



THE LEARNED SOCIETY OF WALES
CYMDEITHAS DDYSGEDIG CYMRU

President's Address

Learned Society of Wales

20 May 2020

Croeso i Gyfarfod Cyffredinol Blynyddol Cymdeithas Ddysgedig Cymru, y ddegfed.

None of us could have expected that this meeting would take place in these dire circumstances. Can I begin by sending my best wishes to Fellows and their families for their good health and safety at this time.

This is my sixth and final address to the Fellowship. I am grateful to you for allowing me the privilege of presiding over our National Academy. It has been an immense honour and it has also been enjoyable. My school motto was "In every privilege there is a duty". To all of us as Fellows, the privilege of Fellowships is accompanied by the obligation to contribute, to put something back into the Learned Society and agree to serve the Nation. My particular thanks to the many with whom I have worked, to all those who have contributed this past year in so many ways, and to Martin Pollard and his team for their excellent service, now in trying conditions.

We have noted the list of those Fellows who have died this past year. It is always invidious to mention some individuals, but I hope colleagues will understand why I draw attention to the immeasurable contribution of my predecessor Professor Sir John Cadogan and of founding Fellows, Professor John Wyn Owen, Professor Keith Robbins, Professor Roger Owen and Professor John Houghton.

Looking back over the decade, your Society has achieved much. We have a Royal Charter, there are now over 560 Fellows, we have recognised talent, promoted research and scholarship, and our voice is heard and heeded. Our financial position is sound thanks to our supporters. But our financing needs still to be put on a more sustainable basis. That is work in progress including negotiations with the Funding Council on getting access to the so-called Diamond dividend. [We have launched a specific campaign to encourage donations in this, our tenth anniversary year, and I commend this to you.](#)

The Strategic aims of the Learned Society are to celebrate excellence, champion research, promote scholarship and act as an independent source of advice to governments and others. In implementing these objectives we hope to catalyse ambition by inspiring academics and younger learners. In all our work we seek to represent our values of excellence, diversity and independence.

There has been, as usual, much routine business. Activities have continued across Wales. We have arranged lectures, supported events, awarded medals, and offered informed opinion to government and legislatures. We are working constructively with other academies.

I would now like to highlight five particular areas of work during this past year.

Your Society made useful contributions to the development of the Welsh Government's International Strategy. An important element of this strategy is the way Wales influences developments outside Wales to the benefit of the nation. We therefore planned a series of [Wales and the World events](#). The first explored perspectives on Soft Power, a successful symposium held at Cardiff Metropolitan University. Joe Nye of Harvard, the father of the concept, kicked off the event with a video presentation. Eluned Morgan, the Minister for International Relations and the Welsh Language, set out her thinking and took questions. We identified Welsh capacities available to exert influence. The importance of influencing London successfully was a conspicuous conclusion. A subsequent session in the National Museum focused on the role of arts and culture. The many examples ranged from opera, to pop music, literature and theatre. We have outstanding musical institutions. Wales has made a significant and sustained contribution to popular music and has a growing capacity for film and television production. The universities in Wales have always been international so the role of higher education was an obvious candidate for consideration at the third event in the series, held in Bangor in February.

We had planned to bring this work together in Aberystwyth University in April. Our ambition was practical. What instruments are available, how, when, where should they be better deployed? What additional resources might be needed and how could loose coordination make the overall effort more effective. It is not enough to critique policy. We should make constructive proposals. Although postponed, the intention is to hold this wrap up session as soon as possible. It will be an important contribution to a post Covid, post Brexit Wales.

One of John Wyn Owen's last contributions to the Society was to brief me before I met the First Minister in December to press the merits of a One Health approach. John always argued persuasively the merits of exploiting the synergies of human, animal and plant health and setting health policy in a social, environmental and international context. How right he was! Our work continues. We will soon publish a pamphlet setting out the merits of a coordinated policy and later this year your Society will bring together the substantial expertise which exists in Wales. The challenges of the health service budget, social care, and social deprivation underline the crucial importance of this area. It is also a subject where Wales can be an exemplar.

[Wales Studies](#) is an important yet underappreciated field of study. As another of our Fellows, Professor Wyn Thomas, would argue "we better understand ourselves if we understand the context of Wales and

what it means to us". Much work and research takes place under the rubric of Wales Studies. It is national and international and covers a myriad of subjects. David Boucher has done much to bring practitioners and organisations together. In January we published our first national snapshot of Wales Studies research, and the profile of the work continues to be raised. It is also being recognised in the new school curriculum in the cross-curricular cynefin approach.

