein, suffers from a heart condition that requires complex surgery, making the journey a matter of life or death on more than one count. The play, adapted by Phil Porter, is first and foremost a testament to exceptional courage born in the hardest circumstances. On stage, it also makes for a creative and moving production.

Géhane Strehler plays Fariba in *The Boy with Two Hearts*, Photo by Jorge Lizalde

The scene is first set in Herat, Afghanistan, in 2000 —before the Twin Towers and two decades before the more recent fall of Kabul. Postponed by Covid, the play has now taken on eerily contemporary echoes, but its ability to speak to the moment with clarity and urgency does not hamper its success as a timelessly entertaining performance.

The first half of the play, directed at pace, follows the Amiris from Afghanistan to the UK, helped along with vigorous movement direction by Jess Williams. The second deals with their life in a new country at a slightly slower tempo. Director Amit Sharma keeps a lightness of touch throughout, which allows the play to drive home even its most emotional points with a welcome touch of humour.

The five-plus-one ensemble cast do a superb job, bringing buckets of energy to the production throughout. The brothers' banter and games exude a great sense of chemistry and tenderness, as the youngest two look after their eldest, Hussein,

who struggles with his increasingly ailing heart. The apparitions of Afghan singer Elaha Soroor punctuate his breathing difficulties and near-cardiac failures. Poised on the edge of the stage, her presence brings a sense of fatefulness to the Amiris' journey, as she observes them from a distance, only getting closer when Hussein struggles to breathe.

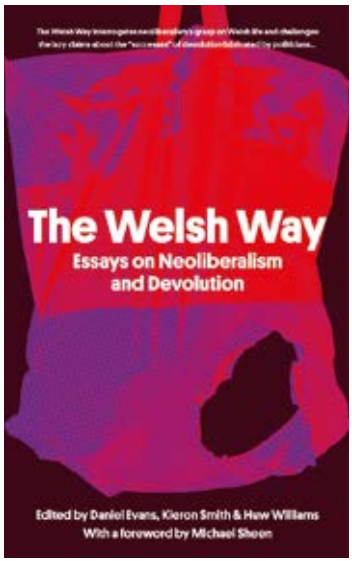
The set, designed by Hayley Grindle, is a semi-circle, which initially stands for the family home before turning itself into a variety of increasingly dangerous and baffling settings. Combined with video work by Hayley Egan, it manages to square the circle of doing justice to the Amiris' transcontinental journey via truck and car and train and ship through typography alone – a laudable feat of inventiveness. The cast occasionally shifts between characters, becoming strangers met on the road, friends, doctors and handlers. If seeing them out of character can produce occasionally jarring effects, the device illustrates the precarity of a journey in which strangers can unexpectedly become foes or allies.

I started by praising the Amiris' ability to appreciate their luck in the face of circumstances few of us can begin to imagine, let alone relate to. Yet it is luck that some people get to the UK, when some don't. That some never have to face a war, when others face it time and again. That some end up in the Calais Jungle, or in the infamous camp of Sangatte, now closed down, when others can get through the relentlessly unforgiving hoops of the hostile environment in France or in the UK. When one of the Amiris mentions his fear of ending up in Sangatte while at a border stop in Austria, an agent reassures him: it's Austria, here, not France.

That my own country should be such a spectacular example of the failure to treat refugees humanely is a topic of great shame and one that should perhaps bring policymakers to think: what should we do so that our country never has to become synonymous with a humanitarian disaster? *The Boy with Two Hearts* is an emotional piece of theatre and an entertaining night out, but it is also a call to action.

Marine Furet is the IWA's Communications, Media and Engagement Officer

The Welsh Way



Eds. Daniel Evans, Kieron Smith & Huw Williams
Parthian, 2021

The Welsh Way begins with an introduction attributed to the 400-page volume's three editors, Daniel Evans, Kieron Smith and Huw Williams. It gives a broad overview of the consensus that governs Wales' public sphere centred on a pre-pandemic speech by Mark Drakeford which 'had it all: radicalism, a sense of a Wales that is distinct (and always defined against England as a yardstick) in its pursuit of equality, motivated by hagiographic notions of Wales' radical socialist past'. The authors contend that this 'narrative of Welsh social democratic distinctiveness' – which, let's be honest, we all recognise – has become 'an article of faith… widely accepted by the Welsh political class (consisting not just of politicians, but academics, journalists and commentators)'. The book's central thesis is that the picture painted by Drakeford and by extension by all of us is 'not remotely true'; it substantiates this repudiation in twenty-three essays that take Welsh Labour to task across a full gamut of social and policy fields.

'Wales is… a deeply neoliberal country' they say, and the evidence is overwhelming – and damning. Devolution is a 'passive revolution' that has resulted in 'the continued collapse of Welsh society under the pressures of late capitalism'; 'the Welsh Way is to play the subordinate partner in… relations with international capital' and to 'tinker around the edges'. Policies hailed as Welsh Government success stories – 'plastic bag charges, 20mph speed limits, banning pavement parking [are] small gestures within a system that continues to immiserate people.'

Let me begin, then, by admitting the presence of a log in my own eye. Editing a current affairs magazine for a leading Welsh think tank, there is of course a danger that I, together with this very magazine and the IWA more widely, are a part of the very ecosystem that perpetuates cosy consensus and thereby facilitates neoliberal orthodoxy and props up political timidity. Having said this, however, the bibliographies following each essay reveal that around a third of the book's contributors draw upon articles published in *the welsh agenda*. So at the very least we are hosting the debate – although this is little succour when that debate characterises our nation, with stacks of evidence, as a place of 'nuclear colonialism' (Robat Idris); 'marketisation of universities' (Joe Healey); 'a lack of affordable housing' (Steffan Evans); 'the highest rate of incarceration in western Europe' (Polly Manning); and 'discriminative policing' against both ethnic minorities and the homeless (Mike Harrison).

