

“I SETTLED WALES LAST THURSDAY” – A VIEW FROM THE FRONTIER OF BROADCASTING. *

Diolch yn fawr iawn am y gwahoddiad i ddod i'ch annerch chi yma heno. I'm very grateful for the invitation to give the Welsh Political Archive annual lecture this evening. I'm well aware of how many distinguished historians, politicians, writers and academics have given this lecture in the past, and I'm very honoured to have been asked. When I think about the kinds of people who have been invited here in previous years, and indeed the work of the Political Archive itself, I realise that what we have in common is our interest in the significance of the material it deals with every day. In our different ways we are all trying to make sense of Wales – its history, its politics and where it goes next. What I shall be considering this evening is the role of broadcasting in helping to interpret our history and analyse our politics. I shall be asking, twelve years on from devolution, whether it's time for Welsh politicians to take a keener interest in broadcasting, its governance and its potential to create jobs, and to make a significant contribution to the creative economy and economic growth.

I want to begin by telling you about something that captures the interlocking nature of politics, broadcasting and history.

Some years ago, I was rather taken aback to be visited by two officers from the North Wales police. They turned up at my office in the BBC to interview me. They were investigating allegations of incitement to racial hatred, and the BBC was at the centre of the investigation.

The allegations had been made by members of the public after the BBC broadcast an edition of a series called Room 101 where Anne Robinson, who was the guest on the programme, had put the entire Welsh nation. (As I'm sure you know, in George Orwell's 1984, Room 101 is where you find the worst thing in the world). Many people complained, and the North Wales police felt compelled to investigate. This was not a programme made by BBC

Wales but by BBC2 and broadcast across the UK. Nevertheless, I was under scrutiny.

As well as interviewing me, they travelled to London to try to find out from the Director-General of the BBC, Greg Dyke, whether he had been involved in the decision to broadcast the programme. Now it is clear from the reaction to that programme that many people were deeply offended by Anne Robinson's remarks although it seemed to me that they entirely failed to grasp that her persona as a strict, sneering quiz-show presenter was probably cultivated to cause offence. She knew exactly what she was doing, and was rewarded with acres of publicity and press coverage. Indeed, at one point she and I appeared in the *Welsh Mirror* under the headline "the two most hated women in Wales".

The row eventually blew over, but what was interesting was the debate it sparked within the BBC. Many programme-makers and senior executives – in Wales and London – could not see what all the fuss was about. But it did make them want to understand a bit more about why people were so furious with a pretty mediocre television series.

So, not for the first time, I found myself explaining about the politics of broadcasting in Wales, particularly around the provision of Welsh-language services and the creation of S4C. And how it was against this background that Anne Robinson's remarks were seen by some as patronising at best, profoundly and deliberately offensive at worst, and how some people, not all by any means, not even the majority perhaps, felt that this was yet another example of the BBC's total lack of understanding of the sensitivities of the Welsh.

Anyone who has worked in the BBC, indeed many people who have never worked for it, will be familiar with the tensions between Wales and London. And between Scotland and London. It is an inevitable consequence of being part of any big centralized organisation but, when it is the BBC, with its particular role in the life of the UK, it is hardly surprising. The BBC is funded

by £3 billion licence fee, is constantly under scrutiny and almost every day has to justify its spending, its size, its salaries; its very existence.

However, it is fair to say that in the past ten years or so since devolution, there has been a marked shift in the BBC's attitude to Wales. Since the creation of the Assemblies in Wales and Northern Ireland and the Parliament in Scotland, the BBC has acknowledged that its central role in British public life has to change. After the referendum of 1997, the BBC put millions into creating the infrastructure in Wales for reporting the activities of the Assembly. Journalists, political reporters, camera crews, studios and all the necessary paraphernalia were put in place to provide hours of coverage, analysis and interpretation of life post-devolution.

In the period since, the trend away from the centre has continued - mainly to Salford it must be said - but these days Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland too are guaranteed a substantial slice of the BBC's network budget. In Wales, the new Roath Lock drama studios in Cardiff Bay are buzzing with some of the BBC's most important drama series including Doctor Who, Upstairs Downstairs, Casualty and, soon, Pobl y Cwm will move in.

BBC Wales itself has grown in stature, reputation and influence. Its spend this year is nearly £150 million and with 1200 staff it is a significant employer at any stage, let alone a time of economic crisis. And of course its everyday business, the reason its 1200 staff are employed, is because of its central significance in Welsh life. It makes a huge contribution to the life of Wales in all its aspects, cultural, social and political.

