

What's the deal on Wales?

Education, devolution and medialand

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What's the deal on Wales?

'What's the deal on Wales?', the US chat show host David Letterman asked David Cameron last year.

A good question.

It deserved a better answer.

I wonder sometimes whether the Letterman question shouldn't replace the West Lothian question as the touchstone of post-devolution politics in the UK.

Indeed, I would like to propose to news editors in London that from now on they adopt the Letterman question whenever they are analysing a new policy initiative from the UK Government.

And I would like to propose to UK Government Ministers that they consider the Letterman question whenever they are thinking of a new policy initiative.

My text for this lecture is the Letterman question. Having spent over three years now responsible for education policy on Wales, I have grown accustomed to being misunderstood.

Because not enough London news editors ask the Letterman question.

Indeed, too many London news editors are not interested in the Letterman question.

But a year before Scotland votes on independence from the rest of the UK, I think they should be interested in it.

Today I want to share from my portfolio some examples of how an over-centralised media system does scant justice to the reality of post-devolution politics.

I believe that we can do better than this.

And I believe that the school of journalism and the Wales Governance Centre here at Cardiff University are well-placed to provide a counter to the metropolitan provincialism of the London-based media and London-based policy wonks.

I want to ask tonight, whether post-devolution, we really have a meaningful UK public sphere. Because it seems to me that we do not, despite the best efforts of the BBC over the last fifteen years to anticipate, to understand and to report devolution.

I believe there could be a major role for the higher education sector throughout the UK in the development of a more meaningful and effective public sphere, using digital media, social media networks, and the talent that you are developing, providing new models of public engagement. And I believe that Cardiff University could be at the heart of this.

We can all see what is happening to the advertising and payment model that has underpinned newspaper circulation for 200 years. If that system of information subsidies from advertising is over, is there a new system where public funding via intermediate institutions – such as higher education institutions – will have a bigger role, particularly in relation to coverage of current affairs. The Welsh Government, of course, has already intervened to support journalism through the Welsh language, with the development of Golwg360, with its independence guaranteed through the intermediary of the Welsh Books Council; we also support a Community Radio Fund, and we are giving financial support to the papurau bro for digitization of content. So we are supporting diversity of media in Wales.

Last year the Guardian commentator Martin Kettle rightly recognized 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.'

I will argue today that increased policy divergence between England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland requires a more sensitive and nuanced coverage of the UK by editors in London, and it is not enough, for the BBC in particular, simply to report the different nation-states to themselves.

I want to take a number of examples from the reporting of education over the last two-three years, and ask whether we are really happy with the frame in which these debates are constructed, and ask what would happen if we had a more balanced and better-informed UK media reporting on these issues.

The examples on which I will focus are

- Tuition fees
- Reforms of Qualifications, and
- The crisis over English language GCSEs

I believe what these examples will show is that there is no UK public sphere offering a considered UK public understanding. Even the BBC, which has lavished millions on its response to devolution, lacks central editorial understanding of the UK public interest. And that too often England, because of the size of its population, is treated as the default model when arguably the devolved administrations are often more in line with mainstream European practice.

Let me start with tuition fees.

Over the last two-three years we have had to manage the consequences of the outcome of the Browne review and its implementation by the UK Government, which has meant fundamental

changes to the way in which higher education is funded.

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Following the Browne Review's publication in 2010, we needed to identify precisely, during the One Wales government, how we could support Welsh-domiciled students while ensuring the sustainability of our higher education system here in Wales. We deliberated over two months as a government, and eventually announced our policy on the 30th November 2010.

In the 'One Wales' programme for government, we had committed ourselves to doing whatever was possible to mitigate the effects on Welsh-domiciled students if the Westminster Government lifted the cap on fees. We believed the Welsh Government had a responsibility to Welsh-domiciled students, wherever they chose to study.

We announced that Welsh-domiciled students would pay no more in 2012-13 than they would have done if fees were not being increased. In other words, the increase in fees for Welsh-domiciled students, whether they study in England or Wales or Scotland or Northern Ireland, is being paid by the Welsh Government. Welsh-domiciled students have not have to find £9,000 to study. The public purse continues to subsidise higher education for Welsh-domiciled students. Welsh students who went to university in 2012-13 pay the same in real terms as students going to university in 2010-11.

