

**Education and the Welsh Public Sphere**

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**May 14<sup>th</sup> 2012**

**Institute of Welsh Politics**

**Aberystwyth**

***(Front slide)***

In his recent book *What are Universities for?*, the intellectual historian Stefan Collini says 'every politician is a closet historian'. To which, I suppose, the only response is that some politicians have studied more history than others. I am conscious that until recently we had a Prime Minister in Gordon Brown who was a distinguished Labour historian, a biographer of James Maxton, and the previous Prime Minister, Tony Blair, separately told both Simon Schama and Roy Jenkins that he wished he had studied history at university. There are some politicians, like Denis Healey, whose autobiography suggests that they have both studied the history and lived it as well.

In Wales, you will have to settle for an Education Minister who has at least studied history to post-graduate level. Why talk of history at the Institute of Welsh Politics? Because history, to my mind, offers key perspectives on some of the challenges we face today, in Welsh education and higher education and in Welsh government more

generally. It would help the analysis of some of the problems we face in both education and in terms of debates over the UK constitution if more people had a sense of where we had started.

In the Rhondda, we are in the process of supporting a number of significant anniversaries:

- 2010 – the centenary of the Tonypany Riots and the battle for economic justice against the coal-owners.
- 2011 – the centenary of the foundation of the Rhondda Labour Party.
- 2012 – the centenary of the publication of *The Miners' Next Step*.

*The Miners' Next Step* is often cited, but little read. And its authors are often mentioned, but little researched. So it is often forgotten that two of its notable authors were in fact themselves actively involved in education. Noah Ablett, who went from the Rhondda to Ruskin College and back again,

was one of the pioneers of independent working-class education, involved with the foundation of the Plebs League and the Central Labour College. Another of its authors, W.H.Mainwaring, later MP for Rhondda East, was a CLC student and later lecturer.

*(Slide on Plebs League)*

Another tradition of adult education was represented by the Workers Educational Association, more focused on collaboration with the existing state education system, and in the Welsh context, saw itself as representing the Welsh ideal of popular culture.

Following the first World War, the WEA survived thanks to grants the Davies family of Llandinam - the same family of course, which provided the funds to set up the world's first department of international politics here in Aberystwyth. Which had provided initial financing for the actual

foundation of the college here in Aberystwyth in 1872, following the sinking of their first successful Rhondda pit near Treorchy in the 1860s. The historian John Davies, whose life also links the Rhondda and Aberystwyth, recalls in his *A History of Wales* that the price of coal 'between 1869 and 1873....rose from 8s 6d to 23s 3d a ton and a dozen new pits were opened in the Rhondda valley alone.' So Rhondda labour provided the money that funded Aberystwyth. And I have come to ask for it back!

You will recall the description of Aberystwyth's launch, by Professor J. Gwynn Williams, who taught me Welsh history at Bangor:

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The day before had been a public holiday. The shops were closed and the buildings, including the new pier, gaily decorated. In the College Hall there was a celebration breakfast supplied by the Belle Vue Hotel. It was of Dickensian

amplitude, the tables heavy with hams and fowls, pies and jellies of all kinds.

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Professor Williams said that the speech which drew most attention was indeed delivered by David Davies of Llandinam who complained that 'The wealthy men of Wales had not played their part and it was idle to plead poverty when Wales had one-third of the United Kingdom's coal.'

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Sir Alfred Zimmern, the first Professor of international politics at Aberystwyth University, was later in the 1920s scathing of the failure of the then University to engage with ordinary working people:

'That the University should mean so little to the coalfield, that it should even display, on occasion, a deliberate preference for the

unlettered, if titled, capitalist over the zealous and lettered proletarian is surely an ironical comment on the meaning of the word University, and would be a bitter disappointment to those who dreamed dreams at its foundation.'

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The Aberdare committee in the 1880s recognized that 'higher education in Wales could not survive without assistance from the state'. As J.Gwynn Williams said: 'The £2,500 granted to Aberystwyth in 1884 was the first instance of government aid for university education in England and Wales.'

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Fast forward just over 100 years and the state is again stepping in, this time on behalf of Cardiff University, as former Welsh Secretary Nicholas Edwards recalled:

‘At that time, the Welsh Office had no direct responsibility, financial or otherwise, for higher education in Wales, but in order to obtain an agreement I offered to find £1 million towards the required package and a deal was done’.