Former IWA Chair Geraint Talfan Davies has often called Wales 'the land of the pulled punch', and if this has for many years been true, with a soft and consensual centre-left fending off occasional aimless roundhouses from the Right, *The Welsh Way* is a full frontal attack: jabs, hooks and near-fatal body blows delivered from the Left.

A central section of the volume is organised by 'Policy Fields' and I turn first to the areas where I have personally experienced the so-called 'Welsh Way' on the ground. Dan Evans' piece on education, 'Standardising Wales' rings immediately true: 'In a world where everything is quantifiable, teaching and education now focus on producing *data*. Schools test children to track their progress, and schools and teachers themselves must be tested to ensure they are delivering high quality services. This culture forces schools to compete with one another… discourages solidarity and

encourages overwhelmed teachers to begin "teaching to the test".' Evans sees 'some progressive and ostensibly laudable ideas' in the new curriculum but a fundamental contradiction in its wedding to 'the logic of neoliberalism education', governed by Wales' overriding obsession with PISA rankings.

On Culture, Kieron Smith inevitably begins with a long quotation from the Welsh godfather of its complex definition, Raymond Williams, before encapsulating it in a pithy and rather beautiful phrase of his own: 'the very stuff of the individual and collective soul'. It is a welcome intrusion on the relentlessly Marxist framework for the book's overall analysis, which predictably relegates spiritual aspects of the human condition beneath material concerns. Unsurprisingly, neoliberalism is held to make little sense of 'something as basically, unquantifiably, elusively human' as culture. A similar claim could be levelled about Marxism and the soul, and to this we will return in conclusion.

Smith goes on to use Raymond Williams' distinction between cultural policy 'proper' and the concept of 'display' to interrogate the way 'arts organisations… are expected to pick up the slack of a state that has failed to look after its most vulnerable'. As with education, the bureaucratisation of arts funding is immediately recognisable to one who has experienced the system. More seriously still, Rhian E. Jones' critique of 'Institutional vs. Grassroots Representation' in the arts and culture is equally unerring: 'under neoliberalism… culture [is] increasingly pitched in terms of instrumental value rather than intrinsic worth'. She lists the National Eisteddfod, Brecon Jazz and Hay Festival as being used vacuously to 'promote' Wales, rather than 'exploring or critiquing it more deeply'. Jones also rightly points out 'closures, cuts and downgrading' of 'libraries, cultural facilities [and] independent music venues' as symptoms of 'austerity' associated with UK Conservative Governments, but – and here is the point *The Welsh Way* hammers home repeatedly – unmitigated by a timid and complacent Welsh Labour Government in Wales that has more tools within the current devolution settlement to build a truly different kind of society than they would have the Welsh people believe.

One area where Welsh Government is beholden to UK-wide policy is immigration and asylum. Much more compassionate rhetoric emanates from Cardiff Bay than from Westminster, but it makes little difference to people's lives

One area where Welsh Government is beholden to UK-wide policy is immigration and asylum. Much more compassionate rhetoric emanates from Cardiff Bay than from Westminster, but it makes little difference to people's lives. As Faith Clark puts it: 'the reality of seeking sanctuary in Wales is little different to seeking it elsewhere in the UK.' For all that phrases like 'A Tolerant Nation' and 'Nation of Sanctuary' have become currency in Wales, in pointed contrast with the 'hostile environment' dreamt up in Whitehall, this language can be contested with the question marks that accompanied both the title of the University of Wales Press volume that 'Revist[ed] Ethnic Diversity in a Devolved Wales' and that of Clark's essay here. Our conclusion must be that just like 'clear red water' such phrases serve as midwives to a pernicious status quo in which Welsh realities are masked by the comfort of endlessly repeating empty ideals.

I have no doubt about the good intentions of many of our Senedd politicians, some of whom I know personally to be warm, caring and hard working individuals. But there can be no doubt that *The Welsh Way* is a wake up call. For Senedd members, and – let's break the fourth wall here – for all of us. (When 'we' write 'us' in articles like this one, we should admit that 'we' are talking to 'ourselves' – other members of the 'political class' – academics, journalists and third sector good eggs, doing our little bit to mitigate the worst effects of a system we are failing to overturn). And let's also say this: even *The Welsh Way*, with its laudable commitment to social justice, its unpulled punches and its gender balanced range of contributors, hardly represents the collective lived experience of the people of Wales. Its editors make a point of claiming that 'unlike most other books on Welsh policy [it is] written in the main by those on the margins of academia and the mainstream commentariat; PhD students, early

You'll get people coming into schools, the police telling you not to use drugs, don't do this, don't do that... but nobody talking to us about the right things to do

career academics, ex-academics and activists.' I have no doubt that many of the contributors have indeed experienced precarity, but it must also be recognised that this loose collective of marginalised academics represent a very narrow milieu of Welsh life.

What we need much more of – and I am thinking internally here too, reflecting on my own practice as a teacher, writer, editor and sometime activist, as well as about the IWA – is the type of platforming presented in the final piece of this volume. 'Interview with Butetown Matters' gives voice to Shutha, Nirushan and Elbashir, three young people from south Cardiff who talk about their own experiences: that 'it's not exactly the kind of place where you are granted much opportunity' (Bash); 'we regularly feel let down by the authorities and those in power' (Nirushan) and 'you'll get people coming into schools, the police telling you not to use drugs, don't do this, don't do that… but nobody talking to us about the *right* things to do' (Shutha).

