

Raymond Williams Memorial Lecture 2018

‘The Deepest Impulse’: education, economy, democracy & society

Introduction

Noswaith dda pawb – good evening everyone.

Thanks to Lynette and David for their introductions, and a huge thanks to the Learning and Work Institute and The OU in Wales for the invitation – the honour –to deliver this year’s Raymond Williams Memorial Lecture.

Actually perhaps I’ve missed a trick there.

In tribute to last year’s speaker, and one of his most famous roles and impersonations on stage and film, I should have started with

“Hello, Good Evening, and Welcome”...

In all seriousness, having met Michael and discussed democracy and education in Wales, I know he shares my passion for extending opportunity, empowering all citizens to engage fully in debate and discourse, and to challenge vested interests and privileges.

Of course, his activism is not wholly uncommon amongst leading lights from Hollywood and the creative arts.

One such predecessor was Orson Welles – a pioneer in opportunities for black actors and writers amongst many other achievements.

In this week - the anniversary of his death - there is a new documentary on his life playing in cinemas across the UK.

And it features this quote from him, given at the 1942 Los Angeles Adult Education Conference

“Adult education must first enlist in the war against provincialism.

“Educators, which means every one of us in possession of the instruments of education, are sworn to the tremendous task of telling people about each other – about their works, which are called wisdom and culture.”

Education, democracy and society – they are all there in that short, far-sighted quote.

And, of course, it pre-dates but complements Raymond Williams’s long revolution, of how we conceive of our world, our place in it, how that is made real or altered by mass communication and cultures, and how an embedded culture of democracy is a pre-requisite for social justice.

And I shall return to these points in a moment.

If Raymond Williams were here this evening, he may well have been taken aback to find a Liberal Democrat invoking his name and some of his ideas. But in his cultural analysis and his fiction he developed ways of seeing the world, and ideas for changing it, that attracted – and continue to attract - radicals of many colours.

His recognition of the strengths of the various strands of Welsh radicalism, his critique of conservative parts of the left alongside his fierce opposition to conservatism, and his insistence the English left was too often wrongly dismissive of rural communities are elements that I recognise all too well!

Context

I will, of course, discuss adult education and its importance and influence this evening.

As many of you will know, the connection between campus and community has been at the heart of my agenda for higher education in particular.

I am pleased by the progress from Welsh universities in recapturing a sense of civic mission – but there is still much to do.

And addressing the decline in adult education – as part of the process of social change and a renewed democracy, not limited to the important challenge of skills development – is integral to this continuing mission.

However, as a Cabinet Minister whose portfolio runs from our youngest citizens through teenagers to university and college students of all ages, I want to invert the conventional approach and analysis. I hope you will indulge in me in that.

Here in Wales, we are delivering the single biggest set of education reforms anywhere in the UK since the Second World War.

Reforming our curriculum and assessment arrangements;

Re-shaping the who, where and what of teacher training;

Delivering student finance that is unique in Europe for supporting all students and all modes;

Changing the national structures for post-compulsory education to break down the barriers that stop us working together to meet learners' needs; and

Reducing class sizes and giving teachers the tools they need to be the best life-long learners and educators.

And so much more, as we go forward with our national mission to raise standards, reduce the attainment gap and deliver a system that is a source of national pride and public confidence.

But, what do I mean by inverting the conventional analysis?

I am not going to look upon adult education as a discipline set aside – away in its own box, unrelated to that national mission.

It is not a mission that stops at the school gates.

In fact, I want to describe how the historical mission and tradition of education – adult education – rooted in community, culture and citizenship in Wales is essential to the new shape of our compulsory education system.

I appreciate that many of you here in this audience may not be fully across all those reforms, such as the new curriculum for example.

But I want to take the opportunity this evening to describe my commitment to those reforms.

And why, and how, that commitment – personal, policy and yes political – is influenced by those traditions and purposes.

We are constructing a system powered by purposes and the type of citizens we'd like to see.

I hope, and believe, that this is an iteration of what Williams would have viewed as an education mission that was truly ensuring access to our "national inheritance, available to everyone".

So, I want to expand a little on that connection,

What it means for modern citizenship,

How we must affirm the common good and common interests and avoid the unnecessary extremes of identity liberalism and leftism;

And what it must mean for social mobility and social change.

Modern Citizenship

We will publish the new school curriculum – which is being co-constructed with teachers, universities, international experts and civic society – in Easter 2019.

It will then be available for testing and feedback, with all schools having access to the final curriculum from 2020, allowing them to get fully ready and prepared for statutory roll-out in September 2022.

Our new curriculum will represent what we want - what we expect - the citizens of the future to become, to know, and to have gained from their teachers.