The history of the establishment of a University in Wales is of course a story of public campaigning and political manoeuvring fought, as J.Gwynn Williams says, ‘in the offices of Whitehall and, above all, on the floor of the House of Commons.’

So arguably, without politics, there would be no Aberystwyth University.

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And of course, when the University of Wales finally came to be established, it did so with a constitution establishing the University Court as the ‘supreme governing body’. In the pre-democratic era, the

University of Wales Court was a central expression of a version of Welsh public sphere – the public sphere of engaged middle-class Welsh public opinion. It wasn't the public sphere of the majority of the population, for whom union politics performed a more valid role, but it was a form of public sphere nevertheless.

I start with this history, because it is sometimes worth recalling that our higher education institutions didn't suddenly spring up as private enterprises or as creations of the higher education funding councils or as works of art drawn up by the refined imaginations of their vice-chancellors. They have a history. They are the product of a particular set of economic, social and cultural circumstances and the political struggles which shaped them. They have both been shaped by, and subsequently helped to shape, the popular history and culture and indeed national identity of Wales – and they have always, in Wales, required substantial state largesse to support them. They exist in a public

sphere, and they always have done. They are not, and never have been, private institutions competing in some kind of idealized market, free of social obligations. Those involved in the creation of the University of Wales had public goals and national aspirations. Public policy shaped them at the outset. Public policy shapes them now.

I want to re-assert, today, the legitimacy of public interest in our higher education institutions and their development, not as something alien to the traditions of higher education development in Wales or the wider UK, but as something that has always been central to it.

So what do we mean by the Welsh public sphere? Michael D. Higgins, then the Irish Culture Minister, now the Irish President, idealized it as ‘a free space of public discussion among citizens’ in his Green Paper on Broadcasting, published in 1995. This is, by the way, the only Government consultation document I have ever read which refers directly to

the German sociologist Habermas, the main theorist of the evolution of the public sphere.

Professor Philip Schlesinger, probably the leading analyst of the relationships between media and the political spaces to which they relate, notes the important role ceded by many theorists of nation-building to national media systems in providing identification with and legitimacy for nation-states: in Benedict Anderson's terms, constructing the 'imagined community'. He suggests that the formation of the Habermas's 'classic' public sphere coincided with the growth of nationalism and nation-state formation. But Schlesinger argues powerfully that it is no longer adequate, if it ever was, to conceive of a simple 'functional fit' between a nation and a national media. To do so ignores the role of multinational corporations, international organisations, regional development and the growing autonomy of stateless nations within multinational states, and the role of global finance. Schlesinger identifies three political levels where

the concept of a communications space is elaborated: the supranational, the nation-state level and below the nation-state.

So in academic debates on the development of policy on the media post-devolution, which will I know be familiar to academics working here in the Centre for Media History and the Theatre, Film and Television Studies Department, it has been recognised that we have to conceive of what Dr Damian Tambini once called ‘a more multi-levelled complex of public spheres and levels of government’.

While in terms of daily papers, most people in Wales read papers produced in London, the UK newspapers which see themselves as shaping public debate sell few copies here, and they rarely cover Wales at all. What is regarded in south Wales as our national newspaper sells to a small percentage of the population. In north Wales, the Daily Post does similarly. The local and regional

papers add another layer, but with a focus that is not itself national. The public broadcasters reach the most, through the evening news bulletins particularly, and provide, principally through the medium of English, the nearest thing we have to an idealized public sphere. Meanwhile, through the medium of Welsh, we have S4C and Radio Cymru, Y Cymro and Golwg in either its physical or online or app versions.

In other words, in Wales we have a fractured and fragmented public sphere, in which a minority of our citizens engage. And that has implications not just for debates around education but for debates around the nature of the United Kingdom as a united political space itself, as I will argue later.

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So our new Welsh democracy operates in a complex world in which spaces of identity, to borrow the title of an important book by David Morley and

Kevin Robins, are changing and contested. As they say, *'Our senses of space and place are all being significantly reconfigured.'*

The Welsh public sphere is, as I have said, both fractured and fragmented. But it is also overlaid by and interacting with a wider variety of spaces of identity that exist either physically or online. We can easily understand the physical spaces and the importance of place – street, community, town, city, county, stateless nation, sovereign member-state of the EU or the UN or whatever.

