

Thanks to the Learning & Work Institute for inviting me to deliver the lecture tonight and to Open University Cymru for their support.

And of course, thank you to everyone here at the Redhouse.

It's a real honour to be able to speak to you here in this building so full of history and indeed this town that holds such a special place within the story of Wales.

And it is with a great deal of humility that I stand before you today to deliver a lecture that bears the name of Raymond Williams.

His brilliance, his insight and his compassion make his writing as powerful and as illuminating today as it has ever been.

In preparation for today I went over much of what he wrote specifically about Wales and Welsh identity and culture, not necessarily what his international reputation has been based upon, and it has been absolutely fascinating.

In his piece 'Welsh Culture', written in 1975, he wrote, "The feeling for the past is more than a fancy, but it's how past and present relate that tells in a culture."

And it is exactly his grasp of that relationship between our past and our present here in Wales, and the challenges we face in exploring concepts like identity and nationhood, that is for me both inspiring and, in these particular circumstances, arse-shakingly intimidating.

So, I'll begin with the only thing I feel I have any kind of authority to be able to stand here and speak to you about, which is - myself.

My own personal experience.

And even that can get a bit slippery, to be honest.

I've spent most of my life outside of Wales.

I left my home in Port Talbot to go to drama school in London when I was 18 years old and I've lived in one place or another on the other side of, and at various distances from, the Severn Bridge, ever since.

It was only when I left that I even began to be aware that there might be such a thing as 'Welshness'.

Like a fish only knowing what wetness is once its landed on the shore, mouth gaping and eyes bulging.

I'd been so 'in it' that I hadn't known anything different to compare it with.

Thinking back, I turned up in London with no real sense of being different, no sense of coming from a particular culture or class or anything like that, really.

I'd been aware of events going on around me growing up, particularly in the mid-80's of course, but I was so myopically focused on being a teenager, with all the self-obsession that can involve, that I hadn't really understood the full significance of what was going on in Wales at that time, and I suppose I just assumed that it was pretty much no different everywhere else.

That the world was probably just the same as Port Talbot but...more of it.

I barely went to Neath, let alone any further a field.

And then, one day, not long after I'd arrived in London, I walked into a McDonalds and no-one could understand me when I asked for milk.

"Milk!"

"MILK!!!"

It's not that hard, is it?

"MIIILLLK!!!?"

"Oh, milk?"

COME ON! Really??? It's that different?

Anyway, I suppose that's where it started. The 'having it reflected back to me that I was different' thing.

But I didn't like that.

I wanted to be different.

I just wanted it to be in a way that I chose.

I didn't like how exposing it felt.

I didn't want my difference to be something that was defined by other people.

I wanted to be in control of it.

And so I started adapting.

Shifting my shape to hide that difference so I could control when it was seen or not.

In the first couple of weeks of being at drama school, I remember one of the voice teachers asking if she could record me speaking.

She said she did that with a lot of students who had quite strong regional accents when they arrived.

She used them as teaching aids for when someone might need to learn a particular accent for a play.

She said she had to do it in the first few weeks though as people tended to lose their accent so quickly and then it would be no use.

I'd be so interested to hear that tape now.

I have no idea how I must have sounded then.

Three years later, when I was just finished at drama school and starting my first job, I did my very first ever television interview.

It was for a Welsh news programme and all about this young Welsh actor making a splash starring opposite Vanessa Redgrave in the West End.

Not long ago I was at my mum and dad's house with my daughter and we accidentally came across a video recording of that interview.

Obviously, Mum and Dad had recorded everything that ever referred to me directly, indirectly, not me but someone who looked a bit like me if you scrunched your eyes up, from the moment I left drama school to this very second - they're recording this right now whilst sitting here in that row just there.

Anyway, seeing that interview was quite a shocker. As I watched, trying to ignore the howls of laughter coming from my daughter, I had absolutely no idea who that person was.

He clearly had absolutely no idea who he was, either.

He had a big hoop earring in his left ear, a pseudo-confidence bordering on arrogance and he certainly didn't sound Welsh.

To be honest, I'm surprised people weren't constantly coming up to me and giving me a slap.

It's amazing the effect that not being understood in a London McDonalds can have on someone's life.

In those 3 years I'd clearly done a real job on myself.

It wasn't that I was trying to hide where I came from.

I wasn't embarrassed about being Welsh or anything like that.

I think I just realised, without it ever having to be said, that I was faced with an utterly overwhelming and totally implacable field of 'otherness', all around me, towering above me.

Like a huge wave rising up, pushed forward by unseen but dimly visible forces that I knew would roll over me without a second's hesitation.

And I found I had very little to hold onto to resist it's ineluctable currents.

On some level, without being aware of it, I decided I would turn and swim with the current.

I would leave negotiating my difference until later, once I'd learned how to swim within the racing tide.

It took me a very long time to even begin to understand the consequences of how you respond to having your sense of difference be defined by others.

The difficulties it can create around developing a genuine sense of identity.

The ways it can disconnect you from your past.

My difference, my Welshness, was first presented to me in the form of a shock from outside.

A crisis of recognition.

And I responded with a form of assimilation and accommodation that I thought I was in control of but actually just confused my sense of identity in such a way that it would take me many years to even begin to come to grips with.

“Who speaks for Wales?”

Nobody.

That is both the problem and the encouragement.

Encouragement because the most valuable emphasis in Welsh culture is that everybody should speak and have the right to speak:

an idea of an equal-standing and participating democracy which was there in experience before it became theory.

Problem because Wales has suffered and is suffering acute economic, political, and cultural strains, and by the fact of history has to try and resolve them in a world of crude power relationships and distant parliaments.”

That was written by Raymond Williams in 1971.

Forty-six years ago he asked that question, ‘Who speaks for Wales?’, in very different circumstances.

How different?

Well, lets see.

In 1971, the Conservatives were in government with Edward Heath as Prime Minister, of course.

That same year, with Harold Wilson as Labour leader, Williams wrote of ‘the long crisis of British socialism, now coming to a decisive stage in the condition of the Labour Party.’

Across the political spectrum, people were struggling to reconcile the decline of traditional industries - coal, steel - with both the promise and apprehension for what emerging technologies might bring.

Sir Julian Hodge founded the Commercial Bank of Wales to provide banking services and much needed support to small and medium sized Welsh businesses.

Wylfa Nuclear Power Station became operational that year in Anglesey.

On the back of the Welsh rugby team winning their sixth Grand Slam, John Dawes was voted BBC Wales Sports Personality of the Year.

In that same year that it became legal to register marriages in the Welsh language, the Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg campaign to remove or destroy English language road signs was ongoing, with protesters being dragged away from court proceedings in Carmarthen against 8 of their members.

Merthyr Tydfil was one of the locations used for the filming of ‘10 Rillington Place’.

The ‘Ryan a Ronnie’ show is so popular that it is moved to BBC1 and broadcast in English, the first of 3 series shown between 1971 and 1973, and Nerys Hughes gets her big break on what was to become the hugely popular TV show ‘The Liver Birds’.

In Port Talbot alone, 5 different newspapers employ 11 reporters between them, all based in offices within the town itself and all desperately competing to beat each other to the next big local story.

Two pioneering Welsh political figures, leader of Plaid Cymru, Leanne Wood and Welsh Cabinet Education Secretary, Kirsty Williams, were born.

And one of the greatest Welsh poets of the 20th century, Waldo Williams, died.

The title of Prince of Wales, a title bestowed upon an Englishman ever since the defeat of Llewelyn ap Gryfydd in the 13th century, was, as it is today, held by Charles, of the House of Windsor.

