



TIME TO DELIVER

The Third Term and Beyond: Policy Options for Wales

The Political Context

Gerald Holtham's lunchtime presentation to the *Time To Deliver* Conference, 27 November 2006

You've heard a lot about policies and will hear more this afternoon. I want to talk about politics – because ultimately politics is where policies come from in a democracy.

It may be an exaggeration to say that politics is in crisis in Western democracies but there are acute difficulties that we see reproduced in many countries. Membership of political parties has fallen steeply in the UK and elsewhere. In some countries there has been a growth of smaller, sometimes more extreme parties making consensus harder to achieve. Recent elections in Holland are an example. Turnout at elections is down. In the UK it has fallen from over 80 to around 60 per cent in general elections and at local elections it is much lower. In Wales we make do with a 38 per cent turnout to National Assembly elections. Moreover, political participation among the young is below average for the population as a whole.

Those are bare facts but at the level of impression or anecdote things are no better. Politicians rank with estate agents or vivisectionists in public esteem. In Wales, for example, the Richard Commission recommended an increase in the number of Assembly members if committees were to be manned and work done; indeed no reputable expert disputes that the Assembly should have more members. Yet the Labour Party was unwilling to propose an increase because it believed that would be deeply unpopular. Politicians are in such bad odour you daren't suggest having more of them. Perhaps the public would like the Assembly better if it didn't have any politicians at all.

Now, although no competent politician would admit it, I think the feeling is mutual; many politicians are secretly rather disdainful of a public that is so indifferent and ill-informed about what they do and the issues they face. This mutual alienation has led to the breakdown, I fear, of a salutary myth.

Policy debate, including parliamentary debate was once believed to trickle down into public consciousness. It was thought that, if you won a debate, somehow by a mysterious process of osmosis it had electoral effects – even though members of the public

interviewed at random would show no awareness of the issues. That myth is no longer believed; innocence has died. If people don't know who the Home Secretary is or the Minister of Education in the Welsh Assembly Government, then they really don't. If they haven't followed an argument, winning it really won't affect their vote. From this realisation was born the professionalisation of political advertising and news management – spin in a word. Policies in areas of low saliency become divorced from electoral politics altogether. And in areas of high saliency policies are adopted not for their putative effects but for the 'message' they send to an uninterested public, for their contribution to political branding. Symbol usurps substance and an indifferent public gets the policies it deserves.

Privatising council houses, for example, was not a housing policy but emblematic of the Conservatives as the opportunity party, posed in distinction to a Labour party that wanted to hold people back in the working class. Fiendishly complicated arrangements for breaking up and privatising the London tube instead of issuing bonds to finance an integrated system had nothing to do with efficiency but demonstrated new Labour believed in public-private partnerships (good and modern - hooray) rather than public borrowing (old fashioned and bad - boo).

By now you will have gathered that I'm only here as a substitute. The IWA really wanted Richard Wilson – Victor Meldrew. They asked him but he didn't believe it. So it falls to me to be the miserable old codger. Well someone has to do it.

I don't want to discuss the reasons for those developments in politics, which are no doubt complex, to do with affluence, the relative lack of burning issues compared with mass unemployment, total war or the need to establish a welfare state. Changes in the economy have also weakened class consciousness and solidarity on which much of 20th century politics was based. I want rather to focus on Wales because I think we have similar difficulties in maintaining political interest and literacy as other places but actually I think the problems are worse here for two reasons.

Reason one is the absence of a Welsh media which is watched or read by a majority of the population and which devotes any serious attention to Welsh political issues. Its bad enough in England but if you read the Sun it's hard to avoid knowing who Tony Blair is, though a deep and dispassionate analysis of his policy may be harder to find. You could read the Sun for a year however – as many people in Wales do - without knowing that Rhodri Morgan existed. To people in Rhyl, Cardiff Bay seems a very long way away. But the bad news is you can go into a shop in Queen St and find people to whom it is every bit as remote. They have absolutely no clue what is going on there politically and no easy way to find out.