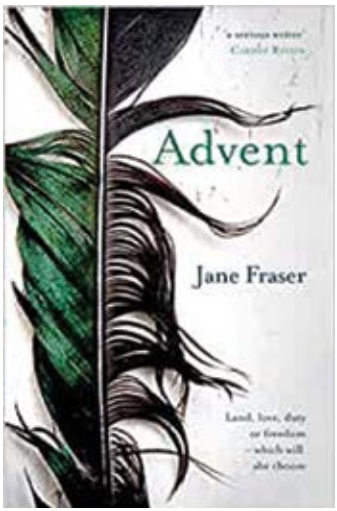
These are vital voices if we are ever to emerge from the national malaise the book identifies. One step removed from this approach, Frances Williams' piece on 'How the High Ideals of The Well-being of Future Generations Act Have Fallen Short' draws on her PhD research as a 'participant observer within community groups at "the receiving end" of policy'. This depressing phrase comes from a volunteer's characterisation of 'the dynamic at play'. Awful because it speaks of people having policy – schemes, programmes, action plans – done *to* them rather than with or even for them; depressing because true.

I turn finally to Gareth Leaman's piece: 'Washed Up on Severnside: Life, Work and Capital on the Border of South-East Wales'. After the 'Policy Fields' I have worked in, here is a 'View of a Neoliberal Wales' from the place I call home. How much will I recognise amid the 'post-industrial ruination'? The writer excoriates the Western Gateway project that has seen the UK and Welsh Governments, and local councils, 'complicit in… granting the residents of Gwent the freedom to devote all their waking hours to precarious, underpaid and unfulfilling jobs, and the freedom to coat their lungs in carbon monoxide in pursuit of this debasement'. Leaman identifies gentrification and deregulation as neoliberal tools to disrupt and dissolve social cohesion. He goes on to analyse the way class tensions resulting from an influx of middle class Bristolians to working class Newport can be passed off as anti-English xenophobia.

Leaman posits Mark Fisher's concept of 'red belonging' – an 'unconditional care without community (it doesn't matter where you come from or who you are, we will care for you anyway)' as a way out – and fittingly for a volume that owes so much of its theoretical underpinning to the work of Raymond Williams, ends with a search for resources of hope. 'Any campaign for the improvement of workers' rights to live and work in more humane conditions must demand something truly new'. He quotes Matt Colquhoun: 'a form of existence which cannot be expressed in capitalist vocabulary'. It is the glimmer of a dream: to 'demand more out of what it means to live, and never stop fighting for it'. A new Welsh Way.

If only we could find the beginning of the path. For that, the humility of removing logs from our eyes will be painful but essential. We would do well to revisit the teachings of the one who first used the metaphor – in Matthew 7:5 and Luke 6:42. This is not to suggest rehashing hagiographic notions of Wales' Christian nonconformist past to match or replace the radical socialist ones, but gently to posit the notion that there are forms of existence outside of capitalist vocabulary and neoliberal hegemony. Unconditional love, community and hope transcend the material world that bound a Marxist analytical framework – and at least as much as I recognise the post-industrial ruination and human debasement, I've experienced these on Severnside too. ➤

Dylan Moore is Editor of *the welsh agenda*



Advent

Jane Fraser
Honno, 2020

Rajvi Glasbrook Griffiths

Set in 1904 – the starting period of the great Welsh Revival as led by Evan Roberts – Jane Fraser's novel draws in on a young woman caught between differently facing choices and a family in crisis. Both hinge on the verge of significant change, in a reflection of the period itself: one the rise of the labour movement and socialism, the other a great general disaffection with religion.

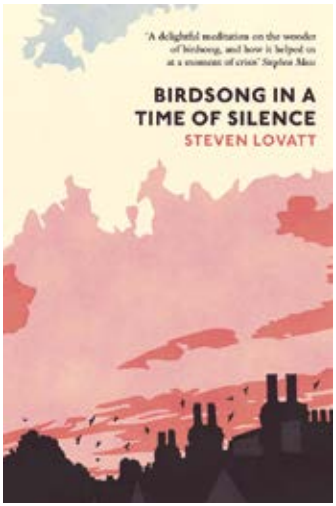
The novel opens with twenty-one-year old Ellen, returning to her family home in Gower after two-years in Hoboken, New Jersey. Her journey has been long and arduous. She has come home after being summoned by her brother's letter, in a last bid to stop her father drinking himself to death. The family to which she returns comprises her alcoholic father who is gambling away swathes of family land, and a mother and grandmother each coping with their disappointments in a muted taciturn strength simultaneously simmering with rage. There are also Ellen's younger twin brothers whose lives and choices perch precariously on all that is happening within their home as well as outside it. It is clear from the beginning that whilst this is indeed Ellen's home, her place has found itself somewhere outside it all. She is both looking in and beyond, navigating and making sense. 'Can't they see she is different from them, always has been?' she wonders, 'That her feet were always itching to get away.'

Place, geographical and human, are central to Fraser's writing. When Ellen is greeted by the trees, hedges and fields, 'so clean looking and newly washed', they remind her just 'how many shades of green there are in Gower.' The dampness of the rain permeates Ellen's home as well as the characters, giving them a heaviness. Gower is not by any means just a cosmetic backdrop or preoccupation, but a place and atmosphere that courses through Fraser's people. Her craft for aptly worded sentences that offer a glimpse into whole worlds is resonant throughout. Sentences are balanced and rhythmic as well as precise in detail and meaning. The present tense in which the novel is written is unusual and acts as a device to give a very exact and immediate viewpoint on the place and time through which lives move, or to which they remain bound.