And the single most powerful position in Welsh politics, the principal minister of Her Majesty's Government in the United Kingdom with responsibilities for Wales, and head of the Welsh Office, is Conservative MP for Hendon South, Peter Thomas.

'A world of crude power relationships and distant parliaments' in which to try and resolve the 'acute economic, political and cultural strains' being suffered by Wales as a result of the 'fact of history', as Williams put it.

It was 20 years ago this year, but still 26 years ahead of Williams as he wrote of those 'distant parliaments', that Wales chose to bring decision-making closer to the Welsh people by voting YES to the creation of an Assembly for Wales with devolved powers.

Before we got there though, just 8 years after Williams asked his question, the first referendum on the issue was held, in 1979; after what was, by all accounts, a toxic campaign, the voters of Wales on that occasion gave a resounding NO and rejected outright the possibility of their own parliament.

A mere 12% of the Welsh electorate voted to have their own Assembly that first time, in 1979.

So what changed?

Well, one of the other notable events of 1979, was the general election, heavily influenced as it was by the recent 'winter of discontent', and the coming to power of one Margaret Thatcher.

Winter came that year in a manner that wouldn't be seen again until Season 7 of 'Game of Thrones'.

For the next 18 years, in spite of continually and overwhelmingly voting Labour, Wales watched as successive Tory governments held onto power and it fell, again and again to a Conservative Secretary of State for Wales to represent Welsh interests and champion the issues important to Welsh people at the seat of power in far-off Westminster.

For 15 of those years it was an Englishman.

And one of them was John Redwood.

The man who made a pig's ear of miming to the Welsh national anthem and who seemed to have been put on this earth specifically to infuriate the Welsh.

But it was during the reign of Nicholas Edwards, Conservative MP for Pembrokeshire and Secretary of State for Wales from 1979 to 1987, and after suffering the nightmare of the miners strike and the unforgivable destruction that followed in its wake, that Wales seemed to have its eyes opened.

It came to realise, it seemed, just how vulnerable a position the country was in when left to the stewardship of a ruthless Conservative government, hell-bent on destroying the unions and making an example of the striking coal-miners.

As Dafydd Elis Thomas recently remarked, "Let's not forget where we were and where we've come from and what shit we've had to put up with!"

And so, it seems, when the chance came round again, after Tony Blair and his 'new' Labour Party emphatically swept into Downing Street in 1997, Wales made sure that this time they would seize their opportunity.

And yet, even then, even after the country had gone through so much, seen so much of what it had built it's sense of itself upon be attacked and left to perish, even then the vote to take power into it's own hands, at least to begin that process, was still so close.

49.7% voted NO.

50.3% voted YES.

Less than one per cent difference.

Clearly, a strong sense of fear.

Of caution at taking on greater responsibilities, perhaps.

Of trepidation at the thought of a growing separation across the now 'clear red water' from that already far-off seat of power in the Palace of Westminster.

Twenty years on, it is seen as one of the great achievements of devolution that it is now generally accepted that Wales should indeed have its own Assembly.

For the majority it is now unthinkable to go back to the pre-'97 state of affairs and, as Kevin Morgan, Professor of Governance and Development at Cardiff University, described it, "the ignominious position of being a quango state led by quango's."

That fear and trepidation seems to have fallen away.

Well, if not perhaps about what devolution has so far delivered then at least as far as the underlying principle of devolution is concerned - that government closer to the people is far better and more effective than government that is far from the people.

In fact, it could be said that a desire to have decision-making powers brought closer to home was a significant factor in a more recent referendum that will have potentially huge consequences for the people and communities of Wales.

The Brexit vote divided the country yet again.

Even though, as one of the most economically disadvantaged places within the whole of Europe, Wales is a net beneficiary of the EU budget, receiving large amounts of EU structural funding, agricultural subsidies and much else besides, the majority of the country still decided that, on the whole, it would prefer to give up whatever economic benefits it was receiving in order to 'take back control'.

Precisely, control over what it would be taking back and from whom are slightly more problematic questions but a strong feeling of discontent with the status quo and a long held and frustrated desire for change were unquestionably prime motivations for the way the vote went in Wales.

As Williams said - "Everybody should speak and have the right to speak".

Of course, it's always a possibility that if people feel they have long been denied that right and are suddenly given the opportunity to speak what they say may very well not be what it is you want to hear.

Welsh Labour were overwhelmingly for remaining within the EU.

So, why would the very same people who, election after election keep returning Welsh Labour to power, a people who for the last 20 years have had government brought closer to them in the form of their own national assembly with it's own devolved powers, headed by the man described as leading the 'most invincible electoral machine' ever known in the United Kingdom, why would those same people feel that they had long been denied the right to speak and, in possibly the single most important vote in Wales in generations, not only vote against that invincible leader and his party's wishes but, unlike Scotland and Northern Ireland, vote virtually in lock-step with the country that has, historically, shown no desire whatsoever to act in the best interests of Wales?

When it comes to the Brexit vote - 'For Wales - see England.'

That, infamously, was all that was written as the entry for Wales in the 1888 edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica.

'For Wales - see England.'

Those four short words are loaded with more history, complexity and division than it could ever be possible to unpack here today.

This is what Williams meant by 'the fact of history'.

But without some kind of understanding of that story and its tortured history we cannot even begin to start answering that question, so full of contradictions.

Because it is the story of a nation that never was, struggling to be.

The story of a people continually shocked and shaped and acted upon from outside.

It is the story of a long process of successive conquests and repressions.

Of bitter fighting and raiding and discrimination.

But, also, of accommodations and integrations and adaptations.

From the Romans to the Anglo-Saxons to the Normans, they all came to fracture us, to control us, to subdue us.

To bend us to their will.

They built their roads, they built their walls, they built their castles.

They changed our language, they changed our faith, they changed our sense of ourselves.

And all the while, we tried to live in the shadow of their powers.

We found ourselves shoved into a people.

Over 1500 years, between the Roman invasion and our final 'annexation' under the reign of Henry VIII, there were brief moments where the possibility of something else began to emerge.

Where an entirely different 'fact of history' might, perhaps, have begun to take shape.

In tenth century Wales, during the time of the Anglo-Saxons, it appeared in the Laws of Hywel Dda.

The King of Deheubarth gathered together expert lawyers and priests from throughout Wales to revise and codify native Welsh law.

The Laws of Hywel Dda were seen as just and compassionate, a legal framework that a people with its own language and a unifying leader could use as a basis for nationhood.

It would retain that promise until 1536 and the Acts of Union when the English king, Henry VIII brought that dream to an end and decreed the law of England was to be the only law in Wales.

As it remains to this day.

English Justices of the Peace were appointed throughout Wales, and the English language was to be the only language of the courts.

Those using the Welsh language were barred from receiving public office and so a Welsh ruling class fluent in English was able to take a firm hold.

Another moment of possibility appeared in the 13th century, under the rule of Llewelyn ap Gruffudd.

At a time of savage violence and constant fear of betrayal, one Welsh prince among many rose to ascendancy.

Llewelyn the Last, as he was eventually known, became the first and only native Prince of Wales acknowledged as such by an English king.

Wales, once more, had an opportunity to begin building its own fledgling state.

Its own language, its own laws, its own power to raise taxes and form the institutions to carry it on into the future as a developing nation-state.

That moment lasted for 10 brief years.

The English king's successor, Edward I, wanted power over all of Britain for himself.

After defeating a Welsh rebellion led by Llewelyn, Edward totally crushed the embryonic Welsh state.

He seized its land and its castles, stole its treasures, destroyed its churches and abbeys, and imprisoned Llewelyn's heirs.

