



**THE LEARNED SOCIETY OF WALES
CYMDEITHAS DDYSGEDIG CYMRU**

CELEBRATING SCHOLARSHIP AND SERVING THE NATION
DATHLU YSGOLHEICTOD A GWASANAETHU'R GENEDL

**Annual Address by The President
Sir John Cadogan CBE DSc FRSE FRSC PLSW FRS**

**delivered during
The Society's Annual General Meeting
25 May 2011**

We are celebrating today the first birthday of the Learned Society of Wales – so it is proper that we should examine what progress has been made.

But first I think we should remember our ambitions, set out a year ago.



*Sir John Cadogan delivering
the 2011 Presidential Address*

We said that the Learned Society should be a focus for Excellence in every one of the scholarly disciplines – and in the professions, not forgetting industry, commerce, the arts and public service – so that Wales should come to be seen – justifiably – as a small but clever country.

Excellence is the only axe we chose to grind.

We said that we see our Society not only as a radical initiator of beneficial outcomes but also as a force for inhibiting damaging decisions based only on belief rather than evidence.



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Our advice might be ignored but it would be there for all to see.

We should set and protect standards.

Our Fellowship should grow by election judged by peer review - with excellence being the overriding requirement. To be elected should become the target for our young scholars. We want the worth of our institution to be judged by the calibre and output of our Fellows rather than by architecture and bricks and mortar.

We said that we would institute a series of lectures and symposia under the banners of Frontiers and Anniversaries. World experts would speak here in Wales about the frontiers of research and scholarship and their ramifications.

How have we fared? Were we starry eyed? Did we bite off more than we could chew?

I think not, although I am surprised that we have managed so much with hardly any resources.

But you can now judge for yourselves because you have before you the Review of our activities during the first year of our existence – a report drafted by our excellent Chief Executive Dr Lynn Williams, who is working on a shoe string, though ably assisted by Dr Ben Curtis. Lynn was responsible, too, for preparing the case to the Charity Commissioners for recognition of the Society as a Charity, which happily has just been granted.



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Therefore, I am going to mention just two major achievements.

The first, without a doubt, is the election of the first group of 119 Fellows. This has been a tough but happy task for the Founding Fellows. They have been responsible for proposing candidates and preparing the detailed cases for consideration by the scrutiny teams led by our Vice Presidents, Professor Dianne Edwards and Professor Wynn Thomas. The Society owes much to their dedicated work behind the scenes. Behind all of our activities – literally pushing and connecting – has been our tireless General Secretary, Professor John Tucker.

The List of new Fellows is before you. I congratulate every one of them – many are here today.

I note in passing that two of our new Fellows were also elected last week as Fellows of the Royal Society – although we were in first, if only by a few days! Our congratulations therefore doubly go to Professors Alun Davies and John Parkes, both of Cardiff University.

But the list at large speaks for itself in the distinction of its members. Here we have excellent people from a remarkable range of disciplines – from Welsh history to particle physics, from economics to electronics. We already numbered among our Founding Fellows many distinguished people from outside Wales. Now this group has been enlarged (and there are more excellent candidates still to be elected).



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Thus, we are able to tap into a wider group of all talents. This is the first time in Wales that there is gathered together, under one canopy, such an extraordinary, multidisciplinary resource of knowledge, talent and achievement.



*Fellows during the Society's Annual General Meeting,
held in the Council Chamber of Cardiff University's Glamorgan Building, 25 May 2011*

Only now through the Learned Society of Wales have we a mechanism for recognising and accessing this hitherto scattered asset of excellence for the benefit of Wales.

Here is a ready-made think tank of impeccable ability and knowledge, and one independent of political inclination and pressures. This is a unique resource for Wales which should be used and not ignored.



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At the outset, we had ambitions in the field of communication of scholarship and research. In this respect I suggest that our programme has been a success – the details are before you in the Annual Review – so I will not elaborate beyond one case.

A week ago, the Learned Society held a Symposium in the splendid new Management Centre at the University of Wales Institute Cardiff. The topic was “What are Universities for?”, and we received helicopter views of the scene from distinguished speakers.