For that reason I found it poignant that one of the recommendations in the chapter on health policy was: "foster a free but responsible media that supports health goals...". If any business needs help in Wales it is people setting up radio stations or newspapers. They surely deserve subsidy so long as they can get a threshold readership and have a threshold amount of 'public service' coverage.

That brings me on to the second reason why the issue is more difficult and important in Wales. The Assembly Government wants citizen-centred policies. In field after field we find the same refrain. Wales is not like England; we reject the commercialisation of more and more aspects of society including the provision of public services. In education as in health we seek to find means of co-operation rather than encouraging competition. Our professionals are to be trusted and our people are to be active citizens not passive consumers. It is a noble vision but that is what it is – a vision. If it is to work, the citizens have to be informed, many of them have to be active. Putting it crudely if we are going to allocate more resources politically and fewer through the market, the political system has to work well.

In practice most people, including these days Welsh people, behave like consumers. They do not expect to be able to influence public policy and many of them are not concerned to try. They take what they are given and moan when it's not what they want. The harsh truth is that the English approach of trying to give people choices, to subject producers to competition and then let people choose and get on with it fits the temper of the times. It's not the sort of society that we of the 1960s generation expected or wanted, perhaps, but it's the one we've got.

The premise behind much current Assembly Government policy-making – that producers can be trusted because they will be guided by a far-sighted political process disciplined by an informed and responsible citizenry – is one that does credit to Welsh idealism. But it reminds me of the press stories saying Wales were going to give the All Blacks a game last Saturday – a triumph of hope over the evidence of your senses if you stood back and took a dispassionate look at the actual situation.

Now I'm not advocating defeatism. I hope Wales go on trying to beat New Zealand and, even with one foot in the grave, I hope to live to see it. And I don't disparage the wish to organise affairs in Wales on the citizen not consumer model. However, we really must wake up to the difficulties of achieving it and tackle them purposefully. It is going to be much harder to pull off than beating the All Blacks. If the effort is to succeed, devolution cannot be a toy for a semi-detached political class – a spectator sport with precious few spectators. It has to be the project of a substantial number of the Welsh people.

That's why we need to rekindle the early idealism that accompanied the setting up of the National Assembly. Do you remember the talk about inclusive politics, with powerful Assembly Committees scrutinising policy on non-partisan lines, or the need for a national convention on the Scottish model to bring citizens and groups together to parallel the discussions in the Assembly? There was talk of a digital shadow assembly that would encourage schools to get involved in a national discussion. Someone wanted to get parish councillors to congregate in Machynlleth in Glyndwr's old parliament to get grass-roots participation. Some of the ideas were half-baked no doubt but we seem to have relapsed into politics as usual. Yet without that drive and energy to find ways to reach out and involve people it is easy to predict what will happen. Current 'new producerist' policies

could turn into cosy arrangements between professional interests, public sector trades unions and the Assembly Government that will not achieve anyone's goals.

Segolene Royal the socialist candidate for the French presidency has promised to introduce citizens' juries to reconnect the State with the people. Well here's an idea. Why doesn't the Assembly Government convene a series of citizen's juries to look at contentious issues where current policy is paralysed by public disagreement or incomprehension. Lets have the case for and against small rural schools or "inefficient" local hospitals hashed out for the benefit of twelve good women (and men) and true. And lets get coverage in the Daily Post, Western Mail, the Independent, and the Guardian as well as on television. We probably won't make the Sun unless the jury is mixed and agrees to sit topless - which would not be suitably dignified - but you can't have everything.

Such exercises in participative democracy would not usurp the prerogatives of elected representatives. The relevant Minister would have to take final decisions and be responsible for them. But to ensure the juries were taken seriously, the Minister could be bound to take full account of their conclusions and perhaps be required to make a written statement giving his or her reasons, if deciding to act contrary to the juries' findings.

At any rate to have decent public services and decent policies in general, without much more commercialisation, we need more active citizens. The IWA has 1,350 individual and corporate members and at the moment that's about the size of the Welsh public. The concerned people and organizations in this room and the politicians need to strain every fibre to encourage and foster those active citizens they seek to put at the centre of policy.

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