The English king put a stranglehold on Wales with his notorious Ring of Steel - a multitude of hugely expensive stone castles all across the land to keep the Welsh principalities under control and to mercilessly quell any possibility of revolt.

And in 1301, in a final act of domination, Edward bestowed the title Prince of Wales upon his own English heir, a tradition which continues to this very day.

The last and, perhaps, most passionately grieved of all the possible alternative histories for Wales is the one where we live in a Welsh nation-state directly descended in an unbroken line from the reign of the 'Son of Prophecy' - Owain Glyndwr.



At the beginning of the 15th century Glyndwr seemed an unlikely leader of the revolution - part of the Welsh gentry, middle-aged, sophisticated, moving easily among the educated and wealthy on both sides of the Welsh/English border.

He had studied the law, ridden with the King's armies twice in Scotland and had possibly even served as a squire to the future Henry IV of England.

But, in 1400 he began a ferocious revolt against English rule that would last a decade, see him proclaimed the rightful Prince of Wales and bring a Welsh nation state closer than it had ever been before.

As the rebellion gathered momentum, the Welsh soldiers within the armies sent to stop him changed sides.

England panicked and issued terrible, discriminatory Penal Laws against the Welsh.

Meant to re-establish English dominance, they only succeeded in driving ever more Welshman to the cause of Owain Glyndwr.

As he swept across Wales, he captured castle after castle, burnt his way down the Tywi valley and on into Gwent.

There were reports of Welsh students at Oxford University leaving their studies to join him, Welsh labourers and craftsmen abandoning their employers in England, hundreds of Welsh archers and men-at-arms leaving English service and returning to their native land to join him in rising up against the English once more.

In 1404, he makes Harlech castle his seat of power and is crowned Prince of Wales.

He establishes a parliament in Machynlleth, and surrounds himself with talented ministers.

He establishes alliances with the French and the Scottish.

And he sets out his programme for the future of Wales - a sovereign state, with a separate Welsh church independent of Canterbury, national universities in both the north and the south, and a return to the progressive Laws of Hywel Dda.

It is a stunningly audacious vision for this land that has lived under a vicious heel for so long.

It lays down the foundations for a future built on common interest and shared prosperity.

It inspires the Welsh people to great acts of courage and sacrifice.

Finally, here is what they had been longing for but never dared hope might one day be turned into a reality.

Not just a people, but a nation.

Not just a country, but a nation state.

But it was not to be.

Nation building takes time. It needs support. It needs protection for its institutions to take root. For its confidence to grow. For its communities to flourish.

Alliances fell. Resources dwindled. And time ran out.

After many years of grinding the Welsh down, of Owain Glyndwr watching his control slowly ebb away, the country fell into the hands of the English state once again.

The last Welsh Prince of Wales, cornered in Harlech, his wife and family imprisoned and soon to be killed, made himself a fugitive.

The English king hunted him down but he evaded capture, ignored multiple royal pardons and despite the offer of enormous rewards he was never betrayed.

With a last nod to posterity, the 'Son of Prophecy' mysteriously disappears from the history books and Wales, beaten down yet again, leaderless and all hope vanquished, becomes once more a subjugated people.

It was only 120 years later and Henry VIII's Acts of Union put the final full stop on the Welsh sentence.

Of course, history didn't stop there and the story of Wales rushed ever onwards but never again did we come so close.

To being.

Ourselves, fully.

Or, at least, the promise of it.

So, we adapted, we shifted, we accommodated.

For 16th century Wales, Henry's Acts of Union suddenly opened the door onto a larger English society and many took their chance to rush through it and improve their fortunes.

The Welsh gentry were allowed to rise through the English ranks, marry into it, spread its influence and, in return, they looked away as Wales was robbed of the trappings of its faith.

Newly Protestant royal coffers filled with old Welsh Catholic riches.

Welsh relics seized, stripped of their jewels and burnt, glass and sculptures smashed, chalices destroyed, altars broken.

We learned to speak like them, to act like them, to think like them.

Well, some did.

By 1600, there were more Welsh people in London than in any Welsh town.

For those living in poverty back in Wales, William Morgan's bible, magnificent and transformational.

The word of God, for the first time, set down in the Welsh language.

A language that could now thrive as a vessel for worship and spirituality and insured that the Welsh speaking people were bound to the English royalty that had made it all possible.

So much so, that in the English Civil War of the 17th century, Wales took the side of the Catholic royalists.

Hard to imagine that this same people would later become known for their radical non-conformism and socialist militancy.

As Williams said, "It was not the race that changed; it was the history."

And as Gerald Morgan writes, in his 'Brief History of Wales',

"While Scotland was still a monarchy with all the necessary institutions of government, Wales only had its own language, and a history it couldn't quite forget.

Many people tried to forget both.

Institutional life had been completely absorbed into England.

While there was now a recognisable boundary between English counties and Welsh counties, in political terms it was not a boundary at all.

The Welsh had abandoned the national struggle in favour of English freedoms: the future struggle would be for identity.

For Wales, see England."

So, how did that struggle for identity play out?

Williams said that it was here, as he was growing up, that his education began to display large gaps.

"...that is to say: a gap in the Welsh history for the four centuries after the Acts of Union; a gap in the English history, or was it also Welsh, which had brought the tram road and the railway through our valley, and which was there visible every night, above Brynarw, when they cleared the blast furnace at Blaenavon and the glow hung in the sky.

All the complications, all the real difficulties, are there in those gaps, and it is these that not only I, but most of us, find so hard to grasp, to decipher, to connect, as we try to make sense of what is called Welsh Culture."

Because what begins to grow in those gaps is the concept of Britishness.

With its simultaneous identities and allegiances.

Its head-spinning conflicts of interest and heart-wrenching appeals to loyalty.

What started as a political union between the parliaments of England and Scotland, got a further boost with the Napoleonic Wars and the opportunity for the English and the Scots to bond over definitely not being Catholics and even more definitely not being French.

Things did get a little more complicated when the predominantly Catholic kingdom of Ireland joined this new British union.

But it turned out the British state was willing to overlook the Catholic bit as long as the really important 'Anything But The French' bit was in place.

In 1832, Irish politician Daniel O'Connell stood in the British House of Commons and declared,

"The people of Ireland are ready to become a portion of the British Empire, provided they be made so in reality and not in name alone; they are ready to become a kind of West Briton if made so in benefits and justice; but if not, we are Irishmen again."

And thereby, as they say, hangs a tale.

The years of bloodshed and the Irish struggles for those 'benefits and justice' are writ large in the book of Britishness.

There was no historic warning speech from Wales or list of conditions which Welsh inclusion in the union was predicated on because, of course, Wales was already part of England.

There was no Welsh parliament to negotiate with, no Welsh monarchy to appease, no institutions of a Welsh state with which to bargain because, as we've seen, none of those things had been allowed to come to life.

There was no speech because there was no-one there to speak it.

Moving forward, British national identity was no longer driven on by protestantism but now instead by the billowing headwinds of imperialism.

For some, the new and expanding British Empire provided unprecedented opportunities for upward mobility and accumulations of private wealth.

And that highly lucrative imperialism both fuelled and was, in turn, fed by the coming of what was about to completely transform Wales in every way imaginable - the Industrial Revolution.

In his brilliant introduction to the Raymond Williams collection, 'Who Speaks For Wales? Nation, Culture, Identity', editor Daniel Williams describes it as,

'... the transformation of an agricultural people of about 500,000 in 1800, into an urban population of 2,500,000 by 1911.

