

# Interview with Professor Richard Wyn Jones



Professor Richard Wyn Jones joined Cardiff University in 2009 as Director of the Wales Governance Centre. He is a Professor of Welsh Politics. Richard has written extensively on contemporary Welsh politics, devolved politics in the UK and nationalism. In addition, he was also one of the founders of Critical Security Studies. He is a respected broadcaster, commentating on Welsh politics in both Welsh and English for the BBC in Wales and across the UK, and has presented two television series. Richard is also a regular columnist for the Welsh language current affairs magazine *Barn*. His new book co-authored with Roger Scully, 'Wales says Yes: Welsh Devolution and the 2011 Referendum' is published this year by the University of Wales Press.

**The *Welsh Economic Review* has an economic bias, and you may be wondering where lies the link between it and your own research interests which are largely of a political nature. With this in mind, our first question is somewhat theoretical. Do you think economic structures follow political structures or the reverse?**

My own intellectual formation was very heavily influenced by Marxism and neo-Marxism, and so the question of the nature of the relationship between the economic and political has always loomed large for me. Is it, after Engels, the economic that 'ultimately' determines the nature of

social development or was this unwarranted reductionism by a man who, in seeking to popularise the work of this comrade-in-arms, was guilty of vulgarisation? And what, anyway, does 'ultimately' mean in this context? Then, of course, you've got somebody like Gramsci – so influential in Welsh historical writing and, indeed, Welsh politics through Gwyn A. Williams – stressing the 'relative autonomy' of the political and ideological super-structure. Begging the further question, what is meant by 'relative autonomy'?

For what it's worth, even if aware of its problems and lacunae, I've always been drawn to the latter position. That said, in recent years I've also been reading a lot of historical sociology and find Michael Mann, in particular, very persuasive. His argument that there are four main sources of social power (economic, political, military and ideological) all of which clearly interact with each other, but none of which can be reduced to each other, seems to me to ring true.

But all of that is very abstract! In terms of my analysis of devolved politics I'm always very much aware of the interaction between politics and economics, be that mediated through social class, or as a tussle of ideas about which institutional arrangements and policies might best deliver certain economic and social outcomes. With regards the latter, it is going to be fascinating to see how the debate over Scottish independence pans out over the next couple of years. For even if one can't be certain of the result of any referendum, I think we can be pretty confident in predicting that it will turn on arguments about the economic benefits and dis-benefits of independence and union.

**Linked to the first question: some people express surprise (and consternation) that the European Common Market of the 1970s has**

**evolved into a political union in the 2000s. Given that individual businesses cannot compete fairly without a consistent regulatory framework, how much surprise is appropriate?**

Anyone who ever regarded European integration as a wholly economic project for a 'common market' with no broader political goal cannot have been taking much notice of what the 'European founding-fathers' or their followers actually said; their goal being very explicitly the transformation of Europe from a cockpit of war and world war into a zone of peace.

Another supplementary aim, in the early years in particular, was to buttress a particular form of capitalist liberal democracy against what was then a very real threat posed by the popular legitimacy and electoral strength of the Marxist-Leninist left. The latter being a point that Alan S. Milward's work brings out very strongly.

The 'common market' was, therefore, always a means to a wider political end; and indeed only one among several means being deployed at the same time. The common currency was to become another means, of course. In that case a particular concern was to tie a reunited Germany into the rest of Europe.

The concern at the present juncture is that the means that have been deployed

or perhaps put more accurately, their cack-handed application – may well be undermining the very ends they were intended to serve. Not that I mean to suggest that peace is being threatened. But it is not scaremongering to point out that the Euro crisis is damaging and even undermining liberal democracy in western Europe. With the installation of unelected, technocratic governments at the behest of 'Brussels'; the imposition of draconian cuts in social welfare provision at the insistence of 'Brussels'; and the moves in 'Brussels' to secure some form of fiscal union in ways that very deliberately seek to avoid any possibility that European electorates might have their say on the matter: these are dark days indeed for the European ideal.

**How far do you consider Welsh devolution to be a product of European federalism?**

Only to a very, very limited extent. While it has often been asserted that European integration was a key factor in the establishment of devolved government, it is in fact a very difficult argument to flesh out empirically.