But online spaces of identity include organised communities of interest, sporting, generational, hobby-based, social networks such as Facebook and the twittersphere, professional communities, educational institutions, blogs of all kinds, as well as the Welsh, UK, and international media and the online off-shoots that they project.

So we have no perfect Welsh public sphere and no perfect singular Welsh political space. In Wales, we may determine our education and higher education policy in a recognised political space physically constructed as the Senedd, but our policy-making is part of a fluid and messy process that sometimes looks confusing not only to our citizens and our media but also to ourselves as a political class. Democracy is messy. Democracy in a stateless nation with a largely coterminous national media such as Scotland is messier still. Democracy in a stateless nation without a coterminous national media like Wales is the messiest of all.

In the new remit letter for the Higher Education Funding Council in Wales I spelt out the need for HEFCW to focus on ‘what might be called Welsh studies, including the study of Welsh history and literature, culture, society, and politics’ in both our national languages. If Welsh institutions do not give priority to scholarship in Welsh studies, then who

will? I recall Professor Richard Wyn Jones, formerly of this institution, saying in 2004 in a lecture at the Eisteddfod, that ‘the percentage of research work discussing aspects of life in Wales is startlingly low.’ Things have improved since then, of course. But we can do better, hence the reference in the remit letter.

Our focus, of course, is and should be on Wales in the wider world. In the curriculum for the Welsh Baccalaureate, part of the core programme of course is Wales, Europe and the World – a chance to learn more about Wales and its relationship with the wider world. And the Cwricwlwm Cymreig focuses in the earlier years in enabling young people to see Wales as a modern, diverse country that is part of a wider international community.

According to the annual school census, I represent the most Welsh constituency in Wales. 81.2% of pupils in the Rhondda aged over 5 identify themselves as Welsh. Ogmore comes next, with

78.5% of Welsh identifiers, then Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney next, with 77% of Welsh identifiers, then Arfon at 75.9 %, then the Cynon Valley at 74.5%, Neath at 73.2%, Dwyfor Meirionnydd at 72.0% and then Aberavon at 71%. It is the old coalfield and slate quarrying areas of Wales which have the highest proportion of Welsh identifiers amongst our young people.

I mention this because it sometimes surprises people. There is often an expectation that places like Ceredigion or Carmarthen would see themselves as more Welsh. But it is the Rhondda's young people who identify themselves in that way.

This of course, was never an insular culture. It couldn't be. The Rhondda in its population growth in the nineteenth century was clearly a society of immigrants, growing from below 1000 in 1851 to 152,000 just 60 years later in 1911. It was at the heart of what Sir Alfred Zimmern christened 'American Wales'. As the late Gwyn Alf Williams,

also formerly of Aberystwyth, said 'in terms of sheer intensity of immigration Wales, which in this context means South Wales, ranks second only to the USA itself.' The Rhondda novelist, teacher and raconteur Gwyn Thomas - whose centenary we celebrate next year - famously said 'Places like the Rhondda were parts of America that never managed to get to the boat.'

In the 1970s and 1980s, Welsh historians, particularly those gathered around the journal *Llafur*, helped to shape an effective understanding of modern Wales. They showed that the history of modern Wales was the story of the growth of modern capitalism and that Welsh identity or identities had been shaped specifically by the reaction to that and the growth of the labour movement in particular. They demonstrated that this was not a colonial society, but an engine-room for empire. They reached out in a popular way to engage with the making of modern Wales. They put into context the stories of all of us as individuals and

our families in a wider community – in a Wales where belonging and identity did not depend on what religion you were or what language you spoke, but on the basis of shared experience and shared history. They helped to shape and create that modern Welsh identity which underpinned the movement to devolution.

That generation of historians enabled us to see ourselves as we were. They challenged the Wales of myths; the Victorian/Edwardian nationalist liberalism that had ideologically dominated the discourse of Welshness; the notion that Welsh history depended on some fantasy football team of princes and rebels – who always lost by the way; and the notion that to be really Welsh, you had to speak Welsh. They reinserted the people back into the place. They paid tribute to the historic particularity of the South Wales experience that gave context to us all as individuals, family members, people in communities – and to a Welsh

working class experience that our families shared, even if our parents had made it to the next rung.

And as we have seen in recent times, the community of historians in Wales continues to engage with those debates, in collaboration with our key media organisations, with the *Western Mail's* excellent series of Welsh history essays, and the recent BBC Wales/OU series narrated by Huw Edwards.