'Rooted. Especially mother, imprisoned by her womb. By the farm. By the men. By being a woman,' Ellen despairs for her mother. It is clear she wants something more than these things for herself, and to an extent has already achieved so. Ellen has returned to Mount Pleasant, the family farm, as 'the woman who manages alone in a city that everybody goes to, unlike this place that everybody comes from.' Yet she is also aware of what it means, to others in her world at least, to be a woman 'fit for purpose'. The novel holds a very compassionate and understanding mirror to the relationships between women. The unspoken currents of empathy and support as well as bitterness between Ellen and the other women of the household echo hundreds and thousands of such mutual words heard and passed over the years. Ellen's character is based on Jane Fraser's great aunt, who courageously left Wales for America at the age of 19. It is perhaps this tangible connection that explains the tenderness with which this story is written. ➤

Rajvi Glasbrook Griffiths is a headteacher in Gwent and director at Literature Caerleon Festival

Birdsong in a Time of Silence



Steven Lovatt
Particular, 2021

Merlin Gable

I have to admit that, quietly, I've sometimes wondered about what book reviews should actually be *for*. An orthodox viewpoint might be that they are for someone – presumably well-placed to make the judgement – to appraise a book against some abstract definition of quality or value. And what then? For readers to decide if they want to buy it? But then how often does a bad review honestly dissuade you from reading a book you otherwise would?

One way to dodge the question is to ask what the *book* is for. A more trendy way to put it might be: 'what's the book trying to *say*?'. This is itself a question that would be at best somewhat impertinent to ask an author – what, you don't get it? At worst it somewhat misses what is perhaps the point of the exercise of reading; to me, this is to accept in good faith the invitation of someone else – the writer – to entertain a topic, idea, or set of themes that they find interesting. The judgement at the end is: was the idea interesting, and did they describe it well?

For Steven Lovatt, that invitation is to join him in experiencing a historic solitude: his observation, most often alone, of birdsong during the coronavirus lockdown beginning in March 2020. Here the reader is his confidante, guided through scraps of woodland or the streets in and around Swansea as he blends a sort of observational storytelling, well-judged commentary on the nature and variety of birdsong, and explorations of much wider human themes and their relationship with those of birds.

For as much as there is avian, and sometimes ornithological, about the book, there is just as much human in Lovatt's own voice, which not only informs as an abstract narrator but acts as a character within the narrative. His writing can feel like the sort of charming enthusiasm you love to experience in your friends as they discuss their passions. The book therefore acts

How can you write, in twenty-six letters alone, the sounds, variety, and subtleties of something distinctly unhuman?

as a surrogate – as the written word so often does – for another form of presence, one which many of us have lacked for much of the past eighteen months. But it feels too easy to say that is all this book is.

There is a second challenge that Lovatt tackles with great success. Writing is always a wishful attempt to fix meaning in language in order to communicate about experience. How much harder, then, is the task when the meaning is that in birdsong? How can you write, in twenty-six letters alone, the sounds, variety, and subtleties of something distinctly unhuman?

Lovatt's palette extends from colour to poetic form to onomatopoeia. Music is a frequent comparator (the 'hidden slurs and glissandos' of the magpie's song), as are some inventive neologisms ('chiffchaff/zilpzalp/siff saff'). The writing is at all times deft, nimble and modest. There's a humbleness in how he appeals to the reader through question, foregrounding the challenge of describing birdsong. Metaphor is deployed carefully, with images that are sure to justify their use. For something that is so much about the joy of excess – an animal that sings for no discernable reason – the language is poised and economical without being unemotional.

I didn't develop any great habits during lockdown. Unlike the purveyors of toxic positivity, I didn't learn a new language, didn't take up gardening and didn't renovate the house (I don't have that luxury, unless my landlord chooses to be either particularly generous or canny depending on your outlook).

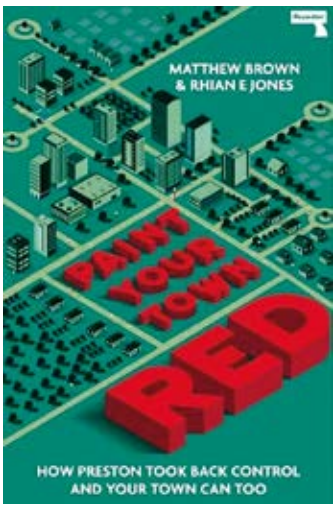
I didn't even read all that much. What's the point of books when faced with the horror that was unfolding? Where others legitimately saw reading as escapism, I somewhat masochistically saw it as an irresponsible and indulgent averting of the gaze. So I witnessed, from my window, and now frankly I wonder to what end.

But taking for a second the point I asked myself in lockdown and at the start of this piece more seriously than it's worth: what is reading for? Whilst in many ways Lovatt's first book is as far from self-reflexive anthropocentric writing as you can get, it did make me confront this question. Because this book too starts with an act of indulgence, or at least of idleness. What do we gain by reading someone else's feelings about birds?

At this time, I'd argue that we gain a lot. Faceless, invisible horror and grave economic consequences leave us atomised. There has been no universal thrust, no *point*, to anything when faced by what was happening around us. Lovatt's book outlines a form of practice – a way of thinking and of writing – that builds resources against that shapelessness and hopelessness. Most refreshingly it is so deeply *experiential*: a rare thing to capture so successfully in writing. ➤

Merlin Gable is the Culture Editor of *the welsh agenda*

Paint Your Town Red: How Preston Took Back Control and Your Town Can Too



Matthew Brown and Rhian E. Jones
Repeater Books, 2021

Jack Watkins

One of the unexpected features of COVID-19 has been its effect on mainstream thinking about political economy. Organisations as varied as the International Monetary Fund, World Economic Forum, Bank of England and the *Financial Times* have all published anxious warnings about the challenges of inequality and the need for change (some would argue without really grasping their own culpability). A UK Government that includes many Ministers with well-documented libertarian tendencies has launched into an ambitious, if yet unclear, mission to address regional inequalities. Meanwhile, authors like Thomas Picketty, Dani Rodrik, Maria Mazzucato and Kate Raworth, each with a detailed critique of what could be termed the neoliberal approach to market economy, are becoming regular fixtures in public policy circles.