So, for example, the establishment of the Welsh Office – a necessary though not sufficient step on the road to the National Assembly for Wales – took place before the UK determined to try to join the European project. Even if we turn to the late 1980s and early 1990s

when we might expect stronger evidence of a European influence, one is reduced to speculating about the role of the Delors Commission (with its deliberate attempt to engage the sub-state level) in helping to persuade Welsh Labour councillors that 'regional government' was not necessarily reactionary, or in re-energising the Welsh nationalist movement by allowing nationalists to persuade themselves that the nation-state level was becoming obsolete and therefore that their victory was inevitable! But, frankly, there are far more persuasive explanations of the shift in attitudes closer at hand, most of which get an outing in a new book by Roger Scully and myself. It was always going to be a struggle and so it has proved to be.

**Wales has had a devolved institution for a decade now. Has devolution and its effects met with your expectations?**

In actual fact my expectations were always pretty low. The record of new polities (if I can use that term in the Welsh context) is of a rather long transition period in which initial, unrealistically high expectations get disappointed while the new institutions gradually become more capable and effective. Just think of post-independence USA or Norway, to cite only two examples that I know something about. The same is also true at the sub-state level. And of course, in the Welsh case we were burdened by a quite spectacularly inadequate constitutional design that left us with an institutional structure that was simply not fit for purpose and had to be adjusted and then replaced in very short order. I'm pretty sure that – *pace* Peter Hain's assertion that this is it for a generation – further changes will be necessary before we have a sustainable system of institutions and powers that will allow devolved government to operate effectively.

**In what areas have you suffered disappointment?**

The main disappointment as far as I'm concerned is the failure of our country's universities to respond properly to the challenges posed by devolution. For too long these institutions have regarded themselves as 'being in but not of' Wales – as a Lampeter Professor is once meant to have boasted. I think that is now beginning to change, not least here in Cardiff. But in academic field after academic field, it remains the case that there is still little or no Wales-focused expertise that can be drawn on. Incidentally, this is why I'm doubtful about the Welsh Government's plans for establishing some kind of Institute for Public Policy in Wales. At least as presently formulated, this seems to

presuppose that the capacity is there in the system and that all that is required is some form of mechanism to bring this capacity into better alignment with the interests of Government. I'm sorry to say that that simply isn't the case; the capacity isn't there. It will need to be built up.

I would also say that it has been very unfortunate that the coming of the National Assembly has coincided with a period of turmoil and crisis in the mass media. This has meant that we simply don't have the outlets for the kind of critical scrutiny required in a complex, modern democracy, let alone the broad-based policy debate that our country's intractable problems demand.

**We recall here a WER interview with John Humphrys in which he said that complacency tended to be a feature of mature democracies. Do you think the Welsh electorate is complacent?**

I'm not sure if 'complacent' quite captures it in the Welsh case. I do sometimes wonder, though, if parts of the electorate are not demoralised. That would hardly be surprising given what has happened to so many communities. I'm continually struck, for example, by the ways in which previously quiet villages and towns in my native Ynys Môn (Anglesey) are being ravaged by hard drugs. What with the lack of jobs and that kind of social dynamic, it's hardly surprising that so many of those young people with a bit of 'oomph' about them want to get out, making it even more difficult for those communities to escape the present downward spiral.

Less apocalyptically, the key challenge in terms of the electoral process in Wales – indeed perhaps **the** defining feature of our political culture as a whole – is the existence of what political scientists call a 'one party dominant' system. Whilst this rather unusual state of affairs is fascinating from an analytical perspective, I would question whether this relative lack of pluralism makes for a healthy political life.

**Do you think it is possible for the Welsh Government, with its new legislative capacity, to steer a different trajectory from the rest of the UK, or is it only able to tinker at the edges?**

I think it's pretty clear that Wales has now definitively embarked on a very different trajectory from England, and across a whole raft of policy areas. This difference resulting not only from 'positive' decisions made in Wales to pursue a particular course of action, but also – perhaps even more so – from 'negative' decisions when Wales declines to follow initiatives being pursued by the

UK government in its role as the English government. It impossible to conceive how this state of affairs might be reversed especially when the electoral preferences and political cultures in both countries are so different. This is not to say, by the way, that I think that independence is inevitable. I don't believe that. But we are moving in the direction of greater autonomy and more difference. It's certainly going far beyond the point at which it is appropriate to talk of 'tinkering at the edges'.