But the process of working together to shape that curriculum also represents what we want from our education system.

A profession that collaborates; that is open to new ideas; that is always learning and that seeks to raise standards for all pupils.

And we are setting an international example on how progressive education reforms can be undertaken through collaboration, creativity and confidence.

I've been lucky enough to meet Ministers, teachers and educationalists from across Europe and North America over recent months and they are watching on with great interest, and are keen to learn from our approach.

Although I'm afraid that this interest and eagerness to learn doesn't extend to our friends across the border!

In shaping the curriculum together we are investing in a shared mission to inspire:

Ambitious, capable learners who are ready to learn throughout their lives.

Enterprising, creative contributors who are ready to play a full part in life and work.

Ethical, informed citizens who are ready to be citizens of Wales and the world; and

Healthy, confident individuals who are ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society.

To my mind, these four purposes are deceptively simple.

They are, in fact, a radical assertion of the essentials of education.

But not so radical that they are completely new.

Indeed, one can draw a line back to Culture and Society and what Williams prescribed as "a full liberal education for everyone".

He wrote that:

"Our specialisms will be finer if they have grown from a common culture, rather than being a distinction from it.

And we must at all costs avoid the polarization of our culture, of which there are growing signs.

Every man's ignorance diminishes me, and every man's skill is a common gain of breath.'#

We are fortunate to have a thriving and equitable public service education system here in Wales.

That, of course, brings challenges.

Unlike other systems, we don't take the conscious decision to write off a significant proportion of pupils and pick winners and losers at 11 years of age.

We have a moral conviction.

Non-selective, comprehensive education where every citizen's skill, ability and learning enhances the common good.

It brings about challenges in seeking to raise standards for all – no excuses, no lowered expectations, no exceptions – but it is fundamental to our sense of self, of education for everyone, and for the nation.

These convictions – and relationship to what is taught - are further expressed in The Long Revolution.

Williams's 1961 prescription for a new school curriculum focused on the:

Fundamentals of English and Maths;

Of general knowledge of ourselves and our environment;

Practice in democratic procedures;

And knowledge not solely as separate disciplines but drawn from the higher stage disciplines;

Contrast and compare with our 21st century purposes-based curriculum,

across six areas of learning and experience rather than narrow subjects;

focused on citizenship of Wales and the World;

with higher standards of literacy and numeracy;

And young people who are more digitally and bilingually competent.

In fact there is very little contrast.

I would argue that we are taking forward Williams's curriculum essentials through new definitions for our communications, cultural and technological age.

And if proof were needed that this Welsh Government, and yes this Welsh Liberal Democrat Minister, was pursuing that Long Revolution, then Williams also set out his initial practical reforms ahead of curriculum change – they were, and I quote:

“Better provision for the training of teachers and for adequate school buildings and reducing the size of classes”

You will see all these in my Progressive Agreement with the First Minister, in the government’s policy programme, and in our national mission action plan!

I know that Williams once wrote of a “fairly decent but also fairly modest Liberal party”

Well, as it’s only me in the Senedd and in Government, we are undeniably modest by definition and size... but certainly not modest in our ambitions for transforming Welsh education!

Common Good And Common Interests

I do, however, want to discuss ‘liberalism’ and the relationship between the liberal-left promotion of identities within education and what that might mean for our common democratic culture and society.

Before I get into that debate, let me clear that I view the victories of progressive politics for our different communities – feminism, LGBT equality, black consciousness, even democratic devolution – as fundamental achievements which we must celebrate and never be complacent about.

As Welsh Liberal Democrat leader, I was proud to hold the Senedd’s first ever debate on transgender issues, long before these discussions were more in the mainstream. And now, as a Welsh Liberal Democrat Minister, I’m proud to be dragging our curriculum and school rules into the 21st Century so that our schools are inclusive spaces that respect the rights of every pupil.

And of course, adult education itself has long been part of that process of social change, of shaping social attitudes.

But the Brexit vote, UKIP’s vote in the last Welsh General Election and of course Trump’s success in the United States, shows the fragility of those advancements.

It is clear that when people and communities think advances are for the benefit of others – rather than for them, their families or society at large – they will think they have nothing to lose by standing against them – or at least to turn a blind eye when these advances are under attack.

As the Princeton Professor, Mark Lilla has said in reference to Trump's victory:

"All of us liberals in higher education should take a long look in the mirror and ask ourselves how we contributed to putting the country in this situation. We must accept our share of responsibility.

But it extends beyond feeding the right-wing media by tolerating attempts to control speech, limit debate and stigmatise and bully conservatives, as well as encouraging a culture of complaint that strikes people outside our privileged circles as comically trivial."