With the feeling that economic orthodoxy is up for debate for perhaps the first time in decades, Matthew Brown and Rhian E. Jones' book is a welcome intervention that deserves to be widely read. As with these other authors, *Paint Your Town Red* is motivated by a series of observations about the precarity of the present order: the weakness of traditional econometrics for measuring societal well-being, the corrosive effects of inequality on the public sphere, the need for a strong state as a regulator and economic actor. However, these grand themes are not subject to the abstraction of academic analysis, but are situated in the lived experience of a Lancashire town.

The book takes as its starting point the experience of 'Community Wealth Building' in Preston, a programme of proactive municipal government procurement, business support and relationship-building that has attracted interest from academics, think tanks and politicians, including Welsh Labour. The Preston model is essentially a programme for local government to promote and support a more grounded, locally-controlled and locally-owned economy. It proposes that provision of many everyday essentials (often termed

the foundational economy) can be better served by encouraging and even prioritising local firms, who add not only a sense of local knowledge and commitment, but ensure that ownership remains in the area, allowing social spending to be circulated within local economies, in shops, restaurants and through personal services.

Where mainstream economic thinking sees inequality as the result of post-2008 sluggishness and the shock of Covid-19, Brown and Jones put Community Wealth Building into a much longer context, grounding contemporary challenges in places like Preston in their history of industrial decline, peripherality to global centres, financialisation of key economic assets and the weakening of local government through centralisation and austerity. While the Davos crowd might be accused of waking up to inequality too late, this book makes clear throughout that contemporary problems have long running structural causes. In this sense, the authors emphasise the credentials of Community Wealth Building as a fundamentally left wing programme. They manage to connect the dots between the miners strike, the Greater London Authority's battles with the Thatcher government, the Occupy protests of the early 2010s, the *indignados* movement in Spain, the rise of Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn and the commissioning of school dinners in Preston in a way that is compelling but also somehow light and engaging. It is not a victory lap for left-wingers who have been proven correct, but a way of grounding our everyday lives in history, and it gives greater depth and meaning to the Preston experience.

The authors' backgrounds give a strong indication of their interest in this topic. Matthew Brown is both an author of and a character in the Preston story, having been a councillor in Preston since 2002 and leader since 2018, being widely associated with having a strategic vision for Preston in a way that is sadly rare among local authority leadership, while Rhian E. Jones is a long-standing author on history, politics and culture whose work shines an important light on how radicalism is reflected in popular culture. Together, they provide a voice that is clearly partial in its assessment of Community Wealth Building, but brings enthusiasm about its potential for improving people's lives.

As its title suggests, it is intended as a practical guide to inform other experiments in local, community-oriented action. Despite its clear grounding in left politics, it never strays into dry theoretical debate or mantras, ultimately calling upon readers to learn the practical lessons of Preston and to develop their own approaches within their local context. By providing a number of real, practical steps for local authorities to follow, it avoids the challenge of utopianism that can often be levelled at left-leaning thinkers. Sections of the book read like a toolkit, with step-by-step instructions for engaging local firms in public procurement or establishing credit unions, and will prove valuable for authorities and community organisations looking to adapt their own approaches.

The key insight of the book, and of the movements that it discusses, is an emphasis on localism

The key insight of the book, and of the movements that it discusses, is an emphasis on localism. This is a departure from the vast majority of literature on economic development, in which the intended audience of 'policy makers' are almost always Ministers, national agencies or central banks. It is an immensely meaningful distinction and one that raises important questions, particularly here in Wales. If one was to wonder, as Welsh Labour figures have in the past, why people talk about the 'Preston model' and not the 'Wales model', the answer would undoubtedly be the importance of localism and of local buy-in - something that the authors address in their deep, meaningful analysis of Welsh Labour's various efforts in pursuit of the same goals as Preston. While recognising that procurement policy doesn't necessarily set people's passions alight, the authors provide numerous examples of personal relationships being built between officials, businesses and citizens, and how these relationships enable a common purpose. It is

As this book makes clear, community wealth building has required local government to wrest back some of the policy-making capacity that it had in the glory days of municipalism, by, as Brown and Jones put it, 'solving problems from below without permission from above'

difficult to imagine these kinds of relationships beginning and ending at Cathays Park.

Nonetheless, as a book aimed as much at practitioners as to a general audience this emphasis on localism has potentially huge implications and will leave readers coming away motivated to explore further. At no point is there a call for scaling-up or replicating what is happening in Preston, and there are few concrete lessons for central government. It makes clear that Preston's experience has been driven by the day-to-day work of local government and the local links that it entails. As this book makes clear, community wealth building has required local government to wrest back some of the policy-making capacity that it had in the glory days of municipalism by, as Brown and Jones put it, 'solving problems from below without permission from above'. It is easy to see why Preston has captured widespread attention, as it offers a template for local agency in an environment where local governments are being squeezed to the point of bankruptcy.