**Can Welsh Government change the business environment in Wales in a manner that is substantially different from the rest of the UK?**

What do you mean by 'substantially different'? Key for me is what the Welsh Government decides to do in the field of education. This is where it has the potential to make the largest difference in terms of the country's economic performance, at least over the medium to long term. There's a huge amount it can do if it has the political will and policy imagination to do so. But summoning-up that will and imagination will be no easy task, not least because it will mean challenging some very entrenched institutional and ideological positions.

We know all about the problems highlighted by the PISA scores, but what of the deeply problematic nature of the current A-level qualification? Then there's the damage to what the Germans might call technical education – never a strong point in the UK anyway – caused by the decision to (in effect) turn all higher education institutions into universities, leaving us with some very, very weak higher education institutions (whose weakness is not going to be overcome simply by mergers) and a further education system that is on its knees. And so on.

Then there's perhaps the most serious problem of them all; a problem that currently appears almost wholly unacknowledged. That is the tendency of Wales to haemorrhage its brightest and best 18 year olds, so many of whom choose to cross Offa's Dyke for their university education never to return. This represents an incalculable loss of human, social and cultural capital for a relatively poor country. If I had to choose only one policy area for action, then incentivising the retention of young talent in Wales would be it.

**What additional powers would you like the Welsh Government to have?**

It's not really my views that matter here. I rather think that it's highly likely that we will see moves in two areas over

the next few years; most likely catalysed by the work of the current Silk Commission.

First, since the self-styled unionist parties shifted to using the language of 'accountability' in the context of the Calman Commission's proposals for expanding the tax powers of the Scottish Parliament, it's very difficult to see how they can avoid the following same logic in the context of Wales. After all, if the law-making Scottish parliament requires these powers to ensure that it is 'fiscally accountable', why should the law-making National Assembly for Wales be any different? Or are they saying that it's acceptable for Wales to be 'unaccountable'? While I'm sure that some in Wales will seek to hide behind Barnett reform as a way of avoiding such a potentially contentious step - 'no taxation powers without Barnett reform' will be the slogan - given that none of the unionist parties are actually serious about reform (especially in the lead in to a Scottish independence referendum!), I doubt that it's a line that they will be able to hold for very long.

Secondly, I think it's nigh on inevitable that we will see a move to establish a separate Welsh legal jurisdiction (all be it on the Northern Irish rather than Scottish model.) Not least because this is a development for which Carwyn Jones has provided conspicuous support over the past 5 or so years.

**It has sometimes been said that until UK became 'blue' while Wales remained 'red' the Welsh Government would not be truly tested. Is this true?**

There's probably a lot in that. But perhaps even more pertinent is the test created by the huge squeeze on the public finances that's going to dominate political life for the coming years. The first decade of devolution was after all accompanied by a period of unparalleled largesse in terms of public spending. This made managing the transition to devolved government very much easier than might otherwise have been the case. Now that's changed and we're entering a period in which inter-party tensions within the National Assembly are likely to become much more apparent and in which Cardiff and London are going to seek to blame in each for the cuts. In other words, there will be a new edge to Welsh and UK territorial politics, which is going to be fascinating for analysts like myself, but much more difficult for those actually charged with governing.

**Is Wales destined to be one of the poorest regions in the UK into perpetuity, or are there untapped resources which have yet to yield riches?**

No. Even if it would be foolish to underestimate the difficulties, I don't believe that history is destiny. As individuals and as a society we have

some agency. But a key first step in actually addressing the very deep-seated problems we face is to ensure that the extent of the problem is more widely known. So while some worry that broadcasting the extent of our dependence on English taxpayers will stoke up English resentment, my own view it needs to become **the** key issue in Welsh politics. It's only then that we're likely to see the necessary psychological shift in our Assembly and Government. Thus far, and for wholly understandable reasons given the Welsh Office inheritance and the nature of Welsh political culture, those active within our key political institutions have in the main regarded their primary task as distributing the funds allocated to them by Westminster by choosing between different public policy options. That needs to change and their task reframed as encouraging wealth creation within a policy framework consistent with the centre-left values that continue to dominate in Wales. Until that happens, I see no prospect other than we will continue to perform poorly.

Reference

Richard Wyn Jones and Roger Scully, *Wales says Yes: Welsh Devolution and the 2011 Referendum* (University of Wales Press, 2012).