It is a large organisation in a small country. Where else could you call on your in-house symphony orchestra to record the theme music for one of the BBC's most successful television series, Doctor Who? It is a patron of the arts and music, a buyer of sports rights, a commissioner of writers, poets, composers; an interpreter of our history, and a vital force in the growth of the Welsh language. In matters of national identity the BBC is probably more important in Wales than it is in any other part of the United Kingdom. Its radio, television

and online services – in English and Welsh – reach millions of people every week. In recent years as all parts of the media – especially broadcasting and print – have faced tightening financial pressures, audiences in Wales have looked more and more to the BBC.

ITV Wales has been forced to scale back its output and the *Western Mail* and *Daily Post* too have had to make significant cuts. When you consider that 85 per cent of newspaper readers in Wales get their news from London-based newspapers with little or no Welsh content, you begin to appreciate why the BBC's role is so vital.

But no part of the BBC is immune from the difficulties facing every other part of the economy. By the end of this current Royal Charter in five years' time, BBC Wales will have made total savings of tens of millions of pounds. They have touched almost every part of BBC Wales's activities with a direct impact on the number and range of programmes produced.

In the past few weeks BBC Wales has announced a further 16 per cent savings over the next five years with the loss of a hundred jobs. The current Director of BBC Wales, Rhodri Talfan Davies, has said that these latest savings take BBC Wales to the very edge of what is possible.

BBC Wales is not alone of course. These most recent changes across the whole of the BBC are a direct result of the licence fee settlement last year between the BBC and the government. The BBC is required to take on responsibility for extra activities and find the money to fund them. They include the World Service, support for a new local television service and S4C.

Faced with such challenging savings, painful choices have to be made, and the cumulative effect of many years' cutbacks is particularly acute in one area above all others, and that is English language television programmes.

In the five years between 2007 and 2011, the number of hours of English language television programmes has gone down by more than 16 per cent,

the equivalent of more than one hundred hours of broadcasting. That's a hundred hours less output about Wales for Welsh audiences from Wales' national broadcaster.

It is an immense tribute to the creativity and hard work of BBC Wales' staff that the programmes they produce are amongst the most popular with audiences. Programmes like *Scrum V*, *Coal House*, *Baker Boys*. But the relentless and unavoidable drive to save money across the whole of the BBC means that audiences here will get fewer drama series about Wales; fewer documentaries; less home-grown entertainment, comedy, music and sport.

At a time when BBC Wales's central role in political and cultural life has never been more important, its ability to fulfil its ambitions in the face of a punishing financial squeeze is bound to be challenged. Nowhere more so than in its English language services.

It is striking that the recent debate around broadcasting has been about the future of S4C and understandably so. Although I have found it surprising that the future of English language television programmes in Wales is apparently of so little concern to politicians and others.

It is instructive in this regard to compare Wales with Scotland. The BBC in Scotland is faced with making similar tough savings, but I have always found it curious that the level of interest and engagement there is so much more intense. Scottish newspapers and politicians complain, write, criticize and attack the BBC's senior management in London. The BBC's top team would tend to sigh theatrically at what they saw as an excess of emotion in Edinburgh and Glasgow, but you would know that, usually, Scotland would get some concession just to keep them quiet. Because a fuss was being kicked up. There was a public debate. Newspapers were agitated. Politicians were angry.

The BBC centrally needs to hear from politicians, newspaper editors and other opinion formers that they are worried about the threat to English language services in Wales as well as the dangers facing S4C. You can bet they would be doing so in Scotland.

They used to do so in Wales too. Let us just consider a lesson from history.

Dr John Davies's book *Broadcasting and the BBC in Wales* (Cardiff: the University of Wales Press, 1993) is full of entertaining stories about the reluctance of Sir John Reith, amongst others, to recognise the importance of Wales and the idea that the people of Wales might want their own programmes – in Welsh and English – clearly caused him huge frustration and fury. John Davies writes about rows over the provision for Wales of extra wavelengths, transmitters and programmes. It is a tale of the uppity Welsh and the high-handed Reith. There is a particularly telling account of how Wales came to have its own service, separate from the west of England to which it had previously been linked. Reith as Director-General was resistant, but came under a lot of pressure from some of his own managers, but more importantly from the massed ranks of the Welsh establishment: Welsh MPs, the University Committee, local authorities, and prominent academics and educationists.