Perhaps the weakness of *Paint Your Town Red* is that it remains unclear the extent to which problems *have* been solved from below. Readers may come away invigorated, but any local authority leader wishing to put their own 'model' in place is likely to end up facing myriad officials, political opponents, business owners and interest groups who do not yet accept that it is time for a change, or even that meaningful change is possible, concerned about value for money or about the implications of tinkering in markets. To win them over, the argument cannot simply be about values, it has to be about outcomes. As the think tank Demos has noted, there is some theoretical support for the Preston model and some valuable data comparisons made over time in Preston itself (much of which is highlighted in this book), yet there remains no formal evaluation of the Preston model, nor any comparative analysis looking across control areas or making use of longer time series.

Anyone looking at this book to provide that evidence base will come away disappointed, but on reflection that is not really its purpose. *Paint Your Town Red* feels like the start of something rather than its end. It invites readers to go out into the world and take action, to debate and experiment and to get involved. It is an introduction and a presentation of the theoretical and historical context that has informed the development of the Community Wealth Building approach, and a description of what that model looks like in practice with an indication of what it can achieve. The challenge these authors have set for the wide variety of actors working in this space is to complement this by building that evidence base through practice. After decades in which we were told that there was no alternative, this feels like a good challenge to have. ➤

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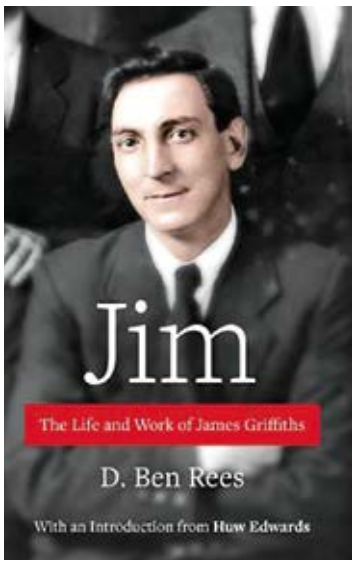
Jim: *The Life and Work of James Griffiths*

D. Ben Rees
Welsh Academic Press, 2021

Theo Davies-Lewis



'The Welsh never had a Moses in the twentieth century', D Ben Rees writes, consummate Celtic emotion pouring from the page. 'But of all the Welsh leaders, James Griffiths is the politician who comes closest.' Such statements are not to be made lightly. For as much as Wales has lacked a messianic figure since Owain Glyndŵr, it has been a production factory for political giants over the last century. David Lloyd George and Aneurin Bevan are two statesmen recognised as gold standard. But neither can be given the same credit as 'our Jim', as admirers affectionately referred to him later in his life, for the Wales we are today.

Rees' biography, an accompaniment to *Cofiant James Griffiths: Arwr Glew y Werin*, published in 2014, makes this argument very convincingly. It traces the forgotten story of the Amman Valley boy who worked his way up the greasy pole – from a 13-year-old in the local anthracite coal mine to becoming the first Secretary of State for Wales. Of course, there is no question that Rees is a dedicated disciple of his subject: the subtitle – Jim is anointed 'Hero of the Welsh Nation' – gives that away. But the author is (reluctantly) capable of criticising his subject on occasion, particularly around what more Jim could have done during the Tryweryn crisis.

Like me, the author was disappointed at how Jim's autobiography, *Pages from Memory* (1969), downplayed his own achievements. Unlike his subject, however, Rees has articulated the James Griffiths story through avid use of historical archives combined with literary fluency and dynamic argument. This is important. For many readers, James Griffiths is an unfamiliar figure. Chronicling the irresistible rise of the Betws colliery boy to the British Cabinet with wider historical and social context is therefore crucial, as is Rees' accessible writing style.

Emphasis is placed early in the book on the great influences that shaped the young Jeremiah. These range from the Welsh patriotism embodied by poet brother 'Amanwy' to the close-knit mining communities that characterised the Amman Valley. We learn how the Religious Revival catalysed by Evan Roberts in 1904, was a 'turning point' for Jim

and many mining friends, who became committed to changing the world for the better. Then came the Independent Labour Party, with Jim a founding member of a branch locally in 1908. Jim was an effective political operator too, as the author credits his efforts as a political agent for the Labour Party holding Llanelli in the 1923 election, before documenting his swift rise from Miner's agent in 1925 to the President of 'the Fed' in the mid-1930s.

But it is Jim's parliamentary and ministerial career that captures the imagination. Contrary to popular history, Bevan and Lloyd George were not the only Welshmen who could lay claim to being architects of the welfare state. Jim's work as Minister for National Insurance in Clement Attlee's post-war government is just as significant, as Lord Boyd-Carpenter argued in a letter to *The Times* in 1975. For the Tory peer, establishing the Welsh Office was not 'the crown of his political career', as the newspaper's obituary had stated, but the National Insurance and Industrial Injuries Acts.

And we can remember Jim for several other reasons too. Championing the findings of the Beveridge Report during the Second World War. Serving as Colonial Secretary in the early 1950s (where he became an important figure for freedom movements globally). And his time as a Labour grandee, including the party's deputy leader, when he navigated the internal politics of Gaitskell and Wilson. Huw Edwards, writing the foreword, suggests there are lessons for the students of Blair, Brown, Miliband and Corbyn to discern here. Jim's skill at negotiation and compromise suggests so.

Inevitably, the true significance of James Griffiths to the Welsh nation is, as Rees argues, setting the scene for what eventually led to the National Assembly for Wales in 1999. Causes to promote Wales were always important to him: Rees points out that Jim wholeheartedly championed the Welsh language and culture, and had a much better understanding of the danger Plaid Cymru posed to Labour's dominance than any of his peers. Rees highlights that the period between the death of his brother in 1953 and the drowning of Capel Celyn a few years later was when he was most active in shaping Labour's policy on Welsh affairs.