We have distorted the liberal message to such a degree that it has become unrecognisable."

He goes on to say that since Reagan's victory, the left and liberals have:

"Thrown themselves into the movement politics of identity, losing a sense of what we share as citizens and what binds us as a nation."

It is not a simple, 'for America, read Wales or the UK', but I would argue that there are clear parallels.

And in this, we cannot view education, democracy and society apart from each other.

I had the great fortune recently of meeting Kerry Kennedy, President of the RFK Human Rights Organisation and daughter of Robert Kennedy, to discuss curriculum reform. And I will come back to that work later in my remarks.

Kerry's uncle, Ted Kennedy, addressed the political balance between identity and commonality in the 1980s. He identified the challenge for the Democratic coalition in this way:

"There is a difference between being a party that cares about labour and being a labour party.

"There is a difference between being a party that cares about women and being a women's party.

“And we can and we must be a party that cares about minorities without being a minority party.

“We are citizens first.”

I believe that the Welsh education system must also be ‘citizens first’.

It is why, on taking office, I re-affirmed the Government’s commitment to a new curriculum, and I accepted the Diamond Review’s proposals that student support should be equitable across modes and levels of study.

I was struck by a recent article by David Hughes, Chief Executive of the Association of Colleges in England. In an articulate advocacy for adult and further education, he wrote that:

“People coming together to learn is often the only time and place they meet people from other walks of life, breaking down the barriers between people. It helps make people feel part of the community, introduces them to new friends and gives them support.”

That is, the concept of education – adult education – as its own form of public space.

In the classroom, in the community, and online.

Exploring and testing ideas and evidence.

This is a deceptively simple notion. But at a time when the concept of evidence-informed debate and indeed the very idea of truth are under assault from some quarters, it is a necessary part of our democracy and culture.

Just as this is true for adult education, it is true for genuine comprehensive education that is not based on selection or ability.

Just as there is a political challenge, there is a challenge for education.

Lilla makes this direct comparison.

He says that too often, self-defined progressive, liberal education that focused on our differences:

“Turns young people back onto themselves, rather than outward to the wider world. Unprepared to think about the common good and what must be done to secure it, especially the hard task of persuading people very different from themselves to join a common effort.”

I view – and our reforms are grounded in this – the process of education is itself a common effort and for the realisation of a common good.

Yes these are shaped by different experiences, identities and perspectives. Absolutely.

But different characteristics cannot, and must not, define and limit the opportunities available.

We must guard against the advancement of liberal identity consciousness as being a partner to the retreat of liberal, broad, national education that involves everyone in a common endeavour.

A common endeavour that encourages questioning and challenge.

To challenge the established ways of thinking and of organising.

But also to challenge those definitions and differences where appropriate.

To be curious about others and the wider world beyond your own identity – however you choose to define.

A common set of purposes, but based on combining the knowledge and skills that enable individual citizens to become part of that process of social change.

Social Mobility And Social Change

Which brings me to my third, and final, theme – social mobility and social change.

As I mentioned earlier, we are building an education system that seeks to partner equity with excellence.

As I've made clear, I believe we should be proud that we have set out the values and purposes for our national education mission.

However, I am equally clear that we must guard against the view that having a set of values is an objective in itself.

I'm afraid that too often some see education equity and equality as ends in themselves.

We cannot allow any kind of cosy progressive consensus in this regard.

I've talked a fair bit about our four curriculum purposes.

The development of ethical, informed young people ready to contribute and be citizens.

My argument is that those purposes are the foundations for social justice and social change.

For empowering our youngest citizens with the knowledge and skills to change society, not just to understand society and accept where they might fit in.

The RFK Human Rights Organisation, as I mentioned earlier, does tremendous international work on curriculum development, introducing human rights issues through the stories of people from across the world.

This then empowers students to become personally involved in rights and advocacy, through links between maths and corporate taxation, food supply and child labour and so on.

This is titled 'Speaking Truth to Power - Changing our World' – which relates back to my previous theme.

If we concentrate too much on which box a student might tick, or fit into, then they will never escape that box. Hence why I took action in renaming the 'Pupil Deprivation Grant' the 'Pupil Development Grant' – still the same resources aimed directly at our poorest pupils, but with a focus on learner progression.

As Williams wrote on the purpose of education:

“The process of giving to the ordinary members of society its full common meanings, and the skills that will enable them to amend those meanings, in the light of their personal and common experience.”

Our schools, colleges, universities and adult education classes bring together Welsh citizens of all colours, beliefs and backgrounds.

Brought together in a common endeavour and very soon through a new curriculum constructed through common effort.

But does that common effort ensure we are changing society and amending those meanings as Williams said?