And historians in Wales through History Research Wales under the leadership of Professor Huw Bowen have been at the heart of the academic collaboration across Wales that we as a Welsh government are seeking to encourage, just as those involved in the academic journal *Cyfrwng* have led important collaboration around the study of the media.

So there is nothing insular about the study of Welsh society, literature, history, politics or culture. What

we are talking about is the study of a particular space of identity in the modern world. Nothing could be more contemporary, relevant or international than that.

Our Wales is not a hermetically-closed space but a permeable one. In the digital world, borders and boundaries are more complex.

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Where are Welsh HEIs in the digital world? I have asked HEFCW to stimulate more engagement by Welsh HEIs with online platforms. It is disappointing that only the University of Glamorgan and the OU appeared to be taking online learning seriously, utilising platforms such as iTunes U. I know that the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol is now looking at this as well and is looking at what it can do to produce more resources online which can be used by learners within FE and schools as well as HE.

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The University of Glamorgan tells me they have enjoyed 'massive benefits' as a result of their engagement with iTunes U:

- raised awareness of the University, its academics and students
- provided more flexible learning resources for students
- shared knowledge with a worldwide audience
- An immense marketing pay-off

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In the digital world, students have access to the best teachers and the best materials. When my step-son was a physics student at Bristol University, he would sometimes email Richard Muller at Berkeley, who runs a course called *Physics for future Presidents*, by the way, and get answers emailed back by him.

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As Larry Summers, the former President of Harvard, has written:

‘New technologies will profoundly alter the way knowledge is conveyed....In a 2008 survey of first- and second-year medical students at Harvard, those who used accelerated video lectures reported being more focused and learning more material faster than when they attended lectures in person.’

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Perhaps the most famous example of online learning of course is the Artificial Intelligence course run by Sebastian Thrun, whose free online course attracted 160,000 students – and he has now quit teaching full-time at Stanford to set up his own online university, Udacity.

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Then there is MIT's own MITX.

I began this lecture with reference to the adult educators of the Rhondda who were behind the Miners' Next Step.

Our agenda is the completion of what Raymond Williams almost 50 years ago called the long revolution, and what I have called the democratization of education. Raymond Williams developed his ideas on culture while working in adult education. I said two years ago that we had not focused enough attention on the disconnect that has emerged in higher education over a period of decades – the drifting apart of higher education and adult education.

The Open University is the pioneer in digital learning. And enrolments in the OU in Wales have risen from 6945 in 2007-8 to 9095 in 2010-11.

I think there are four overall challenges facing the higher education system as a whole:

- the first is the financial challenge of the old middle-class model of HE, where every qualified 18 year-old was traditionally able to access 3 years full-time study away from home
- the second is the transformative challenge of the best content from the best teachers being available on a global basis digitally
- the third is the democratisation of HE and the thirst for learning, which is both a challenge and an opportunity
- and the fourth is the challenge of public accountability for the public money that is injected into the system, which in a climate of economic scarcity will sharpen, no matter how large a proportion of HE income comes from

fees, and will result in stronger national governance and a requirement for better and more strategic institutional governance.

Some of these challenges are well set out in the recent book by Clayton M. Christensen and Henry J. Eyring, *The Innovative University*. They argue in essence that digital learning is the kind of disruptive innovation that is likely to be truly transformative in its impact. They argue that online technology disrupts traditional teaching; that there are now two kinds of students, those for whom the traditional campus-based experience is essential, and those who want to learn while they earn. They are actually positive about the potential of HEIs to transform themselves to accommodate this, and they maintain there will always be a role for physical campuses

and human interaction in learning, but they believe that many institutions are likely to run into significant challenges.

I have no doubt, by the way, that if I ever venture again into the academic world, assuming there is life after politics, then I will need to spend more time creating interactive materials that students can access on their own devices, and I will waste less time on preparing physical handouts than I did back in 2002-3.

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But then, I do that already.

While I think that digital learning does have the potential to be a disruptive innovation, I recall that in the context of broadcasting, in the BBC we were

told for many years in the 1990s that the Internet would take over. But the key lessons so far seem to me

- understanding the new technologies and developing the capabilities to maximise their use is essential
- original and unique content matters
- while some new brands emerge powerfully, strong old brands survive as citizens seek trusted pathways

I dislike technological determinism as much as I dislike socio-economic determinism. So, let me say that I am sure there'll always be an Aberystwyth. But its task in a digital world is more complex and it will operate in a more transparent and democratic environment.