Our announcement was greeted with fury by some of the London media as we dared to announce a decision on tuition fees that was different from the position taken by the UK coalition government in respect of England. The *Telegraph* and *Mail* in particular didn't like it, both branding our actions 'educational apartheid'.

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I know it also shook them up in the BBC newsroom in London. 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.”

Institutionally, the BBC knew what devolution meant. Intellectually, it did not occur to its journalists until action was taken. (slide)

At the time I set our case in the *Guardian*, pointing out that

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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.

I remember having to field a question from a Daily Telegraph journalist about the availability of our subsidy to non-English EU students. He was clearly unaware that UK students in EU countries could also come to benefit reciprocally from the student fee arrangements in those countries.

Let me turn next to the qualifications reforms instituted by Michael Gove, as the Secretary of State for Education in England. Now, I have known Michael Gove since he was an independent television reporter in Scotland. He interviewed me

on a number of occasions. No doubt that will send ITV journalists running to the archives. It will probably be more embarrassing for me than for Michael.

I haven't always been convinced by his powers of prediction.

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But as I told the Education Select Committee last week, I have usually found him to be charming and engaging, even though I have only met him once since he became a Minister.

I am glad that on that occasion I told him one of the advantages of devolution was that it allowed England to be a laboratory for experiments.

On 26 June 2011 on the Andrew Marr Michael Gove announced a new approach to GCSEs show, meaning that they would be taken on a linear basis with exams only at the end. On the 27 June he

wrote to the Chief Executive of Ofqual to confirm this, copying myself and John O'Dowd, the Northern Ireland Education Minister into the letter. I replied saying 'we had expected some Ministerial level between the UK nations before any announcement was made'.

On 30 March 2012 Michael Gove wrote to me stating the actions he intended to take in respect of A Levels. 4 days later, 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'.

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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’.

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

I wrote back to Michael Gove on the 23rd April, saying ‘it is regrettable...that you did not seek to agree the proposals with me and John O’Dowd before they were announced.’

On the 14th May, the regulator in Northern Ireland, the CCEA, wrote to those centres in England taking its qualifications saying that it was withdrawing its examinations in future from England. ‘This decision has been taken as a result of emerging policy differences between England and Northern Ireland’.

Michael Gove responded to my complaint on the 23rd May with a handwritten note at the bottom of

his letter saying ‘Thank you, as ever, for your forbearance and understanding’.

I assume that was tongue in cheek.

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At the end of June the Daily Mail broke a story that Michael Gove was to bring back O’Levels. This sparked a frenzy of activity in the UK coalition with the Liberal Democrats upset.

John O’Dowd, the Northern Ireland Education Minister, came to meet me in Cardiff on 4 July last year and we then wrote to Michael Gove on the 1st August. We pointed out that GCSEs and A Levels are ‘jointly owned qualifications’ – they are actually owned by the regulators in Northern Ireland and England and by the Welsh Government – and said ‘the importance of prior notice on imminent qualifications policy announcements in England is

of critical concern to us and should be to all three administrations.’

We said that earlier involvement would ‘reduce the potential for mixed messages and confusion for learners, teachers and other stakeholders.’

On 19th September, Michael Gove wrote back, offering a meeting with the newly appointed junior Minister Liz Truss rather than with him. Liz Truss, of course, was not the problem.

(Belfast Telegraph)

The Belfast Telegraph said that Gove had shown ‘a very high-handed attitude’. John O’Dowd expressed his concern that he may have ‘fatally flawed’ the GCSE qualification.

(Telegraph slide)

In January this year, Michael Gove announced in the media that A Levels would be fully linear qualifications and that AS Levels should be standalone qualifications. These are, as I have said, qualifications that he does not technically own. He then set out his plans in a letter to the chief executive of OFqual, copied to me, saying

he was making a policy decision ‘to make changes to A Levels in order to ensure their reputation’.