Sadly, the Minister for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills, Mr Leighton Andrews, was unable to attend the meeting but Mr John McCormick, Chair of the independent review of higher education governance in Wales, took the trouble to come to Cardiff to give his first public presentation on this vitally important subject and to answer questions. We are most grateful to him for this.

We welcomed the decision by the Minister to hold this independent review. We saw it as an opportunity to inform dialogue between the university community and its masters – a dialogue which is essential. Government by edict without argument – and by belief rather than evidence – should no longer be the way forward.

The genesis of this review was in Mr Andrews’ belief that the governance of the Welsh universities not only lacked competence but was based on unsuitable membership, or at least leadership, of governing bodies – too many *crachach* as he so eloquently put it.



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A further underlying belief emerged in the election manifesto of his political party, which flatly declared the Welsh universities to be unfit for purpose.

So we waited eagerly to learn what this review body had to say. First and most important was its remit, which defined what the review was allowed to cover. This properly pointed out that tax payers had to expect assurance that the use of public money is maximised to full effect – and we all know that there is always room for higher efficiency in using the tax payers' money – in the universities, and in Government too.

There was too a very important and welcome nod in the direction of promoting academic freedom.

Sadly, missing from the remit was any mention of the funding of the universities. It is noticeable that there was no publically-declared instruction that funding questions should be excluded, but the review body decided, in the absence of any reference to funding, that this vital issue should not be examined.

This meant that the review could bear only on organisational issues so that, in the view of the Learned Society, an opportunity for an independent examination of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (the well-established SWOT analysis) was lost, or maybe circumvented.



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In my view, an independent SWOT analysis is essential. It is evident that the Learned Society, through its widespread Fellowship, is well placed to meet that need and it will decide on this very soon.

Without such a basis, the future of Welsh universities will continue to be influenced by belief rather than evidence. In the event, the review admirably made one thing very clear – that there would continue to be an arms' length body, such as HEFCW now is, which would firmly stand between the universities and Government and thus keep at bay the institutional short termism and control-freakery that is endemic to all Governments and thus protect academic freedom.

This was not only its most important conclusion by far; it was a relief because it is known that there are those who would see HEFCW abolished and its functions transferred to the Civil Service.

The review also proposed an overarching board consisting of officials of the Welsh Assembly Government to oversee the formulation and delivery of a strategy for higher education. Hardly independent one might suggest and, in the absence of an independent SWOT analysis, this body will not be able to do its work.

Further, and very importantly, the Welsh Assembly Government is urged to initiate and assist in the establishment of an independent high level “think tank” for higher education in Wales.



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This the Learned Society endorses with enthusiasm and points out that independence should mean that the Welsh Assembly Government should take advice from The Learned Society on members from the academic community – the Society now being an unparalleled and cohesive resource, drawing on distinguished Fellows both in and outside Wales.

Juggling with the composition of university governing Councils and replacing HEFCW with another organisation is unlikely to make any difference to the parlous financial state brought about by more than a decade of serious underfunding since devolution. This will certainly be the view of the hard pressed scholars and researchers trying to do something, other than talk, at the coal face.

Indeed reorganisation (and Government is far from being an exception) always leads to lots of time-wasting activity rather than action – meetings, discussions, consultations, jostling for job security and diversion of attention from more important issues, with no one keeping their eyes on the ball. Reorganisations are the breath of life for bureaucrats. Rearranging the chairs comes to mind. But it takes people who have experience of the real, wealth creating, working world to know this.

The other item given much attention in the review is the University of Wales, now into its second century and a revered Welsh Institution. Its very existence is very strongly criticised. The strength of this attack raises questions about the reasons for this.



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The review remit refers at the outset to tax payers' value for money and this might be at first sight the genesis of the emphasis on the University of Wales. But this institution is almost totally independent of the tax payer, as acknowledged in the review, which, of course, gives it unparalleled independence from politicians. It makes one wonder.

We said a year ago that we would give advice to Government whether it was welcomed or not. We pointed out the major problems for the universities arising from persistent underfunding by Government. This deficit is now worse.