I want to say a few words about the development of policy on education and higher education in the context of contemporary debates on the future of the United Kingdom. I think it is time to make the case that it isn't Alex Salmond who is the biggest threat to the unity of the United Kingdom. It is the UK coalition government practising a policy of what I want to call 'English exceptionalism', and the Westminster political and media class, mired in what both Lord Morgan of Aberdyfi, Kenneth O.Morgan the historian, and Raymond Williams separately called their 'metropolitan provincialism',.

The UK coalition government presumes that it can speak for the whole of the UK.. It is clear that they have not thought through the detail of their policies and their implications for the whole of the UK, particularly where their UK-wide policies may require active co-operation from the devolved administrations.

We live in a Wales of course where the bulk of people get their news from newspapers written in London. It is perhaps not surprising that when they engage with issues of education policy in Wales it is on the occasions that they think of us as exotic or backward.

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So when we took a decision on HE tuition fees that was different from the UK coalition government, the (slide) *Telegraph* and (slide) *Mail* in particular didn't like it, both branding it educational apartheid.

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Even the BBC were a bit shocked. An old friend contacted me on Facebook to say

“Leighton – wish you'd seen the response in the newsroom...think the penny dropped at last about the reality of devolved powers. Da iawn.”

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I responded in the *Guardian*, pointing out

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- I am responsible for the student support arrangements for students domiciled in Wales. The Scottish government is responsible for students domiciled in Scotland. Northern Ireland ministers in their assembly for students domiciled in Northern Ireland. And – wait for it – Vince Cable and David Willetts in the UK coalition government for students domiciled in England. They are welcome to follow our example in Wales.
- If that puts us in the European mainstream, while England swims in a different direction, so be it.

Qualifications (slide)

On 31<sup>st</sup> March Michael Gove wrote to me stating the actions he intended to take in respect of A Levels. On 3<sup>rd</sup> April, coinciding with a letter back to Michael Gove from the Chief Executive of the English regulator, Ofqual, the front page of the Daily Telegraph was headlined 'Dons take charge in A-level shake-up'. The article said 'universities will be given new powers to set A-levels for the first time in 30 years because of fears that the gold standard qualification is failing to prepare teenagers for the demands of higher education. Ministers will relinquish control of syllabuses and hand them to exam boards and academic panels made up of senior dons from Russell Group universities'. As the vice-chancellor of Aberystwyth rightly said 'the Russell Group universities are important and have a powerful brand – but there are other universities that we know have excellence in student experience and teaching. Why would you not want to include those universities if the option became available?'

The article was accompanied by an editorial highly favourable to Michael Gove and his 'characteristic boldness'.

Now, I have known Michael Gove since he was a journalist on Grampian television. I quite like him. I told him when we met in summer 2010 that one of the advantages of devolution was that it allowed England to be a laboratory for experiments.

But one of the problems of the over-centralization of our print media is the likely confusion of Welsh parents and pupils over what is actually happening. If Michael Gove says that A levels or GCSEs are too weak and need to be strengthened –in the process, for example, radically simplifying the debate over modular and linear forms of assessment – then that is what the so-called national newspapers will report. Given their reach into Wales, a perspective on those exams is given, largely unchallenged. The nuances, for example, of the research on A-Levels amongst HEIs and

employers that was undertaken jointly by Ofqual, the Welsh government and the Northern Ireland regulator, get ignored. And while the reality of devolution is that decisions are for us to take, and our policy autonomy is unchallenged, if the validity of the exams has been publicly questioned, then it has an impact on the confidence that people place on exams taken here too.

In his letter to me, Michael Gove accepted that A-Levels were a three-country issue affecting students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. But he failed to consult either me or the Northern Ireland Minister before rushing to the UK media with his plans.

The same could be said for his proposals last year to change the direction of travel for GCSEs, announced on the Andrew Marr show on 26<sup>th</sup> June 2011, again without Ministerial discussion with Wales and Northern Ireland.

The reality now, in respect of both A-Levels and GCSEs, is that we are seeing, without debate, a dismantling of the three-country system for public examinations. The Northern Ireland examining body has already decided it will not offer its exams in England. It had a tiny share compared to the WJEC, but this is a symbolic and significant step. John O'Dowd, the education minister in Northern Ireland decided that they would leave the decision on modular GCSEs to schools, saying that Michael Gove's decision 'did not appear to have been taken on the basis of clear evidence or educational justification'. In Wales, we have made it clear that our decisions on qualifications will be made on the basis of evidence and that is why we are conducting a full review of qualifications for 14-19.