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Two weeks later came the Ebaccdown, where he confirmed that he was abandoning plans to replace GCSEs with the proposed E baccalaureate. He also abandoned plans to have single exam boards in England.

Again, John O’Dowd and I found out about the plans from the media and again we both wrote to complain. Wales and Northern Ireland agree with

each other and disagree with the Secretary of State in England.

I am glad that the Education Select Committee in the House of Commons itself called for a Ministerial conference on GCSEs last year, but disappointed that they have not been able to persuade their Secretary of State to agree to this.

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And just last week the Mail on Sunday said that Michael Gove would be introducing a new higher Maths qualification to all UK schools. Oh no, he won't.

All of this doesn't say much for the Prime Minister's respect agenda.

One of the problems of the over-centralization of our print media is the likely confusion of Welsh parents and pupils over what its 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.

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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’.

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.

This episode does not say much either for the critical faculties of the UK media. As a politician who supports the union, let me say that one thing I do know as a result of all this is that you cannot unite the UK around the agenda of the Daily Mail and the Daily Telegraph. It is probably just as well that Scotland has its own qualifications system.

I can't exempt the BBC at a UK level from criticism on this. One report I saw said that the Welsh Government would be deciding whether to follow England in abandoning GCSEs. They did correct the report after we pointed out we were having our own independent review of qualifications which had been underway a long time before the Ebacc debate.

Michael Gove's agenda is of course the agenda of the American new right, translated into English policy. His comments that GCSEs and A Levels are not fit for purpose and have been dumbed down come straight from the lexicon of the US new right of the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Professor Steve Barnett wrote an essay back in the late 1990s which analysed this phenomenon. **He demonstrated how 'dumbing down' came to be adopted as a phrase in Britain:**

In the five years from the beginning of 1990 to the end of 1994, the entire UK broadsheet press could muster only 11 references to 'dumbing down' between them. The tally rises to 27 in 1995 and 23 in 1996, not enough to suggest that a defining statement about the state of 1990s Britain had arrived. But in 1997: it took off: the British broadsheet press saw over 400 references to 'dumbing down'. (Barnett, 1998)

Barnett has noted that the context for discussion about the 'tabloidization' of the media has been a deeper anxiety about education, politics and culture. He notes that the discussion is generally pessimistic, seeing a decline in standards from a mythical golden

age, when what might be happening is a widening of access to communication.

In Culture and Society Raymond Williams of course famously dated the conservative concept of a decline in standards to the 1740s, so Michael Gove is reinventing a very old tradition, often utilizing, as Raymond Williams said of T.S.Eliot ‘the growling innuendoes of the correspondence columns rather than the prose of thought’.

But that is probably a different lecture for a different day.

The final example I want to look at is last summer’s GCSE English debacle. What has become known on Twitter as hashtag gcsefiasco.

It was an episode which demonstrated, let me say, the power and value of social media as a

communications tool, and yet again the value of blogs as tools for specialist policy analysis.

I will say more about that.

The night before GCSEs were published, it became clear on Twitter that something appeared to have gone wrong across England. A head teacher in England, Geoff Barton, posed the question on Twitter whether other schools were seeing unexpected declines in GCSE English. The Times Ed online forums provided a further vehicle for discussion.

I was already aware of what we were looking at in Wales, with a projected 3.9% fall over the previous year, having been briefed in the normal way.

Initially, I believed that it was just something unique to Wales and we had clearly not yet succeeded in turning around performance. Then I discovered what appeared to be happening in England and I decided our regulatory officials should take a more fundamental look at the issues and the next day I

ordered a review.

To summarise, the review looked at the performance of the 2012 cohort in detail. It compared their results with the cohort for 2011. It concluded that the 2012 WJEC results were unjust for candidates in Wales, and probably in England too, and that there should be a regrading in both Wales and England.

Our report was praised by the respected education writer Warwick Mansell as 'more detailed and more revealing' than similar material from Ofqual.