Over a period of years they kept up the pressure. Letters were written; deputations sent; presentations made; thunderous editorials appeared in the *Western Mail*. Wales wanted its own station; it wanted what Scotland had, and did not see why it should not get it. Reith and his managers replied with sophisticated technical arguments about lack of wavelengths. Even about geography. Wales, said Reith, was a mountainous country so it could not have what Scotland had. The general secretary of Plaid Cymru at the time, J.E. Jones – clearly a man of dry wit - is quoted as saying “everybody knows that Scotland is flat”. I wish I'd thought of that 90 years later when I was in the throes of similar arguments about wavelengths and transmitters.

Eventually Reith became convinced that something needed to be done, and he instructed his team to find out how the BBC could offer a separate wavelength to Wales which would pave the way for a separate programme service. At around the same time the BBC's Royal Charter was coming up for renewal – always a good time to wring concessions from the BBC. The government announced the setting up of a committee to look into the issues raised for the BBC. Reith was furious to discover that one of the committee members was Clement Davies, the Liberal MP for Montgomeryshire. He thought that having a Welshman on a committee to discuss the BBC was wholly unnecessary because, said Reith, “I settled Wales last Thursday”.

Almost a hundred years later there is a lot we can learn from the beginnings of the BBC's presence in Wales and the part that politicians and other concerned citizens played in its creation.

Perhaps the most striking aspect was the single-minded, unapologetic determination of Welsh politicians and other distinguished men and women that Wales should not be short-changed. They did not care that the BBC thought they were unreasonable or cantankerous. Which they did. What they cared about was that Wales and its people were given appropriate resources and relevant programmes.

It is a huge contrast with the rather passive attitude of many in public life to the difficulties in Welsh broadcasting in recent years.

For instance, not so long ago S4C lost a Chief Executive, a Chairman and a Head of Programmes in a matter of weeks. Shortly afterwards, we heard that the bulk of financial responsibility for S4C was being transferred by the UK government to the BBC without any consultation with S4C itself. What do you think the University Committee and the Welsh MPs of the 1920s and 1930s would have to say about that? I reckon we can be pretty sure they'd have made a song and dance about it.

Of course some politicians, including very senior ones, did complain, but in a rather muted way. Doubtless many would argue they are in a difficult position because broadcasting is not a devolved matter.

But surely, the time has come for Welsh politicians to get seriously involved in such important matters. The creation of the Assembly changed the nature of the relationship between Wales and England; between Cardiff Bay and Whitehall. Everyone agrees the Assembly's role is to do what is best for Wales. As far as broadcasting is concerned, it could do better. Wales needs to take a tougher, more robust stance. For instance let us look at what happened to S4C last year. Without any consultation, with S4C itself the Westminster government came to an arrangement with the BBC which means that the corporation will find the bulk of the money to fund S4C – around £76 million – from the licence fee. The Department of Culture, Media and Sport will contribute £7 million, compared with the £100 million or so that it has been giving S4C directly every year. This new deal begins in 2013, but it is far from clear whether the DCMS will make any financial contribution after 2015

So it is entirely possible that S4C will become a totally BBC licence-fee funded service in a few years' time. In the past week the BBC and S4C have at long last unveiled their new funding and governance arrangements. It is a good deal for S4C. But it is a deal that can only last until the end of the BBC's current Charter in five years' time. The debate around the future shape of the BBC, and therefore S4C, will begin long before then.

Of course some people have long argued that it makes no sense for S4C – a Welsh language broadcaster – to be accountable to a Whitehall department. In response, some politicians have said that they wouldn't want S4C devolved without the money. Fair enough. Especially when the DCMS is giving the channel around a hundred million pounds a year, but not such a convincing argument when that sum is reduced to only £7 million and possibly zero.

Recent debate – such as it is – has centred on the future of S4C, but it is becoming increasingly urgent to start a debate about what is happening to

BBC Wales' English language services. Following last week's announcement, the BBC's total contribution to S4C will be well over £90 million. That's £76 million of new money and around £20 million that it already spends on its Welsh language programmes for S4C including Pobol y Cwm and Newyddion.

Even if BBC Wales spends a similar amount – around £20 million – on English language television, that is still a disparity of more than £70 million pounds. To borrow a devolutionary metaphor, this is the elephant on the doorstep. When will someone begin asking questions of the BBC Trust about the disproportionate nature of the Corporation's investment in Welsh and English language services for Wales?