The shift from a pastoral country with its population fairly evenly spread throughout its regions into a predominantly industrial nation with its urban majority packed into the southern coalfield was accompanied by significant cultural shifts that were the making of modern Wales: geographically from country to city; politically from Liberal to Labour; linguistically from Welsh to English."

The British imperial war-machine demanded to be fed and the major industrialists of the era fell upon Wales, rich in natural resources, with a rapacity so great that we are still experiencing its aftershocks today.

North-east Wales had the greatest range of industries but it was the developments in the south-east that were to prove the most significant.

The ironworks here in Merthyr Tydfil - Cyfarthfa and Dowlais in particular - gave rise to Wales's first industrial town.

By 1830 Monmouthshire and east Glamorgan were producing half the iron exported by Britain.

The new steam engine technology ran on a steady supply of coal so it made economic sense to concentrate industry in coalfields where engines could be readily supplied.

And so the transformation of the South Wales coalfields took off.

There was massive and diverse immigration into those mining valleys.

Communities began springing up all over it, sometimes in incredibly harsh conditions.

Instead of people being scattered across a rural landscape, as they had been in their agricultural past, these new industries now forced them to work and live shoulder to shoulder.

The communities they developed clustered people together in ways that must have been incredibly volatile to begin with, filled as they were with feisty young men, come from all over Wales and beyond, looking to be part of this new industrial work force.

But as time went on, those communities, the mutuality and the solidarity that they would come to represent, would eventually form the basis for a new emerging core of Welsh identity.

One centred around a political, class based consciousness that developed in response to both the closeness of their communities and the harshness and insecurity of their working conditions.

For all the promise of a shared British identity and the many benefits that would lead to, the vast wealth that was being generated by the voracious extraction from the Welsh landscape was certainly not being equally shared out with the people tasked with doing the back-breaking work.

Aside from the large personal estates built up by the iron masters and other industrial titans, money was spent on creating an infrastructure within Wales but one that was solely based on getting the wealth out beyond the borders.

The networks of ports and railway lines that came into existence were in no way meant to serve the interests of Wales itself, only to suit the needs of the higher 'British' interests, with its expanding Empire, and the pockets of those who stood to make the most from it.

Even today, just try travelling between North and South Wales and you'll see how much energy has been put into making that as easy as possible.

Religion, too, would take its place at the coalface of this roiling Welsh transformation.

The Welsh Methodist Revival of the 18th century was one of the most significant religious and social movements in the history of Wales.

From the time of the middle ages the established church in Wales had been the Church of England.

But the fervor behind the spread of nonconformism in Wales meant that by the middle of the 19th century it had become a predominantly nonconformist country and by 1920, the disestablished Church in Wales was self-governing.

At one point in this religious shift a new Welsh chapel was being built every 8 days!

In 1850 they outnumbered churches by 5:2.

What had begun in small rural areas spread to the new industrial settlements of the south as the migrants brought their religious devotion with them.

In places such as here in Merthyr Tydfil, and Aberdare, Llanelli and Neath, Nonconformity went hand in hand with the rapid industrial growth.

Williams placed this obsessive fervour that the Welsh displayed in the taking up of Nonconformity within the context of the country's long history of repression and frustration.

He said it made its way "into a people and a culture which for other reasons, within the general subordination, had a great store of readiness and longing and potential energy, which came to give the movement quite specific passions and intensities."

It meant that a new Welsh middle class elite began to grow and dominate public life throughout Wales.

Deacons and ministers, shopkeepers and politicians.

In 19th century Wales, the promise of British respectability, with its dazzling empire, offered this new elite an elevated place in the world.

As Simon Brooks argues in his book 'Why Wales Never Was',

"The very social classes that in other countries formed the backbone of national movements...saw in Britishness the opportunity for personal advancement."

Brooks writes that, as Victorian Wales came to be among the most modern societies in the world,

"..although the middle class was small, it could have spread the gospel of nationalism, but it did not."

In this most turbulent of Welsh centuries, it was becoming increasingly understood that as the country was being reshaped around you, that transformation spoke a language and that language was not Welsh.

The infamous government report that came to be known as the 'Treachery of the Blue Books' made it very clear what Britain expects.

The public inquiry was carried out in 1846, by three English commissioners, to look into concerns about the state of Welsh education.

They visited and gathered evidence from every part of Wales.

However, they spoke no Welsh and based their report mainly on accounts provided by wealthy landowners and Anglican clergymen, not groups known for their warmth of feeling towards the Welsh language or indeed nonconformism.

Unsurprisingly, the official report of the following year was damning in its appraisal.

It concluded that the Welsh as a people were ignorant, lazy and immoral and that the prime causes for this were their continued use of the Welsh language and the noxious spread of Nonconformity.

Its message was clear - the world is changing, your country is changing, modernising.

There are fortunes to be made; power and influence to be accrued.

You don't want to be left behind. Do you?

Brooks argues, that had there been a well-organised nationalist movement at the time, to ensure that the Education Acts of 1870 and 1889 had given Welsh its proper place as the medium of education in Welsh schools, then, at that crucial moment of mass immigration at the end of the 19th century, the 'linguistic disintegration' of the coalfield need not have been inevitable.

As it was, the Blue Books report, despite anger and outrage from some, encouraged the Welsh middle class to embrace their Britishness and enjoy the fruits of British imperialism.

If the distinctiveness of their language was ebbing away they could rest assured that their religion and the nonconformist grip it had on their society was a sure source of Welsh 'otherness'.

As for the working class men who had left their rural Welsh speaking homes to become part of the new industrial boom, they were joining up with immigrants from all over the rest of the British Isles.

Together, they found themselves part of a community where both Welsh and English were spoken.

Over time, unlike the agriculture based Wales that they had originally travelled from, it wasn't language that gave these communities their sense of themselves - it was class.

Eventually, they would come to feel that, at times, they had more in common with the mining communities of North-East England than with the Welsh speaking farming ones of North Wales.

Violent Welsh uprisings, like the attempted Chartist revolution of 1839 with its armed march on Newport or the bloody and earthshaking rebellion here in Merthyr in 1831, weren't originating from a sense of national identity, at least not consciously.

They were part of a more class based sense of solidarity and a reaction to localised industrial conditions and outrages.

Three separate threads were now emerging within the Welsh identity.

One, predominantly rural, woven together around language and its connection to history, increasingly reckoning with the mounting pressures on its very survival.

Another, around the emerging politics of a working class, struggling with the exploitative forces of capitalism, and rooted in the industrial south.

And, one more, steeped in a liberal, middle class nonconformist embrace of Britishness and its pursuit of individualism.

These threads would only become more problematised and more entangled as time moved on into the twentieth century.

Through the great bonding of two world wars, and the terrible suffering in between.

The General Strike, and the great transformational programme of the post-War Atlee government with its universalist vision of welfare and healthcare for all.

With a Welshman at its very heart.

A highpoint, undoubtedly, for what a truly inclusive Britishness can offer.

And, also, the attack on Penyberth air base, the flooding of the Tryweryn valley for an English reservoir, and the first seat in the British parliament for Plaid Cymru.

Bomb threats and investitures.

The destruction of the mining industry and the attacks on organised labour.

Lagoons and racetracks and Seimon Glyn.

Devolution and Brexit.

We are today still trying to make sense of how those threads have evolved, and are mutating still, in the face of outside pressures.

In his 1975 essay on 'Welsh Culture', Williams wrote,

"It is easy to speak of a proud, independent people.

The rhetoric warms the heart.

But you can be proud without being independent; you often have to be.

In the older epochs of conquest, and in the modern epoch of industrial capitalism, there hasn't been that much choice.

The self-respect, the aspirations, were always real and always difficult.

But you don't live for centuries under the power of others and remain the same people.