The strength of our system was demonstrated by the fact that when we identified an injustice in relation to English Language GCSEs, we were able to act swiftly to resolve this. In England, everyone including the Secretary of State conceded there has been injustice for some English students. The case went to court, and the High Court decided that Ofqual was within its rights not to order a regrading. The judgement said that Ofqual had been trying to address the best way to deal with the 'balance of unfairness.'

In our case, of course, our system is highly transparent. I have been scrutinized on the issue almost every week in the National Assembly, and I volunteered to go to Westminster to give them some evidence as well. The regulatory system worked well in Wales, as the respected political journalist Steve Richards noted at the time in the

Independent.

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Our re-grading was of course national news in the UK, with extensive coverage on BBC Newsnight, News24 and in many of the national newspapers. Councils in England, many run by Conservatives, called for action to be taken as we had done.

It demonstrated once again, as had tuition fees, that we could do things differently. But again, there was a hint of outrage that Wales had dared to deviate from England, heavily fanned by the evidence given by the Secretary of State in England and the Chair of Ofqual when they appeared before the Education Select Committee in September. Michael Gove got a number of things wrong about the Welsh system, not understanding that the Welsh Government was the regulator, that Wales had not adopted one of the English GCSEs on offer in England, in general sat by weaker student cohorts. The Chair of Ofqual – supposed to be a politically impartial appointment - claimed that we had a political difficulty because Welsh results weren't good enough and we were trying to cover up for that – entirely omitting the fact, of course, that our regulatory report had recommended a regarding in England as well, which wouldn't have diminished any performance gap with England, it would have maintained it.

The Western Mail's education reporter, Gareth Evans, was right to criticize the UK media for failing to follow through on these issues.

Councils, headteachers, teachers, their unions, commentators, journalists in England all followed what we had done, and Twitter helped to ensure that this policy network was strengthened, deepened and broadened. I found myself keeping in touch with experts and specialists in England through Twitter, and getting alerts to powerful and valuable analysis on a variety of blogs and websites by a variety of media and academic commentators and educationaists, some of which helped me to understand better the technicalities of grade-setting.

Twitter has flattened the means of communication between citizens, specialists and those in power. I get regular messages from constituents, students, pupils, teachers, headteachers and concerned citizens.

Twitter certainly helped force into the open, along with the Freedom of Information Act, the impact of judgements by Ofqual, who had clearly embarked on a course of action designed to prevent grade inflation, which had had the effect of actually imposing grade deflation, something with consequences for school accountability measures in both Wales and England. For this audience, I will avoid the slightly arcane debates on comparable outcomes and Key Stage 2 indicators, but I can provide the references if you want them!

Ten years ago, we could not have had that shared experience which Twitter in particular enabled.

There are many issues relevant to the study of the

media and the study of politics that are thrown up by these examples –

- to what extent, for example, is the policy autonomy of devolved institutions constrained by a centralized media?
- What is the right way to manage intra-government relationships over common interests at a time of policy divergence?
- Has the UK system yet evolved to a mature state post-devolution?
- Is it feasible to envisage UK-wide editorial judgements being made by any media organization, able to analyse policy forensically and explain it intelligently to the overall audience?

In Wales, we are now used to alternative centres of power in the UK. I am not sure that UK Ministers are. There are now 3 kinds of UK Ministers, it seems to me.

Those, like the Foreign Secretary, or the Defence Secretary, who operate on a genuinely UK-wide basis.

Those, like the Secretary of State for Education, who are largely Ministers for England.

Those, like the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, who work principally on a UK or GB

basis, but have to deliver some of their functions through the devolved administrations. They may have designed systems which treat England as the default model then have to revise them when they discover, to give but one example, that we have kept education maintenance allowances in Wales unlike England and we need to know if this will affect the income of families on Universal Credit.

DWP would have benefitted early on from asking the Letterman question. What's the deal on Wales?