Frankly, we're not there yet.

I'm sure it will shock you to know that we have fewer than 400 teachers from a black or minority ethnic background in Wales, and only 4 headteachers;

The percentage of our population with higher level qualifications still lags 3% behind the UK average.

And that progression to post-graduate study in some of our Valleys communities lags at half the rate as it does here in Cardiff, when it already runs

significantly behind for the proportion of 18-year olds that enter higher education in the first place.

These are just three areas that demonstrate the challenges that still lie ahead.

However, I am confident that reforms to student support, opening up apprenticeship routes and teacher training opportunities will go some way to addressing these.

But furthermore, I recognise the role adult education must play in addressing these and other areas of the national mission.

For example, we have embarked on reforms so that we do more to attract non-traditional workers into the teaching profession.

This includes delivering a part-time teaching qualification via a blended learning model. This will ensure that the provision is geographically neutral. It will also enable part-time students to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by the new student finance arrangements.

And those student finance reforms are already having a significant impact on part-time student recruitment in Wales. Its early days but I understand that the OU is seeing a percentage increase that runs into double figures.

For me – increases in part-time and post-graduate study – particularly from non-traditional backgrounds and from mature learners is the real test of the radicalism of our student support reforms. And so far, thanks to a collective effort, we are passing that test.

Conclusion

But I would be the first to admit that there is still some way to go – in a continuing age of reduced and limited resources – to ensuring that adult education and life-long learning is part of the natural order of university, college, funding council and government decision-making.

You will know me well enough to recognise, as I said at the outset, that I view adult education and community engagement as integral to the civic mission of post-compulsory education.

Not just in the provision of courses, but in how community experiences and interests inform research and other university activities beyond the lecture hall.

I have asked HEFCW to report to me by the end of the year on this issue.

This will relate to, but not limited by, the civic mission investment that was taken forward following my most recent remit letter.

Once I receive that report, I will consider it in the context of our plans for a new Tertiary Education Commission.

But as I have set out this evening, this tradition and ethos is influential in many ways.

I hope that I have made the case – bold as it may be – that our current national mission of education reform has inherited from Raymond Williams and the essentials of the adult education tradition in Wales.

Changed circumstances, yes definitely – but our teachers and students are stepping forward in the spirit of the long revolution.

A curriculum and education system that, as Williams wanted, provides everyone with the opportunity to “grasp the real nature of our society”.

And within a confident and democratic Wales where, as he wrote in Long Revolution, there is a system of “public education designed to express and create the values of an educated democracy and a common culture”.

In his novel ‘The Fight for Manod’, Williams features a final scene in which two of the main characters drive to one of the passes high in the Brecon Beacons. In doing so, Williams captures the economic, social and cultural change within Wales over the preceding century. I am going to quote from it now:

Where they were standing, looking out, was a border in the earth and in history: to north and west the great expanses of a pastoral country; to south and east, where the iron and coal had been worked, the crowded valleys, the new industries, now in their turn becoming old. There had been a contrast, once, clearly seen on this border, between an old way of life and a new... But what was visible now was that both were old. The pressure for renewal, inside them, had to make its way through a land and through lives that had been deeply shaped, deeply committed, by a present that was always moving, inexorably, into the past.

Now, that is a vista – of a landscape and of a shared history - that I see and think about every week as I travel from Brecon to Cardiff Bay. The challenge that we still face in Wales is that of renewal: of economy, culture and democracy – and I think we all know that the challenge is likely to become tougher in the coming years, don't we?

We can only secure that renewal, and the social justice that must be a part of it, by building an education system that seeks to build a common culture and ideas of shared citizenship, from our new curriculum through to adult education.

I started this evening by drawing a connection between Williams and Orson Welles.

In concluding his remarks to that Adult Education Conference in 1942, Welles said:

“The new elements of mass education will be to the dark places of the human mind as bright sunlight is to the crawling things under a lifted stone.

“The vermin and bacteria of intolerance cannot survive in the bright gleaming light of understanding”.

The collective effort across our education system to raise standards, partner equity with excellence and inspire generations of informed and enterprising citizens is no easy task.

We have our own national version of lifting that heavy stone.

Yes, we face some tough times but we can already see beginnings of that bright sunlight,

And our understanding of it and its potential for change owes a great deal:

To Raymond Williams,

To the history of adult education in Wales,

And to the efforts of educators past, present and future.

Diolch – Thank You.

END

The Raymond Williams Memorial Lecture is organised by Learning and Work Institute Wales in partnership with The Open University in Wales. The Lecture was delivered by Kirsty Williams AM, Cabinet Secretary for Education on 10th October 2018 at Norwegian Church in Cardiff, Wales.

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