There have been failures to consult us effectively on the remit of cross-border bodies such as the School Teachers Review Body.

In terms of welfare reform, the UK government takes England as the default model for service delivery, and is still unable to answer key questions we have as to how they intend to mandate people on to devolved services or withhold training allowances including Welsh Government allowances, from trainees who have a benefit sanction imposed or pending.

We also expect the UK Government to honour its commitments under the Welsh Language Act. It was therefore particularly disappointing that in November 2011 the UK Government wrote to all teachers in Wales through the medium of English only. I objected to this, and the Schools Minister Nick Gibb subsequently apologised to me for the failure to issue the letter bilingually. I am sure that the Welsh Language Commissioner will be looking carefully at the exercise by UK Government departments of their responsibilities in Wales in the future.

I think there are a number of interesting issues for academic exploration in the relationship between central and devolved governments.

But what is really happening is deeply cultural. UK coalition government often have UK-wide responsibilities. But sometimes its Ministers are largely Ministers for England; sometimes they exercise cross-border England and Wales responsibilities; sometimes they operate in an environment where policies have traditionally been developed, as with GCSEs and A-levels, on a tri-partite basis.

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They operate, in practice, on the assumption that England is the norm. In this, they are demonstrating what Martin Kettle recently in the Guardian called 'England's institutionalised indifference about the non-English parts of Britain'. The coalition government's response reflects the timeless born-

to-rule assumptions of the English public school system that trained administrators to run an empire – the imposition of an English exceptionalism that today threatens the unity of the United Kingdom itself.

When Seymour Martin Lipset's *American Exceptionalism* book came out in 1996 I recall a frisson of excitement amongst the Conservative Party policy wonks who used to attend the receptions and dinners and visits to the Proms that the then BBC Head of Public Affairs used to have to organise. Whoever he was. Was there not, I heard some of them say, a kind of English exceptionalism that underpinned the conservatism of England – the kind of individualist, mercantile philosophy which differentiated English from continental history? Many of those people, of course, subsequently went on to hold positions under the Conservative party of David Cameron.

What they meant then by that label of ‘English exceptionalism’ is different from what I mean by it. Under the coalition, it is English policy that is moving away from the other constituent nations of the UK. English exceptionalism is the political practice of this Conservative-led coalition.

Martin Kettle rightly said in his Guardian article that ‘the London press must get out more. It needs to make a much more conscious and deliberate effort to report Scotland and Wales to England, as well to discharge a British responsibility to report to and for Scotland and Wales themselves.’

Martin Kettle is right. None of the broadsheets adequately covers Wales. The weekly political press like the *New Statesman* or the *Spectator* never do. Most of the think-tanks and party pressure groups rarely engage with devolved issues. The specialist press, like the Times Higher and TES, do to be fair look at what we are doing – the TES normally on a weekly basis.

The institution with the biggest responsibility to report Britain to itself is of course the BBC, which on a regular basis goes through paroxysms of neurosis about whether it is reflecting the UK adequately, then shortly after forgets all about it again.

Before Rhodri Morgan made me a Deputy Minister in 2007, I was writing a book on the BBC and Britishness. Indeed, I gave a version of the first two chapters to a seminar here chaired by Professor Tom O'Malley. I had about 70,000 words written and it was due to be published in 2008 by UWP. They were, I think, the wrong 70,000 words, but never mind. One day I will return to it.

Jeremy Hunt may be the Murdochs' favourite Culture Secretary, and Jim Naughtie's favourite mispronunciation, but his tenure has been marked by an unprecedented assault on public service broadcasting, both in the hasty re-negotiation of the BBC Licence Fee, and the cut in the S4C budget.

Indeed, the most damaging thing to happen to the Welsh language in the last two years was the decision by the UK Government to abandon the funding formula for S4C, set down in statute, without any effective public debate. The budgetary loss to the Welsh language in the five years to 2014–15 will be at least £60 million.

It is clear that in terms of language policy at least, the Welsh Government will need to take a closer view of the impact of broadcasting policy on the Welsh language.