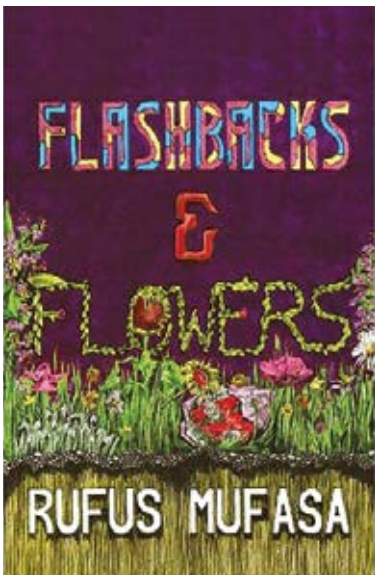
Jim successfully (and often painfully) negotiated with sceptics such as Nye Bevan to give Wales parity with Scotland by urging the creation of a Welsh Office with a Secretary of State. It was official policy in the Labour manifesto in 1959, a long-awaited and critical pledge seen as an indication that Labour had finally given guidance to the Welsh nation. Half a decade would pass before the Welsh Office could be formed, but it was due to the manoeuvrings of Jim and sympathetic Labour colleagues that the first tentative steps to Welsh self-government were made.

Surprised to be sitting at the Cabinet table as an elder statesman in 1964, Jim sought to ensure firm foundations were built for ministers that would follow him. It is no great shame that Jim failed in his vision to build a 'new town' for Wales, as he made respectable progress on his other two priorities as Secretary of State: strengthening the legal status of the Welsh language and supporting further work on the feasibility of setting up an elected Welsh Council. Results were not always immediate, and Rees admits that Jim could have been more ambitious in post, but he had laid the groundwork for those who served in the post after 1966.

By the General Election of that year, a distinctly Welsh Labour had become the unquestionable national movement of Wales. They had won 32 out of 36 constituencies. For Jim, Rees writes this was a 'magnificent vote of confidence' after the establishment of the Welsh Office and his term as Secretary of State. He left his Cabinet job shortly after and remained Llanelli's MP until 1970, thirty-four years after being elected.

But his significance to Wales – elevating our status in Westminster and instilling a sense of self-belief that we were able to govern relatively independently – have stood the test of time. Rees' volume is an impressive tribute, telling a story which still resonates today because in many ways it mirrors the experience of the Welsh nation in the twentieth century. Finally, that story has been told. For the first time in many years, we can say with a bit more certainty: Jim Griffiths remembered, at last. ➤

Theo Davies-Lewis is the chief political commentator of *The National Wales*



Flashbacks and Flowers

Rufus Mufasa
Indigo Dreams, 2021

Windfalls

Susie Wild
Parthian, 2021

Nia Moseley-Roberts finds moments of connection in two new poetry collections by Welsh women

'Queen of the cross-art' is the title granted to poet and 'literary activist' Rufus Mufasa in the blurb of her debut collection, *Flashbacks and Flowers*. Even without this hint, Mufasa's grounding in performance is evident from the style of her poetry. It is goadingly aural, patterned with assonance and rhymes which only emerge when spoken aloud, challenging you to free them from the page. To try and capture such a dynamic style in print is an ambitious venture. But then so is the whole project of *Flashbacks and Flowers*, whose poems labour their way through the span of Mufasa's life, from her childhood to her teenage years, abusive relationships, and the muffled shock of maternity. This is an achingly brave book, and for that Mufasa should be applauded, but I am less sure it is a great one. Having seen her live, I can attest that Mufasa is certainly queen of the stage; whether she is also (yet) queen of the page is more debatable.

The key question is this: how do you bring your audience with you when you are discussing the deeply personal? Mufasa, as might be expected from an artist nurtured on cultures of rap, grounds herself in physicality and sound. She – activist, teacher, pioneering artist – is a presence. She is strong. When Mufasa performs, she surrounds you, her voice flows around and embraces you. You are with her because she is there, and she is impossible to shut out.

Flashbacks and Flowers' fundamental flaw is that it has been severed from this source. In the move from stage to page, from physical performance to written object, something has been lost in translation. Another way of framing this is to consider the difference between poetry which presents and poetry which represents. Mufasa's poetry represents her own experience. Her longer prose-poems – 'Comp' and 'Once Were CaeCoedians' are good examples – read like scripts of a living history recordings, archival footage of someone asked to remember for the camera. *Flashbacks and*

Flowers documents Mufasa's life, as she 'scribe[s] this almost-lost-dynasty | with only memory'.

The problem with this is that you need to have led a similar life in order to fully appreciate her art. These poems work through pointing to shared experience, acting as an interface between Mufasa and the reader. As someone raised in a Welsh-speaking family, the bilingualism of 'Y Gegin Fach' was like a warm bath, and as a woman who narrowly escaped being assaulted whilst walking home, 'Once Were CaeCoedians' reads like a terrifying could-have-been.

These moments of alignment are deeply affecting. But just as common are moments of disjuncture in which the connection is lost, and these are all the more frustrating for the knowledge that something unreachable lies behind the words on the page. Poems like 'Weasel' left me with a sense of not having *got* it. In performance, Mufasa's presence patches this; it is easier to reach for her when she is there. On the page she and I passed like ships in the night.

I suspect that this is a problem which will heal itself. Mufasa's writing is of a womanhood which is raw, painful, and close. I am asking for objectivity where I suspect that it is not yet possible or kind; in the meantime, more context notes would be welcome.