It is this, always, that is so hard to admit, for it can be made to sound like a betrayal.

And so a genuine identity, a real tradition, a natural self-respect, can be made to stand on their own, as if nothing else had ever happened."

Can they?

Be made to stand on their own, as if nothing else had ever happened?

Well, perhaps they can, but not indefinitely.

Eventually, the past - what undeniably has happened - will break through.

It must.

Using whatever pathways it can find.

And if that has not been reckoned with, and prepared for, then it can come as a wave of fury and destruction.

Possibly, even self-destruction.

As Williams wrote,

"Unless in one way or another people can get effective positive control of their own places and their own lives, this complex industrial society will smash itself up, with increasing hatred and bitterness, not in spite of but because of the imposed and artificial unity which the existing system is now fighting to maintain."

The past is not past.

It is not, after all, 'another country'.

Whether we are aware of it or not, we walk its busy streets and tread its muddied pathways every day.

As the Welsh language has been pushed further to the margins, it's visibility protected but not the communities bound together by it's everyday realities, as the towns and villages that grew up around the coalfields and the ironworks have been beaten down and forgotten about, seemingly even by the political party born out of its struggles, as our squares and high streets are littered not only with cheap chicken and pizza shops but also thousands of empty chapels and darkened welfare halls, and as the dazzling promises that the offer of Britishness made seem to ring ever more hollow with each passing Welsh budget day, we are left with the realisation that the world did indeed reshape itself and we were, after all, left behind.

No matter what deals we thought we made.

The Pied Piper of Britishness danced us all down to the river and then left us there.



And as we wake up to the reality of where we are and the incredibly dangerous position we find ourselves in we open our mouths, to warn each other, to shout it to the world, and find we have no voice.

Because we never got to build one.

There is a reason we have a dragon on our flag.

Dragons soar aloft on the magic and mystery of the past.

They terrify with their ferocious power and the savagery of their fiery wrath.

But, most importantly - they only exist in our minds.

And in our hearts.

Never in the real world.

Was it Europe that tore up the Laws of Hywel Dda?

Or controlled us with a Ring of Steel?

Was it Europe that made Owain Glyndwr a fugitive?

Imprisoned his family and crushed his vision for a Welsh future?

Who was it that stole our relics? And smashed our altars?

Did Europe tell us who to worship and what language we were allowed to do it in?

Who set the wages in the iron works?

Who opened fire at the Westgate Hotel?

Who set the tolls that forced Rebecca?

Who sent their troops to Merthyr?

Or to smash the NUM?

Who drowned Capel Celyn?

Was it Europe?

No.

We know who it was.

But if we want to stay British we have to forget.

Or act like it doesn't matter.

So don't teach it in schools.

Don't talk about it in public.

Don't connect.

Pull down the newspapers.

Keep the television quiet.

Hollow out the language.

Make us a theme park.

Make us a folk museum.

Make us a gift shop.

Accomodate. Accomodate. Accomodate.

"As if nothing else had ever happened."

Before trying to answer the question of why Wales, unlike Scotland or Northern Ireland, would vote almost identically to England, lets go back to the one Raymond Williams asked in 1971.

Who speaks for Wales?

Because they are, essentially, both questions about the same thing.

Where is the Welsh voice and how does it make itself heard?

Well, there is no single Welsh voice, of course.

There are as many voices as there are people, as there are communities, as there are histories.

But, if a voice speaks and there's no-one there to hear it - does it make a noise?

In March of this year, as Theresa May prepared to trigger Article 50, Welsh First minister, Carwyn Jones, warned,

"If they are not careful, people's sense of disengagement with Brussels will simply attach itself to London.

They are giving the impression sometimes that they do not listen.

And what kind of message is that to the people of Wales?

People in Wales are going to start saying 'well, the government is listening to the Scots; we need to be like them.'

I assume the First Minister wasn't referring to the launch of a new Welsh Time Machine program there and that it was more a coy threat about the Welsh people taking a greater interest in the subject of Independence.

That appears to be as strong as it gets from Welsh Labour.

Because of course, any further down that road and they're straying onto opposition territory.

And, as we all know, the Welsh people, divided as they are by their own language, with many still scared to death by the idea of 'cottage burners' taking over, don't yet seem to regard Plaid Cymru or indeed the idea of Independence for Wales as something they're prepared to get on board with in any great numbers.

And, for Plaid itself, the tightrope they have chosen to walk seems to be between pursuing the respectable path of a civic nationalism that all too often isn't delivering and a full-throated cry for a cultural nationalism that just seems to offer its opponents a stick to beat them with.

As far as feeling not listened to and people's sense of disengagement with Brussels simply attaching itself to London, I would suggest the First Minister looked a little closer to home.

Bringing government closer to the people was never meant to stop at Castle Cardiff.

Communities beyond Cardiff have to be able to feel that they too have a stake in the Welsh state.

There has to be greater engagement with local communities.

When it comes to the question of public engagement in the democratic process, don't just keep asking how you can get people to join you or how you can get people interested in what you're doing.

You're asking the wrong question.

Ask how YOU can get interested in what THEY are doing.

How can you join THEM?

I've heard so many people since the Brexit referendum, people in all kinds of positions of authority and responsible for delivering all kinds of services, talking about how its really important they all listen now.

"We must listen to people."

"We have to listen more to the communities we represent."

"We haven't been listening enough."

As if listening is something you can suddenly do with the flick of a switch.

You have to learn how to listen.

It's not just a question of standing there with a clipboard and asking questions with the right look on your face.

You have to show up.

And stay around.

You have to let go of your assumptions and your biases and your agendas and your prejudices.

It's really hard.

Speak to the people who are on the frontline of working in communities.

The ones doing the really tough work of giving support where its desperately needed.

Where their resources are getting smaller all the time but the need for what they're doing is getting greater every day.

Ask them about listening.

Because they're really good at it.

But they're also the ones who'll say that they're not being listened to.

The body of this country is made up of passionate, brave, creative, innovative, resourceful, selfless people.

In our church halls, and in our universities. In our hospitals and in our charity shops. In our women's institutes and our labour clubs and our voluntary organisations and our small businesses and our emergency services and our youth clubs and our rugby clubs and our school staff rooms.

That is who makes up the body of this country and they're being forced to wear the clothes of mediocrity.

Speak to them.

Learn how to listen to what they tell you.

And then develop your policies.

And when you've developed them have the courage to see them through.

Or if you ask for a report to be done and recommendations to be made then act on those recommendations or people will feel you're just wasting their time.

As Kevin Morgan said, "To assume a new power is one thing but to have the capacity, the competence, the confidence to deploy it effectively is something completely different."

Having ground-breaking, progressive policies like the Future Generations Act or the Social Value Act is one thing but it means nothing if you're not prepared to drive them through and deliver them on the ground.

You have to be stronger with local government.

The number of times I've heard community groups saying that they had a much loved local amenity threatened with closure because of budget cuts and then when they tried to take over the running of it themselves it was their very own local council who became the biggest obstacle to them.

And the councils themselves are in an impossible position.

Neath Port Talbot council have cut their budget by more than 77m pounds since 2010.

They're faced with having to cut another 10.2m for the next financial year.

More services cut, more opportunities reduced, more pressure put on overstretched people.

You start to see why perhaps there's not a great deal of incentive for government to listen to people.

Because increasingly they know what they're going to say.

And when government responds with the inevitable excuse of Westminster ultimately being to blame then the conversation has to end.

Because there's only two places Welsh Labour can go from there.

Either they have to admit they are too incompetent with what budgets they are given by their Westminster purse-holders and too weak to get anymore out of them or the whole relationship is systemically flawed and needs to be totally rethought.