Broadcasting, of course, was not part of the devolution settlement. But the reality of post-devolution Wales has made it clear that new processes of engagement with the Assembly will be required. That is an argument I made in *Media, Culture and Society* and in *Cyfrwng* some time ago, before becoming a Minister,

And although my party said at the last Assembly elections that we were not seeking its devolution in the immediate future, the current Minister

responsible for broadcasting in the Welsh Government has said that he is “sympathetic” to the case for some form of devolution in the future.

Change will happen, just as the European Union slowly evolved over time its own responsibilities over transnational broadcasting, despite hostility from member-states.

English exceptionalism also surfaces in HE policy. The Higher Education Policy Institute recently published a report on *Universities and constitutional change in the UK*, looking at the impact of devolution on the higher education sector. I broadly agree with its conclusion that ‘the social democratic governments in the devolved countries have shown little appetite for the market-based reforms adopted in England and while acknowledging the need to maintain the autonomy of universities they seem to be moving in some respects in the direction of a more traditional European model of higher education’. I have said on numerous occasions in

the past that we prefer to plan the development of our higher education sector, not leave it to the market.

But I do not agree with the report when it suggests that ‘the autonomy of universities is in danger of being eroded and there is a possibility that their relationship to government may soon be similar to that of the further education colleges or to the polytechnics in England and Wales before incorporation’. On the contrary. I don’t think that the evidence of the HEPI study bears out such a conclusion.

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In any case, I think our proposals for institutional governance, drawn up by John McCormick and his team, would strengthen university autonomy and ensure more sustainable institutions. Autonomy without sustainability is of course meaningless.

I think the problem with the HEPI study, as with so much writing about university autonomy, is that it counterposes a supposedly ideal state of university autonomy with an environment in which democratically-elected governments expect some degree of acknowledgement of the investment they make in the higher education sector, and their overall goals for it. University autonomy and its partner academic freedom are not the same thing as the freedom of vice-chancellors to do whatever they wish.

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You can have an ideal state of autonomy if you wish: Simon Jenkins makes the case for this in the Guardian at regular intervals, arguing for universities essentially to operate as private institutions in a choice-driven market, and suggesting that their autonomy has been eroded since the 1988 Baker Education Act. I don't agree with his vision, but it's a perfectly logical one.

Myself, I am not sure universities ever were so autonomous.

As I said at the beginning, Aber's first public subsidy was awarded in the 1880s. Before the 1988 Baker Education Act, Nick Edwards was bailing out Cardiff. Most universities are about as autonomous as their vice-chancellor's last grant application.

Indeed there was a time, of course, when universities were represented in Parliament, with MPs elected by their graduates.

We live in the age of accountability, more so since the banking collapse of 2008 and the expenses scandal of 2009. And no sector is immune from that. So measures of accountability will exist and without them there will be no public funding. And in any case, public purposes have always underlain ambitions for university development, whether in the 1880s or the 1980s or today.

HEPI's study does make the interesting point that arguably 'policy autonomy is constrained by the impact of changes in the financing of higher education in England, and the need to maintain funding at competitive levels.' I agree with HEPI that 'Reforms in England have been made without adequate consideration of their impact outside England' – another example of the practice of English exceptionalism to which I referred earlier. But I don't agree with HEPI's conclusion that 'liaison with the devolved governments is erratic' when it comes to HE policy. There is good dialogue and exchange of information between officials and David Willets has been helpful and communicative about the direction of policy developments.

And arguably the biggest attack on university autonomy was the cut in the teaching grant by the coalition government in the comprehensive spending review.

Finally, in response to HEPI, let me say that I am attracted by the possibility of incorporating in future HE legislation a codification of the principle of academic freedom not unlike that which exists in Irish law, and has recently been recognised in the Scottish Government's own independent review of governance.

I think increasingly we have a stark choice between us. A new vision for the UK, as the First Minister has proposed, or the policy of English exceptionalism which seeks to build walls around the Tory heartland, led by the propagandists of the *Mail* and the *Telegraph*.

Steven Thompson, lecturer in the department of History and Welsh history here in Aberystwyth, wrote recently in the *Western Mail* that Aneurin Bevan once said, in respect of the Tredegar Working Men's Medical Aid Society 'I am not emotional about institutions but I am about people.'