Susie Wild, by contrast, is a poet who presents. In her complete world, Mufasa's villains are more insidious – a rapist will marry your best friend – whilst in *Windfalls*

Both Wild and Mufasa revisit and rediscover moments of sexual assault and near assault in their poetry, but again, the difference between presentation and representation is present

Wild's slip in and out of view, existing as patterns of behaviour in the moment of the poem before dissipating forever. Both Wild and Mufasa revisit and rediscover moments of sexual assault and near assault in their poetry, but again, the difference between presentation and representation is present. In 'Toby said', Mufasa uses her poetry to capture the realisation that she had been the victim of gender-based abuse and violence, retelling the story of her life as a litany of fractured moments: 'But one day, on some random day: BANG. Epiphany!'. In Wild's 'Newly Single,', this realisation happens more explicitly in the process of the poem: 'Perhaps you should | have pressed charges. Spoken to someone'. Wild uses her poetry to craft shards of experience into beautiful objects for display, handing them over to her reader for inspection.

Taking up this invitation is a joy; Wild's collection is, strictly speaking, two. The first half of her book, 'The Carnivore Boyfriends', tracks through her early life and relationships, terminating when she finds the man she will eventually marry. 'Windfalls', excavates the more recent past, covering moments of Wild's life through the pandemic, and will be painfully familiar to anyone who has lived through the past year and a half. Wild's is a good voice to herald the coming of the pandemic art, but for me it comes too soon: I am still not convinced it is all over and am dubious about pausing before I am sure it is.

Yet for all this, *Windfalls* is excellent poetry: Wild is an excellent poet, her work flowing with the ease that comes only with a liberal dash of talent and no small amount of practice. I read this book in one sitting and enjoyed it. My mother read it before I even got my hands on it, and she enjoyed it too, returning to pick at it even as I write this review. Wild's poems are usually structured along the basis of either dyads or jewels: she either has two parts moving against each other (the meat cutting and domestic violence in 'The Vegetarian Helps Slice the Ham'), creating a dynamic reading experience and adding interest, or she polishes a moment until it shines ('Nude, smoking, in the dawn doorway' was a complete joy). Wild's work perhaps lacks the ideological depth it would take for me to really love it, but then I am an exacting reader who wants difficulty. For well-crafted and enjoyable poetry, you could not do much better. ➤

Nia Moseley-Roberts is a postgraduate student and Ertegun Scholar at the University of Oxford

Q&A

Maddy Dhesi is an 18-year-old student and first time voter from Wrexham. In the run-up to May's Senedd elections, she worked with Citizens Cymru Wales' young leaders to run a social media engagement programme aimed at encouraging young people to register to vote

Why is voter ID a problem for Wales?

The UK Government's elections bill would make it mandatory for Welsh voters in UK General Elections and Police and Crime Commissioner elections to provide photo ID in order to vote. The UK Government has proposed Voter ID to erase the threat of fraud from our elections completely. But even ex-Minister Matt Hancock admitted only six cases of voter fraud had occurred in the 2019 General Election. If the six cases of ballot fraud were the biggest problem facing our elections then this would be a necessary step to ensure the integrity of our elections. But the proposed boundary changes by the UK Government could see Wales' 40 seats in the House of Commons falling to 32 – and turnout in the Senedd elections has failed to surpass 50% for decades. In Wales, our decreasing political representation is the biggest problem that faces our elections, not voter fraud. Cracking down on voter fraud will only result in disenfranchising and discouraging marginalised voters.

How will voter ID affect voters?

Following the Senedd election it was reported that 35,000 16 and 17-year-olds were unregistered. Schemes such as voter ID will only dissuade new voters. Before the 2021 Senedd elections, many registration campaigns focused on the quick and easy nature of voting. But acquiring a passport or provisional licence are often lengthy processes that require access to acceptable ID photographs, civil servants willing to verify your identity, and a cost of between £34–85. Quite a leap from a free five minute registration process. How can we expect to increase the turnout of young people if voting comes at a cost of time, effort and money?

The UK Government has defended the claim that voter ID will disenfranchise the estimated 3.5 million in the UK without access to ID by promising to introduce free electoral identity cards. However, an electoral identity card scheme that would cover everyone in the UK without ID is forecast to cost over £20m, with much of the cost borne by local councils – some of whom are already passing motions against the proposals. The pilot scheme for voter ID in 2019 reported over 1,000 voters being refused a vote and not returning to vote again. Voting needs to be as easy as possible and adding more steps to the process will only hinder the progress Wales needs to make on participation and representation.

Access to photo ID also carries a racial disparity – whilst over three quarters of White people are reported to have at least one type of photo ID, only 48% of Black people and 31% of Asian people can say the same. Rejected voters are therefore more likely to be people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds, creating an electoral system that is more of a reflection of the UK's White population. Wales only has three MSs and currently no MPs in Parliament from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds. Voter ID laws will only worsen this underrepresentation.

How did you feel about being a first time voter – and what barriers still exist for young people voting for the first time?

I was excited: the best part was realising how few of my friends and classmates would not have been able to vote if not for Votes at 16. But I also became very aware of the problems with our elections, particularly for young people. In December 2019, conversation about the UK General Election was everywhere: in school, on social media, on the news. But in May 2021 – even though young people saw our education, opportunities and futures affected by the Welsh Government's decisions – there was no common knowledge of the Senedd election, let alone the parties and the voting system.

One of the biggest barriers in the Senedd elections is a lack of awareness about them. Energy needs to go into constantly engaging young people, as well as education about the Welsh political system. Lack of knowledge surrounding the Senedd election extends to the ballot box. Though the Regional List vote is appealing to voters because it gives more choice of candidates than the constituency First Past the Post vote, the different voting system of the Senedd election was a confusing shock to many young voters I spoke to, who had only ever heard of First Past the Post via the highly publicised UK General Election. We need to make the most of the democratic system we are in – whether that be through accessing the vote or understanding how our voting system works – and a lack of political education and the discouraging addition of voter ID risks preventing this.

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