And neither of those responses is an option for Welsh Labour so we just don't have the conversation.

There is a calcification at the heart of the machine here in Wales, it is jamming up the gears and it's stopping us from moving forward.

We are stuck.

Our economy is going nowhere fast, and we just seem to tinker round the edges; unemployment levels are down but in-work poverty is soaring; low skilled and low waged jobs are all that seems available for many; and ideas that could be used to generate local wealth building like the use of public procurement and co-operation between anchor institutions goes undeveloped.

Our civic institutions are in danger of becoming as restrictive and constraining as the 'ring of steel' ever was.

One centralised stranglehold in London just looks like it's being replaced with another one in Cardiff and politics has been reduced to management and admin rather than anything to do with bold vision and brave leadership.

Our government and its opposition have no-go areas in what they're prepared to talk about because of protecting their own political space and the fear of either scaring people off or not being seen as different enough.

We have a distinctively Welsh, English-speaking working class that grew up around industries that have long since disappeared.

Their loyalty to the Labour party, that they themselves were instrumental in creating, has become more and more strained as the party itself struggles to stay relevant to its grassroots communities.

As Peter Mandelson is supposed to have remarked, "The people of South Wales will always vote Labour because they have nowhere else to go."

In most regions of South Wales at least, whoever you vote for in Wales, Labour win.

On the UK level, the electoral maths of the British system means whoever you vote for in Wales ultimately it can't really impact the UK elections.

That so many people across Wales felt that an English nationalist party like UKIP were able to articulate their own sense of frustration and resentment says much about where we find ourselves today.

Walk down any high street in Wales and barely anyone could tell you what areas have been devolved to us, let alone what's going on at the Assembly from day to day.

Within government you have an opaque civil service divided up and isolated in their own silos with no incentive for joined up thinking.

In the public sector, budgets continue to be cut, services to be diminished, morale to nose-dive with no end to austerity in sight and the ramifications of Brexit still to unfold.

And a voluntary sector increasingly being asked to pick up the slack, whilst at the same time having to fight each other for the same small and ever-dwindling pots of money available, totally disincentivising any sort of co-operation or solidarity amongst themselves.

It turns out that there are indeed large sums of money available for Welsh projects and enterprise but the publicly funded national grant funding organisations that have a responsibility to share that money out across the whole of the United Kingdom can find it difficult to get across the Severn Bridge a lot of the time.

And, perhaps most significantly, underpinning it all is an almost total inability for us as a nation to be able to talk about all this with each other.

As Simon Brooks noted, "The parameters of discourse limit the possibilities of what can and cannot be said."

The parameters of our discourse in Wales are limited from both without and within.

From without because media policy in Wales is a reserved matter under the direct control of a disinterested UK government, and from within by both an avoidance of certain conversations for political reasons and the fact that the platforms for where those conversations can take place are so woefully absent.

A few bits and bobs of news and analysis here and there tacked onto the end of what gets sent to us from England.

An extremely rare one on one interview of any depth with a Welsh politician.

Vaughan Roderick on a Sunday morning.

The Institute for Welsh Affairs podcasting their conferences and lectures.

Occasional bits of investigative journalism, current affairs or advocacy on the big public broadcasters.

The Wales that gets reflected back to us from our broadcasters through drama, entertainment, documentary or reporting in no way represents who we are or the plurality of our experience or the range of our interests and concerns.

And have you tried looking for books about Wales?

Wales Online cites healthy numbers in terms of clicks but, as Emma Meese, Media & Training Development Manager at Cardiff University, pointed out recently, if you look beyond that and instead at the actual amount of time those people are engaging with the stories it seems little more than a peremptory glance at the headlines and that's it.

This is not to denigrate the work that is being done by individuals within the existing framework, many of whom are here today, and I include myself in that, but just to say that the opportunities for that work to get done and be amplified and engaged with by the entire country are so meagre.

It's how we get to connect with each other, show who we are, where we've been, explore who we might be, challenge and change each other, discuss, argue, provoke.

It's how we show the rest of the world who we are and who we can be.

Without it we recede into darkness and isolation.

We are all too easily drowned out and engulfed.

When the big broadcasters do get involved with more in depth and extended pieces of reporting around issues like homelessness, as ITV Cymru Wales did recently, it can have a real impact.

The 6 part BBC Wales series 'The Story of Wales' gave me the education I wish I could have got in school.

Series like 'Hinterland', 'Bang' and 'Stella' do a lot of heavy lifting.

And its been heartening to watch new exciting projects emerge like Nation.Cymru and the always inspirational Desolation Radio podcast but these are rare oases in a desert of stunted discourse.

Lee Waters and Angela Graham, in their introduction to the IWA Wales Media Audit in 2015, said -

"It is essential ...that the UK government recognise the particular media needs of Wales and that the Welsh government, too, should act to the full extent of its capacity in this area."

An improvement on the current media provision in Wales, "...is a democratic, social and cultural necessity."

Exactly how much incentive there is for our government to support the strengthening of a sector that would of course result in them being put under far more pressure and made more accountable is up for question though.

Perhaps most dangerous of all is whats happened to our local journalism.

Until recently, when it finally shut down, Dr. Rachel Howells was a founder director and editor of the Port Talbot Magnet newspaper.

Last year, she submitted a report to the Assembly committee 'Inquiry into News Journalism in Wales', which summarised her 5 year PhD research into local news and democracy in Port Talbot and Wales.

In it she revealed that at a local level, staff numbers in newsrooms across Wales have dropped by 60-90% in the last decade.

For example, as I mentioned earlier, in 1970, Port Talbot had 5 newspapers employing 11 reporters all permanently based within the town itself.

Today, there are none.

The South Wales Evening Post employs one reporter, based 10 miles away in Swansea, to cover the whole Neath Port Talbot patch.

All across Wales, offices are closing and the few reporters that remain are being asked to do more.

Cover larger areas, fill more pages, provide breaking news online and respond to social media.

Time was, the offices provided an important and regular point of contact between journalists and the communities they served, and reporters could leave the office regularly to uncover, investigate or report on nearby stories.

That time has gone.

Now, there is a much greater reliance on press officers and press releases triggering stories instead of reporters actually being at public meetings or conducting interviews.

The localness of stories is diminished.

Fewer local voices are heard from and more likely to be high status when they are.

So the views and agenda of institutions and authority are being given undue weight while local campaigners and residents are getting sidelined.

Scrutiny of those in power is being left to local residents, who find it difficult to get answers from opaque and difficult institutions.

If they do manage to find anything out, then they face the challenge of how to get it to a larger audience.

Dr Howells's data suggested that a significant number of people, in the absence of a local news source, are finding out about important issues by stumbling across them in physical spaces - planning application signs, protest notices, campaign stalls, barriers on thoroughfares and even graffiti!

With news going unreported and activists unable to gain the ear of journalists, the lack of information is leaving residents feeling powerless to act or to have their voices heard.

Rumour and speculation is rife.

People become angry and disengaged.

"What's the point? Nobody ever listens to us anyway."

She found that the lack of those three vital things- information, representation and scrutiny - clearly did have a large impact on democratic engagement.

There is evidence to suggest that without them being in place voter turnout figures, both for local and national elections, can drop as a result.

Significantly, though, the key marker for that in Neath Port Talbot may not have been when the newspaper itself closed down, but years earlier, in 2000, at the moment when reporters were no longer based within the town itself.

This was when the sources became less local, when stories became more reliant on PR, when real engagement with the community being reported on began to fall away.