In a sense that sums up our approach to HE reconfiguration. I want to see an HE system in Wales which plays to the strengths of the individual institutions, and avoids unnecessary institutional competition. I recall that when I was a student at Bangor in the seventies, you couldn't have studied law there – for that, you would have had to come to Aber, as so many, including our First Minister, were to do. Today, you can study law in Bangor. I mention law not to pick on lawyers – though why not, it's a good sport – but simply to illustrate a point. We should not be sentimental about institutions or courses, but we should be sentimental about people and their opportunities to learn. No institution in Wales has ever taught every subject.

One of the most irritating things in media coverage of politics is the tendency to personalize policy debates. From time to time I am told that HE reconfiguration is my policy, that I have dreamed it

up, and I am seeking to impose it like some Stalinist zealot.

Some history would provide a sense of perspective. The debate on HE reconfiguration goes back to the first Assembly. I wasn't an Assembly Member at the time.

The very first policy review carried out by the National Assembly's Education and Lifelong Learning Committee in the first Assembly term was that of higher education. Under the chairmanship of Plaid Cymru's Cynog Dafis, there was cross party agreement that there should be a revised structure of higher education, based on the cluster model. In 2001, there was cross-party recognition that individual institutions were too small to be sustainable.

You can trace it in the policy documents of that era, such as *Reaching Higher* and what you trace there of course is the emergence of a collective policy

agenda, supported by all parties, let me say, in the Assembly at different stages. In his autobiography, Geraint Talfan Davies, former controller of BBC Wales and former Chair of the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol, refers to that agenda being actively pursued by my predecessor Jane Davidson during the second Assembly, who in 2004 asked HEFCW to use core funding to encourage HEI's in Wales to collaborate.

As Geraint recounted, mergers and reconfiguration largely 'foundered as the result of differing mixtures of academic snobbery, geography and misdirected ambition'. And he rightly concludes

'Higher education provided a salutary example of where the proper defence of the arm's length principle was not followed through with a reciprocal obligation to autonomous reform, despite all the funding pressures for change.'

HE reconfiguration is the beginning of a process of strengthening the HE sector in Wales, not an end in itself. I would far rather discuss the quality, range of provision, strength of research and the opportunities open to HE in Wales, rather than focussing with quite so much intensity on its structure. But we will complete the agenda.

After Jane Davidson, my immediate predecessor Jane Hutt took the agenda forward following the Jones review of HE with the HE strategy document, *For our Future*, published in 2009. In her foreword to that document, Jane Hutt said 'I am in no doubt that higher education needs to change, and change fast'. Before that document was published, the Wales Audit Office published its report on Collaboration between Higher Education Institutions and the Assembly's then Audit Committee reviewed it.

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The Audit Committee at the time was chaired by the Conservative AM David Melding, now the Assembly's Deputy Presiding Officer. It included 5 Labour members, two Conservatives, two Plaid Cymru members, and one Liberal Democrat. The report said 'We think that the Assembly Government and HEFCW between them need to be much more robust in this area.'

In my first remit letter to HEFCW issued in March 2010 I made explicit reference to *For our Future* and the Wales Audit Office and Audit Committee reports, and asked HEFCW 'to instigate a step-change in its approach to funding' to use core funding 'to drive forward strategic goals.'

HEFCW submitted its corporate plan to the One Wales Government later in 2010; the Cabinet of the One Wales Government endorsed their call for 75% of Welsh HEIs to be at or above the median income for UK HEIs by 2013, and I made a statement to that effect in the Assembly in June 2010.

Subsequently HEFCW published their assessment that there should be 6 HEIs, more or less, in Wales. We had the announced merger between Swansea Met and Trinity St David's and then the University of Wales. The Assembly election followed with our manifesto commitment to a smaller number of stronger universities. HEFCW then published its advice to me on the future structure of the HE sector; we held our stakeholder engagement exercise on that and I made a further statement in the Assembly announcing how I was minded to take that forward. I am now engaged in discussions with the post-92 institutions in South East Wales and other interested parties.

I set out this history because it is important, I think, for people to understand the policy process and the extent of political and public engagement that there has been over time. This is not my agenda – it is a collective agenda pursued over time by governments in the Assembly from the first

Assembly on. And it has been endorsed in an election manifesto. Democracy will prevail. Manifesto commitments will be honoured.

Today I have tried to sketch some of the contours of complexity that underpin the making of policy on education and skills within a devolved government in a stateless nation in a multi-national state with a centralized media at a time of policy divergence. I hope these are issues of interest to an audience at the Institute of Welsh Politics.