These are tricky arguments that some would prefer to sweep under the carpet because no-one wants a debate that pitches one language against the other. So let me be clear, S4C must be properly funded to continue to provide the service for which it was set up. But that cannot be at the expense of programmes in the English language. The principles of the debate must be around fairness and, above all, making certain that all audiences in Wales are given the television and radio programmes they want and deserve.

For the time being then, S4C is squarely within the BBC's financial embrace, and it is the BBC Trust who will be the ultimate authority. The Trust has stewardship of the licence fee on behalf of the public. The Trustees are busy people with a huge range of responsibilities and there is only one representative from Wales, Professor Elan Closs Stephens. Her job, along with the other trustees, is to scrutinize all the BBC's activities, not simply those in Wales.

At the moment we are fortunate that the BBC Trustee for Wales is a robust, experienced and effective individual. But a trustee's term is only five years.

So it is fair to ask where is the public debate about these important matters and where does democratic accountability lie?

Is it right that the debate and the decision-making about funding matters for two public service broadcasters in Wales should take place mainly in London?

And what of ITV Wales? It was heartening to hear the editor of ITV regional news at a conference in Cardiff the other day talking about the continuing importance of public service broadcasting even after the existing licence comes to an end.

Between now and 2014, we must hope for an open and vigorous debate about the future of ITV in Wales too. It has already been suggested that a single licence could be created for Wales alone (separate from the west of England), with clear and specific public service responsibilities.

These are big, complex questions made more difficult to negotiate because what we are dealing with here is one of the unresolved conundrums of devolution. Broadcasting is not devolved, but the assembly has an interest in it. What that means is that it has a voice in key appointments including the BBC Trustee and S4C chairman; its culture committee has conducted numerous inquiries into matters related to broadcasting; its communities committee is in the middle of another at the moment. Under the previous coalition government, Professor Ian Hargreaves of Cardiff University was commissioned to write a review of the creative industries in Wales – a powerful assessment of the potential of the creative economy. The Welsh Affairs Select Committee in Westminster also looks at broadcasting from time to time. And the Institute of Welsh Affairs, above all other organisations, gets to the heart of some of these testing problems.

These are all useful contributions to a debate about broadcasting that has so far been muted and low-profile. But they do not address the central questions: who makes the decisions about broadcasting in Wales? How does it meet the expectations of audiences? How can its potential be exploited for the benefit of the Welsh economy and jobs in Wales.

Because broadcasting is not a devolved matter, it is inevitable that the assembly's attention should be focussed on areas where it has the power to make a difference. It's interesting to see how much decisive impact can be made when the Welsh government has the power to act. For example, in a critical area of policy, the government has made a commitment to fast broadband for all Wales by 2015.

But, even though broadcasting as a whole is not devolved, certain key aspects of it are, but these are split across several departments in Cardiff Bay – culture in the heritage ministry, Welsh language in education, and economic matters in the business and economy department. If it was not so fragmented, maybe we would have a clearer vision and greater accountability.

Options around governance and accountability need to be explored. Some of the basic structural elements are already here. The BBC has an Audience Council in Wales that advises the Trust; Ofcom has a Welsh advisory board; S4C its authority. Should their role be strengthened? Merged? Disbanded and replace with a new mechanism for public service broadcasting in Wales?

Because there is an even bigger prize at stake than a fully functioning and adequately resourced national broadcaster, and that is linked to how Wales uses its power and influence to harness the value and impact of the broadcasting sector for the benefit of Wales and its economy.

The route is through the wider creative industries. Although broadcasting is only one part of the creative industries, it is by far the largest and the most significant with big opportunities to be grasped. The Hargreaves review defined the creative industries as “those activities which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have the potential for wealth and job creation”. These include music, design, architecture, craft, advertising, computer games, publishing and software and social media. Because of its size, broadcasting plays a pivotal role in the creative economy.

And it is a sector that has already been identified by the Welsh government as a priority for economic growth and as the latest figures show, it has real strengths. The creative industries in Wales have been growing in terms of jobs much faster than the economy as a whole with employment up by 11 per cent between 2005 and 2009 against 6.8 per cent for the economy as a whole. It is a sector that pays well too, mainly because of broadcasting.

But other research indicates we face a real challenge - a NESTA report at the end of last year compared the concentration of creative industries in various parts of the UK economy. Wales is in the bottom group alongside the north east of England and Scotland. In the lead are London and the south east of England. No surprises there. So if Wales had the power and ambition to bring greater clarity and focus to the potential of the creative industries for the Welsh economy, what could the impact be?