Her report ended with a stark warning -

"There is likely to be a large network of news black holes caused by the withdrawal of local journalism and masked by the continuation of local newspapers that resemble 'zombie newspapers' with scaled back staff numbers and a much smaller amount of locally relevant content."

This is truly frightening.

A Welsh population, at a local level, with little access to information about their communities; their views and concerns not being adequately represented to those who have authority over them; and knowing that those authorities are barely being scrutinised or held to account.



Yet, with the true extent of the damage largely going unnoticed because these hollowed out 'zombie newspapers' make it look, from the outside, like there's something meaningful still in place.

Nature abhors a vacuum.

Empty spaces will always get filled.

In the absence of our own journalistic infrastructure, the majority of our news and opinion comes from the 'British' media, filled of course with 'British' concerns.

But England has always been the dominant component of the British Isles in terms of size, population and power.

It was inevitable that, over time, that which was important to England would become what defined British sensibilities.

With the decline of it's empire and particularly since 1973, when the UK joined the EEC, the very concept of Britishness has been under threat.

Or, as Raymond Williams said, with them becoming increasingly economically and politically penetrated themselves -

"Many of the things that happened, over centuries, to the Welsh are now happening, in decades, to the English."

The consequent confusion and struggle for identity, that we in Wales have been wrestling with on and off for the last 1500 years, has now become part of the English experience.

And that experience, with all its attendant emotional crisis, has been amplified through the 'British' media and then on into a country where, as we've seen, discussion of Welsh identity and its connection with a history of repression and thwarted nationhood has been greatly restricted.

The frustration and the anger and the resentment articulated within that English experience, by the likes of UKIP and others, seemed to connect with a deep reservoir of those same feelings within many here in Wales.

Feelings that have been there in people, laying dormant perhaps, for a very, very long time but unable, when the moment came, to find expression within their own national framework, whether historically, culturally or politically.

I'm not saying that the reasons people had in Wales for voting to leave the EU are not totally valid reasons in their own right and I'm not commenting on the rights and wrongs of voting in that way.

Concerns about wages being driven down by European workers in areas where low skilled and low waged jobs are already scarce can't be simply dismissed as racist.

People feeling anger at the status quo being something that seems to actively work against them and their interests is not anything to be trivialised or ignored.

And whilst there can be darker currents within it, a desire for a more level-headed and rational approach to immigration, both its benefits as well as its drawbacks, is clearly needed.

But when a lot of the reasoning revolves around issues like 'control' and 'identity', as we've seen, issues that have long been central to Welsh experience, it's hard not to think there may be some displaced motivation at work.

Especially when those issues are being framed within a specifically English context and delivered by a predominantly English media.

Unavoidable, and very important to understand, if and when outcomes don't match expectations.

Earlier this year, Ellie Mae O'Hagan wrote in the Guardian -

"The myth that the Welsh electorate which consumes basically the same media as the English, would somehow hold on to an inherent progressivism in the face of industrial decline was always absurd."

I would add that it was also in the face of being disconnected from its own history, and denied opportunity to explore its own modern identity in the context of that history.

The dragon had no voice so it spoke through the mouth of St George.

And we know how he felt about dragons.

As Simon Brooks wrote, "The practical outcome of not promoting a Welsh identity is to entrench a British one."

And for Britain - see England.

And here I want to be clear, when I say England, I mean the English state.

Williams began his 1983 essay 'Wales and England', like this -

"It can be said that the Welsh people have been oppressed by the English state for some seven centuries.

Yet it can then also be said that the English people have been oppressed by the English state for even longer.

In any such general statements all the real complications of history are temporarily overridden."

One of the complications for me is that, most of the time, I love being British.

Parts of it anyway.

I think the majority of Welsh people probably do.

I just wish it loved us a bit more.

It's just not a level playing field.

Never has been.

The English really do need their own devolution.

It is entirely possible that without it, especially if Scotland were to leave the UK, the English would start to see the UK as they did the EU and start asking why they should be subsidising the under-performing Welsh (and Northern Irish)?

We could be forced into a form of independence created to suit the English rather than one instigated by, and designed to meet the needs of, ourselves.

The other aspect of all this that worries me is that when government is desperate to improve the economy and journalism is unable to give the powerful the scrutiny necessary, including powerful corporations and industry, then communities, often the poorer communities, can be left extremely vulnerable.

Ask the people of the Lower Sirhowy Valley who are fighting against the Hazrem Environmental waste recycling plant planned for their area.

An area with an industrial past that has left its community with higher than average respiratory problems and already appears in the lowest 6% of the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation.

They worry about what the increased levels of nitrogen dioxide and the poor air quality will do to them and their children.

The people of Neath Port Talbot worry about what effects the proposed super prison will have in their area planned, as it is, to be so close to their schools and communities.

Ordered by Westminster, with, as yet, no consultation with the community it will affect, and scant evidence that Wales needs it at all.

No-one can say with certainty how many people may be affected by the proposed dumping of hundreds of thousands of tonnes of radioactive mud into the sea off Cardiff's coast.

In preparation for the brand new Hinckley Point C power station, EDF Energy is planning on dredging mud from the now abandoned sites at Hinckley Point A and B and dumping it off the bay.

Even though the Welsh government have already approved the plan, people like marine pollution researcher, Tim Deere-Jones, have huge concerns that the waste has not been sufficiently tested and the levels of radioactivity could be much higher than is being currently stated.

Multiple studies show that waste dumped into water like this can transfer to the land via coastal flooding and sea spray, so being sure about those radioactivity levels seems pretty important.

These stories get bits of coverage here and there but they rarely break through.

There just isn't the support for reporters to do the kind of long form, in-depth investigative reporting that I know they feel many of these stories deserve.

The pressures on them we've already discussed simply don't allow them the resources to do it.

Wanting to attract foreign investment and to welcome new industry, with all the jobs for Welsh people that can bring, is completely understandable, especially given everything I've talked about here today.

But we have to be vigilant that it is not at the expense of communities who have already dealt with so much and whose voices can all too often either not be heard or too easily be drowned out.

There's one story that we should keep in mind when thinking about how all these elements can come together.

It's a story that has been going on for fifty years.

The story of Brofiscin Quarry and a man named Douglas Gowan.

You won't find much written about this story, certainly not within Wales and certainly not given how long its been going on, who it involves and what its implications are.

Brofiscin Quarry is a disused limestone quarry not too far from here, in Groes-faen near Llantrisant.

And Douglas Gowan is now a 74 year old, disabled man with a lot of different and complicated health issues.

But in 1967, when he first visited Brofiscin Quarry, he was 24 and working for the National Farmer's Union.

He had been called out to investigate mysterious deaths and abortions among the livestock of farmers in the area around Brofiscin.

This led to him discovering that Brofiscin Quarry was being used as a toxic waste dump and that it had been going on for a couple of years already.

Multi-national corporation Monsanto had a plant in nearby Newport who had been stopped from routinely dumping chemical wastes into the River Severn and public waterways and sewers.

So, with the help of a local haulage company, they identified the site at Brofiscin, secured planning permission and, without capping or lining it against rainfall despite the quarry being permeable, they started dumping their toxic chemical wastes there, instead.

Wastes which included large amounts of polychlorinated biphenyls (or PCB's).

Little was publicly known about the adverse effects of PCB's at the time, and according to the most in-depth reporting on this story that I have managed to find, (which is in the British environmental journal 'The Ecologist') what was known had been discovered by Monsanto and kept secret.

The Ecologist writes, -

"Company papers subsequently released in America show that for more than 30 years Monsanto had sat on lab test results that showed PCB's were fatal to rats and other animals, causing exactly the symptoms and deaths that had been seen in the Brofiscin cattle."