In our recently-published paper¹, we used HEFCW's figures to show that, in the last decade of abundant spending in other Welsh public sectors, the universities' funding was cut back continuously, leading to a cumulative gap between Wales and England of £360 million in money of the day, equating to some half a billion pounds in today's money. The gap between Wales and Scotland was more than £1 billion in money of the day. No wonder that Scotland has five universities in the THES list of the top 200 universities in the world, while Wales has none.

And the gap has since got even bigger.

1 Comments of the Council of the Learned Society of Wales on the Welsh Assembly Government's Support for the Universities in Wales, 1 March 2011
(<http://learnedsocietywales.ac.uk/node/62>)



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Every year, HEFCW, with permission from Government, publishes a paper entitled “The Funding Gap”. Despite this, Government is in denial. It has taken to describing the funding gap as “so-called” and, worse, during the recent electoral campaign, the First Minister went further and referred to the “alleged funding gap”. In the same vein, ministers have said that, because there are likely to be negative changes in England, the gap will be abolished – thus admitting that there is a gap, by the way. Through this specious and illogical argument, Government is expecting the electorate to forget the cumulative and damaging deficit of close to half a billion pounds in today’s money.

The only way to abolish a gap is to fill it.

The party of Government states that the universities are unfit for purpose. Let us leave aside the question of whether this is argument by assertion rather than evidence.

But if it believes this, then it should not go on ignoring the effects of its policy of underfunding and concentrate on remedying this overwhelming deficiency rather than be diverted, and diverting others, by dogmatic concerns about the side-show of reorganisation.

During the election the Learned Society wrote to the leaders of the four main parties, requesting that this issue of the funding gap in higher education be addressed specifically in their manifestos. None complied. It is ominously clear that the Learned Society is now the only overt opposition to this steady and deliberate erosion of the only knowledge base of the Nation.



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We do not have a strong enough private sector to provide the wealth we need. On every economic indicator Wales is falling further behind. Performance in our schools and universities also lags, in step with their declining budgets.

We must attract more industry, particularly high-tech business, as well as screwdriver industry. There is no doubt that a really outstanding science and engineering base is the only way to attract research-based companies anxious to get close to the action.

It is also a fact that shortage of finance hits hardest on high-tech university units. Witness that there is no longer a Chemistry department in Aberystwyth or Swansea. Without such strength, including in social and economic studies and the humanities, budding start up companies will be thin on the ground.

The universities are there to push back the frontiers of knowledge through research by outstanding researchers of international standing. These researchers also have the massive responsibility of training the young by passing on knowledge and expertise, particularly in science medicine and engineering, where they have to learn how to practise or “do” their discipline.



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The balance will vary from research-intensive universities to those less so. It is through consultancy and spin-off that universities are there to help industry and commerce. But always the universities are there to bring out the best in people – to produce people who can think the unthinkable, who will make discoveries that we don't even know are there to be discovered.

And the best universities will attract the best students as well as staff. Thanks to the extraordinary generosity of the Welsh Assembly Government in picking up the fees of all Welsh domiciled students, at the expense of direct funding of the universities, we must expect to lose many of our best young people to evidently better universities elsewhere, taking the money with them.

So what a pickle forecasting of budgets becomes when no one knows how many of our students will leave, how many will come in from outside Wales and how the cap on graduating rather than entering numbers will pan out.

The universities must stretch young minds and ensure that the young, almost without thinking, come to act on evidence and not opinion – to challenge opinion based on analysis of the facts, to seek evidence where none exists and, when faced with statements they can't accept, to attack the argument and not the person. How often do we hear people in the public eye dismiss a sound argument by saying "well, he would say that wouldn't he"?



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Despite the dismissive comments from Government, our universities have done surprisingly well, but this is by consuming their seed corn. We have excellent people but they are struggling compared with their better-supported competitors over the border. Let us hope we can keep them. There is very little which can be called internationally excellent in Wales beyond what the universities are struggling to do.

It is worth repeating that no politician, no civil service administrator and no board of directors has ever made a discovery. Discoveries are made in the library and in the laboratory, and very few of these exist outside the universities in Wales.

Compared with our competitors, the vital university sector in Wales now constitutes a deprived area with no sign of recovery. Universities can and should be the engines of growth – but they need fuel.