The Learned Society differs from other National Academies in the United Kingdom in our commitment to a bi-lingual approach. But bilingualism is so much more than conforming to regulations about the oral and written use of language. Bilingualism and particularly multilingualism is enriching to the individual and to Society. We had planned an ambitious symposium to explore the many facets of bilingualism; social, cultural, economic, educational and more. Our aim, as in much of our work, is to inform, stimulate, and produce practical beneficial conclusions. It will be a priority to reschedule this event, which has been so well planned by Mererid Hopwood, Claire Gorrara and Enlli Thomas.

I have spoken previously of the role of the Fellowship and the Society as a source of inspiration to encourage not only researchers and academics, but crucially to encourage younger learners. They face particular challenges and I would like to see more direct support for them and for their teachers. We contributed to the development of the new school curriculum. Work continues to identify how we can match what schools and learners would find helpful with what Fellows and the Society can provide. We are making progress on a new Welsh Young Scientist initiative. Covid has given us a constructive opportunity. Last week we launched a [Lockdown Learner Challenge](#), a competition for year 11 and year 13 learners to help motivate their learning at this time.

I want to turn now to three significant future challenges.

Universities have been facing turbulence these many years. Problems are now hugely exacerbated, first by Brexit and now by the consequences of the Coronavirus. Brexit means the end of European Union financial support for our universities. Structural Fund expenditure in support of universities has been very influential in Wales. As those funds really came on stream, we saw an improved research output. Today future government support for research, including QR, is problematic. We seem destined to be excluded from Horizon Europe and indeed Erasmus. What is to replace these programmes? We are pressing for at least a maintenance of current levels of expenditure. Crucially Wales must have a fair crack at access to available UK research funding. Similarly it is vital that Wales gets a need based share of the proposed UK Prosperity Fund which is due to replace EU support.

Covid has devastated the work of universities, as elsewhere. The traditional model is under huge threat, and we can expect the number of international students to dwindle with a consequent loss of their important financial contribution. UK students are naturally keeping options open. Some will defer entry until some normality returns. The most vulnerable universities will be those whose income is most dependent on fee

revenue. In all ways, the financial pressure on our universities will be acute. The Learned Society, operating as it does distinct from individual institutions, must give every support to the sector. Universities have a vital role in local communities, developing skills, in contributing to the economy, in their research output across the range of subjects including blue sky, and in attracting international interest and investment in Wales. The sector would do well to sharpen up its contribution if Welsh universities are to secure the necessary assistance, particularly from government, as they go through the crisis and as they emerge in to the new normal.

The strapline of your Society is “Celebrating Scholarship and Serving the Nation” and we have been offering expert advice in many areas. I am proud to say that this advice is more and more sought and appreciated. It is wide ranging and the need for it more and more apparent. Covid 19 demonstrates daily the need for advice informed by evidence-based research, from both scientists and social scientists. Of course, final judgements have to take in to account all relevant factors, but strategy should be underpinned by professional expertise. Politicians and experts are working together, but I hope that the former are not setting up the latter as fall guys for failure. Fellows have for example, been part of the advice to the Welsh Government on the handling of Brexit and on issues which may arise as the Coronavirus lockdown is eased. The Learned Society has a distinct contribution to make to life in Wales and to the opportunities and challenges facing Wales. We will do that more effectively, the more we mobilise the expertise of the Fellowship, our strongest asset. I hanker after practice in the Royal Society of Edinburgh where on key issues, they are able to draw together relevant experts, and the group then produces excellent dedicated reports. Our Fellowship is now sufficiently large to permit us to do more of this and build on arrangements that have worked in the past for devolution, education and health.

As I conclude this, my valedictory Presidential address, I want to thank you for the privilege of serving. I am especially grateful to all those with whom I have worked, to the Fellows, those who have served as Officers, on the Council and other Committees and who in so many ways contribute to the activities of the Society. Little of our work would have been possible without our excellent staff.

It is now my great pleasure to hand the baton to [Professor Hywel Thomas](#), who is a most distinguished academic and who is already a member of Council. My very best wishes to him and to the Society for continued and expanded success. I leave confident of the essential relevance of the Learned Society and of its sustainable basis, convinced of our strategic goals, and assured of the potential to deliver more for our nation.

Diolch yn fawr.