Production of PCB's was eventually banned in America by 1979, and 7 years later the UK government followed suit.

But, according to The Ecologist', "They are not safe and they do not become safe over time; they are long-living and their effect on human and animal health is cumulative. As a consequence their impact might not be immediately felt."

The dumping of PCB's went on at Brofiscin Quarry until at least 1972.

Despite Douglas Gowan's investigation, his findings about the connections between the dumping and its effect on local livestock, his concerns for the local populations health, his warnings to the local council, the environment agencies, the government and Monsanto itself, nothing was done to even attempt to clean it up until 2005.

In the years between, Gowan has been ridiculed, threatened, beaten up, publicly discredited, he's had numerous attempted break-ins, he's been sued in court, denounced in Parliament and forced into a witness protection program.

"Documents have been mysteriously lost, witnesses silenced, scientific data ignored."

'The Ecologist' reports that the then Secretary of State for Wales, Peter Thomas MP, libelled him; scientific luminaries such as Sir Richard Doll, a pioneer in linking smoking to health problems, said PCB's were perfectly safe and Gowan didn't know what he was talking about, only later to be found

that he was actually receiving payment from Monsanto; the minister of state for the environment at the Welsh Assembly at the time, Carwyn Jones, chief executive of the Environment Agency, Baroness Barbara Young and Lord Rooker, the Defra minister responsible at the time, according to the same report, all said that the water at Brofiscin was safe and that dumping only took place in a very small and isolated section of the quarry.

All claims refuted to this day by Douglas Gowan.

According to the Guardian newspaper, by 2011 officials had concluded that dangerous toxins within the quarry “had the potential to pose a significant health risk to local residents”, and that Monsanto was indeed liable for the contamination and should pay the cost of cleaning it up.

Monsanto has never accepted liability and has only ever offered a contribution towards the clean-up costs.

In spite of hundreds of millions of dollars being paid out by Monsanto over court actions brought against them in the US for doing the same thing there, to the likes of the poor African-American communities of Anniston, Alabama, no such actions were ever taken by the Welsh or UK authorities.

In spite of pressure from Douglas Gowan and others.

A cap has since been placed on the quarry but Gowan, whose own body tissue has been found to contain high levels of PCB, still has grave concerns.

In an email I received from him recently, he said -

“Brofiscin Quarry is the site of the worst ever dumping of PCB’s in raw form, in used products or in contaminated waste.

It is generally accepted that over 80,000 tonnes of PCB will have been forced down into the aquifer below the porous limestone quarry.

The cap over the site has reduced the problem on the surface but only to cause all the waste to now be flushed down into the aquifer.

This aquifer is the reserve water supply for Cardiff and Birmingham.

The contaminants will adhere to minute solids and travel, and, inevitably, will one day become a health problem.”

So far, such concerns have been met with claims of any investigation being too expensive at a time of austerity, and with problems not likely to be seen for another 50 years it’s a problem for then not now.

And I’m fairly certain that not many of you, if indeed anyone, has heard or read about any of this.

In 1985 Williams wrote a review article entitled ‘Community’.

In it he wrote about two books, by different authors, each about a different aspect of Welsh history.

At one point he uses a phrase that has stayed with me ever since I first read it.

It has become a sort of touchstone for me.

It was only recently that I realised I’d actually misunderstood what Williams meant by it.

He wrote - "...the more profound community is the area of its discourse."

What he meant in the context of his article was that each writer's subject - the area of their discourse - was which of the communities that they each were writing about was the most profound.

But the reason why that phrase has stayed with me and become so meaningful for me is because, to me, it's saying that the place where we meet and share who we are, what we dream of, where we've been, what we suffer, how we find joy, it's that place that is the 'more profound community'.

The area of our discourse.

What can and cannot be said.

The scope we allow ourselves to have the conversation and how many of our people are able to have their voice be heard in it.

That's what makes us not just a community but the more profound community.

We don't have to agree but we do have to engage.

We must not let the parameters of our discourse become so limited that we cannot see where we really are.

Historian Martin Johnes reminds us that it is truly remarkable that a small country like Wales, with no real political identity or clear legal status to our nationhood has managed, in the face of being enveloped by a huge imperial power like Britain, somehow, to hold on to our sense of being different, with our own cultural identity in all its complexity, and our own language.

In spite of everything.

Remarkable.

Seen in this way it is a story of extraordinary resilience.

But, if we are to have any kind of a future then we must face the reality of our present and that means a reckoning with the legacy of our past.

Williams wrote, -

"What is it that has happened?"

It is nothing surprising. It is in general very well known.

To the extent that we are a people, we have been defeated, colonised, penetrated, incorporated.

Never finally, of course.

The living resilience, in many forms, has always been there.

But its forms are distinct.

They do not normally include, for example, the fighting hatred of the Irish.

There is a drawing back to some of our own resources.

There is a very skilful kind of accommodation, finding a few ways to be recognised as different, which we then actively cultivate, while not noticing, beyond them, the profound resignation.

These are some of the signs of a post-colonial culture, conscious all the time of its own strengths and potentials, longing only to be itself, to become its own world but with so much, too much, on its back to be able, consistently, to face its real future.”

Like I said at the beginning of this, I have spent most of my life outside of Wales.

So what right have I to stand here and speak about these things?

To talk about ‘we this’ and ‘we that’?

No right. No right at all.

I am just one of those many Welsh voices.

But I do have a voice.

And unlike many, my voice can be heard.

Many of us in this room today can have our voices heard.

And I have come to feel the responsibility of that.

And the opportunity of it.

When I walked into that McDonalds, all those years ago, newly arrived in a strange familiar land, little did I know or care that vast currents of history were swirling around me, unseen but pushing and pulling like the ocean against a small ragged piece of coastline.

An incident without importance or meaning to anyone but me and yet, at the same time, a moment repeating back over and over through the past and on and on into the future, experienced by multiple generations and continually shaping, with each response and reaction to it, the possibilities for our self-definition and shared identity.

I felt my difference and shifted, drew back as Williams said, skilfully accommodated, found my few ways to be different and cultivated them.

When the door was opened to that larger society, as it was in the age of Henry and his Acts of Union, I ran through it.

When the promise of British respectability and the fruits of individual opportunity were offered up to me, as they were to those in the 19th century, I took them.

Gladly.

And without a second thought.

But slowly, over time, through becoming more engaged, sometimes by design but more by accident, and always because of the example of others, I have come to feel differently.

I begin to understand now what Aneurin Bevan meant when he said, -

“The purpose of getting power is to be able to give it away.”

And when Raymond Williams wrote, -

“As so often in Welsh history, there is a special strength in the situation of having been driven down so far that there is at once everything and nothing to lose, and in which all that can be found and affirmed is each other.”

We must affirm each other.

That is where our future lies.

That is where we build from - each other.

Use what voice we have in the service of each other.

Whenever we can, join our voices together to help create a Wales that is our ‘own world’, as Williams described it.

A world that can argue, and challenge, and question, and explore.

A world that can encompass multiple histories, and diverse experience.

A world that does not avoid its past or ignore its divisions.

A world where our difference can become the source of our strength.

Confident enough to take control of our own energies and our own resources.

Connected to each other and taking responsibility for ourselves.

That is how we build our dragon.

Put real flesh on its bones.

And hope that, one day, it will fly.

Thank you.

**Raymond Williams Memorial Lecture organised by Learning and Work Institute, in partnership with The Open University in Wales delivered by Michael Sheen on 16<sup>th</sup> November 2017 at RedHouse in Merthyr, Wales.**

**Please note: written version may include slight variations to the live broadcast.**