To put it at its simplest. It is about creating jobs. And, at a time of economic crisis, nothing is more important. If the Welsh government had a greater grip on the sector with much clearer lines of accountability, then I believe that by working with partners like the BBC, S4C and others, it could devise a coherent strategy across the creative sector to deliver jobs.

Take the BBC Wales' new drama centre in Cardiff, established through a partnership with the Welsh Assembly government. The Roath Lock studios have the potential to be the biggest drama production studios outside London, with well-paid jobs, smart technology, and a flexible, highly-skilled workforce. But the BBC can only do so much on its own. It needs, amongst other things, to be able to rely on schools, colleges and universities for recruits who have the right training and skills; it needs people who are adept at technology; understand software developments. It needs support companies with expertise in post-production, computer technology, online and software development. Success in the creative industries depends on government policy influencing the role of education and business as much as it does on the ambition of the broadcasters themselves. It is certainly the case that the broadcasters provide the lion's share of funding to sustain the industry but a

great deal more can be done with a clear set of policies to underpin its long-term future.

It is worth turning our attention to what has been happening in Scotland in recent years where an independent Scottish Broadcasting Commission was set up to examine these issues. Its final report called *Platform for Success* – was endorsed unanimously by all the parties in the Scottish Parliament, in particular its key recommendation of the creation of a new Scottish public service broadcaster. The chairman of the Commission, Blair Jenkins, speaking at a conference in Cardiff two weeks ago, said that the most obvious change in Scottish broadcasting in the next ten years will be the creation of that new dedicated Scottish public service broadcaster. He said that Scotland has national galleries, museums, libraries, opera, orchestra, legal system, health service ... a Scottish national everything ... except a Scottish national broadcaster.

Such a service would cost £75 million funded by the licence fee. The Scots argue that the principle that the licence fee is up for grabs is already established. They mean S4C of course.

In Scotland the message is clear and it is simple. They want a Scottish public service channel because a grown-up country deserves its own national broadcaster.

So what are the opportunities for the Welsh government to influence the future direction of broadcasting policy and to argue for greater accountability? Now is the time to start thinking very seriously about it. Over the next few years there is a range of opportunities for Wales to make a strongly-argued case for greater responsibility for broadcasting.

Firstly, the UK government is planning a new Communications Bill before the end of this parliament – the Culture Secretary has already said that it will be based around a number of concepts including economic growth, the overwhelming concern in Wales and Westminster.

Secondly, a review of S4C is due to take place between now and 2015.

Thirdly, the BBC's current Charter and licence fee arrangements come to an end in December 2016 – the debate about its future is already beginning, and is likely to be even more frenzied than usual this time around because the government has already indicated, by transferring S4C, that the licence fee can be used for other things besides the BBC.

Fourthly, the Silk Commission on further powers for the Assembly has begun its work – another opportunity to examine where responsibility for broadcasting sits.

So there has probably never been a more suitable time to ask these questions about democratic accountability and scrutiny; about what devolution means for the governance of broadcasting in Wales; about where future funding decisions should reside; and, most importantly, how bringing all these factors together can lead to the creation of jobs and contribute to the Welsh economy.

I believe it is worth spending time and energy on working out the answers. By doing so with vision, imagination and confidence, it is entirely possible to make big and enduring changes.

We need a robust solution and we need strong political governance of broadcasting in Wales. And that depends on the determination and boldness of our political leaders and the maturity and capability of all involved to put aside traditional rivalries and territorial skirmishes. But I am certain it can be done.

I wonder what the uppity Welsh men and women of the 1920s would have to say about all of this. Plenty I should think.

I would like to finish by quoting my late husband Patrick Hannan who cared a great deal about some of the things which I have touched on this evening, and

who wrote and broadcast extensively about them, and whose memory was honoured here just two weeks ago by the National Library and BBC Wales in a Memorial Lecture. Patrick also delivered the Welsh Political Archive annual lecture himself in 1992.

Two years ago the Institute of Welsh Affairs published a volume of essays entitled *English is a Welsh Language – Television’s Crisis in Wales*. This is what Patrick wrote in his essay - “The democratic deficit remains because democracy isn’t simply about voting but about knowledge. In not much more than half a lifetime we have between us, the political and media classes, discovered and invented Wales. What everyone now needs are better ways of understanding this new structure. The big question is this: where in the future – the near future – will people be able to look for that?”

Menna Richards

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* The text of the twenty-fifth Welsh Political Archive annual lecture delivered at the Drwm, the National Library of Wales, 3 November 2011