There are also public bodies like Ofqual who have not yet caught up with the devolution settlement. As I told the Assembly's Children and Young People Committee in November a senior Ofqual official wrote to the Welsh Government last July claiming that they had the right to regulate qualifications wherever they were taken, including in Wales. The logic of this would have been, under the legislation, that the Welsh Government could have ordered a re-grading in England. We didn't think that was Parliament's intention. Following a discussion with our lawyers, Ofqual withdrew their letter. But even at the end of August, Ofqual's Director of Regulation said in an email to her chief executive 'I know we would all like to put the Welsh regulation issue to one side, but we can't.'

We understand devolution – they now need to.

Instead, we need a new culture at the centre, one informed enough to understand the differences between the different nations in our multi-national state, and one sophisticated enough to recognize that England is not the default model, and the other nation-states interesting only for their exoticism in diverging from it. Could it be that Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are more in step with each other, and England is the eccentric? Could it be that Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are more in tune with mainstream European thinking, and England is the loner howling in the attic?

And if we were to conceive of the UK in this way, with a more balanced sense of the four nations emanating from London newsrooms, how would the news report Michael Gove launching a unilateral attack on GCSE and A Level exams, when Wales and Northern Ireland continue to support them?

‘Constitutional crisis over English Education Secretary’s unilateral threat to qualifications?’

So, what's the deal on Wales? How would it be if Wales were treated as normative, as the default system, rather than England?

I am not convinced, 14 years after devolution, that we have evolved an effective UK public sphere.

Michael D. Higgins, then the Irish Culture Minister, now the Irish President, idealized the public sphere 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, 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. 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, 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'. 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.'*

Of course, while in terms of daily papers, most people in Wales read papers produced in London, the UK broadsheets 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. Our Wales is not a hermetically-closed space but a permeable one. In the digital world, borders and boundaries are more complex.

I think sadly there remains a culture of deference within the Welsh media. Deference to London and

London-based editors, deference to a centralized culture which is assumed to be normative, the default mechanism, or just too often assumed to be right because it has been around longer.

When the Attorney-General referred the Welsh Government's Bye-laws Bill to the Supreme Court, so many commentators in the media here told us that this to quote BBC Wales was 'an embarrassment for the Welsh Government'. In the end of course, we won 5-0. On all counts.

That alone suggests to me that it is time to say to our own media here in Wales – stop looking over your shoulder. Stop tugging your forelock. It's time to abandon the Cymric cringe.

And of course the institution with the biggest responsibility to report Britain to itself is 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. 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.

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.

What, however, can we do about this centralized media system? Do digital systems and the new social media allow for the development of alternative models of news, information circulation and commentary? As I mentioned in the context of the hashtag GCSEfiasco, those mechanisms exist on an informal level, within specific policy communities. Are there more formal mechanisms that could be developed, perhaps by a network of higher education institutions in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and England?

- I said when I spoke at JOMEC's community journalism conference that I think there is real scope for the media in collaboration with educational institutions, and there is a major opportunity for Cardiff University here.
- In terms of reporting the National Assembly, for example, I suggested that the Journalism School, in co-operation with the Wales Governance Centre, could be pioneering coverage of the National Assembly for Wales online. In Washington DC, Roll Call has been covering Capitol Hill since 1955 and now does so online.
- With proper editorial oversight, this could be an exciting venture for students of the university covering some of the stories in Cardiff Bay which never or rarely get reported, except at moments of maximum tension.
- An effective web or app-based publication, with associated video and audio coverage could be a major contribution to both journalism training and opening up the Welsh public sphere.

- The beauty of these interactive ventures, compared with print, is that it's easier today for more people to report their own local news than it was in the days of the printing press .And interactive offers **rolling** coverage - not just once a day or once a week as in the case of print editions.
- But now I wonder whether there isn't something more to this. Could journalism schools across the UK not combine to ensure effective UK-wide coverage of current affairs online? Isn't there a new opportunity and potentially a new model here? And couldn't Cardiff University lead this?

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You may recall this poster from the 1997 referendum campaign (showed a hand holding a television remote designed as Big Ben).

Let's create a new model for reporting, where England is not the default, where the nations and

regions speak to each other and can contribute their own perspectives, where we recognize that we have diversity amongst the home nations, and create the appetite for knowing more about each other and learning more about each other.

Yes, perhaps it's time to take over the remote control.