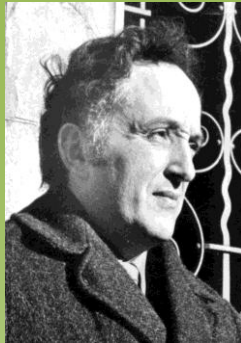


A Bee or Two in my Bonnet

**Notes of a
Nationalist and Socialist**

by

Emrys Roberts



Plaid Cymru History Society

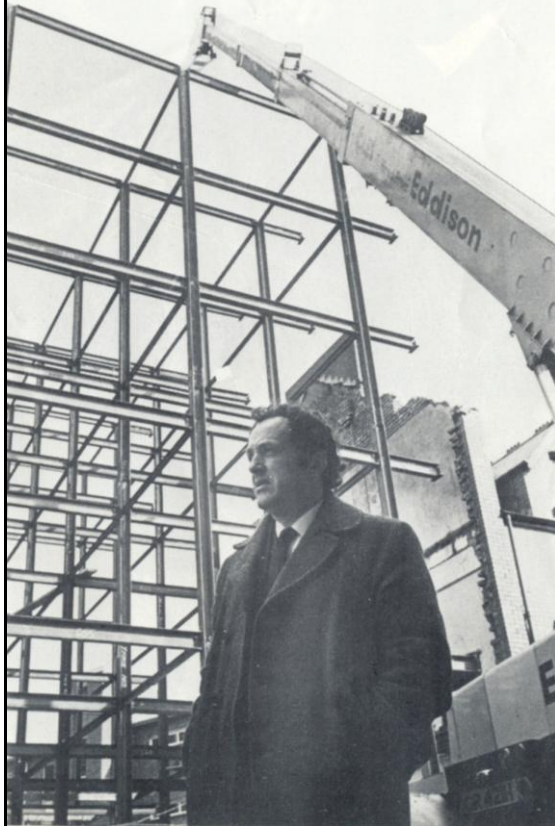
The Plaid Cymru History Society presents the full version of 'A Bee or Two in my Bonnet – Notes of a Nationalist and Socialist' by Emrys Roberts, former general secretary of Plaid Cymru who fought the Merthyr by-election in 1972.

'A Bee or Two in my Bonnet' has been published in English and Welsh by the Plaid Cymru History Society.

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Merthyr needs more jobs



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A Bee or Two in my Bonnet

Notes of a Nationalist and Socialist

Foreword

This is not an autobiography. I doubt whether that would be of much interest. I have been persuaded, however, that at some time in the future my grandchildren or other members of my family may wonder how and why I became involved in Plaid Cymru and in other socialist causes and why I took such an interest in the National Health Service. These notes are an attempt to answer some of those questions.

There are very few references to my family or other personal matters – not because personal relationships are not important to me but because I believe one's private life should remain private unless it materially affects the matter under discussion. I trust neither friends nor family will feel hurt if there is no reference to them in these pages. They are important to me in other aspects of my life than those that are dealt with here.

Early Years: Leamington Spa, 1931 – 1941

I was born in 1931 in Leamington Spa, Warwickshire in the centre of England – my mother was from Leamington but my father had arrived there from Blaenau Ffestiniog where he was born via London and Canada. He joined the Canadian army at the outset of the first World War, was badly injured, married my mother in 1916 and returned to the front to win a Military Cross in 1918 for leading an attack on a German gun emplacement.

After the war, my parents returned to Canada where my brother, Gwynfor, was born in 1920. They returned to Leamington in 1922 to take over my maternal grandparents' greengrocery store and it was there that my sister Megan and I were born, Megan in 1929 and I two years later.

My father was a passionate Welshman who could speak little English when he went to work in London at thirteen years of age. The only Welsh I remember, however, from those early years was “Nos Da” which we said to my father every evening. Megan and I visited our Nain in Blaenau Ffestiniog once or twice and stayed for some days on one occasion with my father's sister Modryb Bet and her husband Griffith John Williams in Gwaelod-y-Garth just outside Cardiff. Modryb refused to speak anything but Welsh to us, though we didn't understand a great deal.

One of my first memories is listening to the heartbeats of George V, broadcast on the wireless as he lay dying, but it did not create much interest in our family. I also remember, some 2 years later, a bomb exploding under the railway bridge between Leamington and Warwick – probably the work of the IRA. I recall asking my father why they did such a thing – my first interest in politics I suppose – but I don't recall his reply!

I also remember talk of the “Prime Minister” – possibly when Chamberlain returned from Germany with his piece of paper. I asked my father what was meant by the term. He told me that it meant he was the most important of the King’s ministers. To me, a minister was someone who preached in chapel on a Sunday and I failed to understand why the king needed more than one of them!

Following the first World War my father had become a pacifist. Several pacifists would meet for supper in our house from time to time, many of them from the Bruderhof – a group of people who renounced all personal possessions and shared everything equally amongst the members. A group of them lived on a farm not far from Leamington. Two whom I remember with particular affection are Harry and Edith Soan. Harry had been a minister in Coventry but resigned at the start of the 2nd World War as so many of his congregation disagreed with his pacifism. Some years later he moved to a small-holding in Cil-y-Cwm and became friends with Gwynfor Evans. Thousands across Britain came to recognise his mellow tones on his country diary broadcast regularly for several years on the radio.

I remember many interesting discussions – though I did not understand many of them, especially when they argued about the morality of contraception – which was not allowed in the Bruderhof. It must have been in those days, however, that I began to be interested in discussing political issues.

During the 2nd World War, we were all issued with a gas-mask, which we had to take with us wherever we went. I remember on one occasion skating on the ice in a low-lying field alongside the river Leam. The surface was so slippery I failed to stop and landed in the river, with my gas-mask over my shoulder and pulling me down. One of my friends succeeded in getting hold of a fallen branch and holding it out over the river for me to clamber to the bank. I never really

enjoyed swimming after that! I preferred more physical games like rugby and squash.

Leamington is not far from Coventry and I remember vividly the night the Luftwaffe bombed the city. They dropped a multitude of flares to help them locate their targets and even though it was the middle of the night, it seemed like mid-day, even in Leamington. We heard the following day about the destruction which had been wrought on Coventry. My memory is a little hazy, but I think it must have been that morning that we discovered a small trench about half an inch wide along the back of the house. The whole building had moved. And it was a fairly substantial building. Although by then it was in the middle of a row of shops in one of the main streets of Leamington, years before it had been a coaching inn which had been divided in two between us and the Butlins who lived next door. Sometimes, if we had been naughty, my father would send my sister and me up to the large attic. I quite liked going up there as it contained many bits of interesting paraphernalia, including an old-fashioned sit-up bath and a large bust of Shakespeare. Apparently the building had been the Shakespeare Inn in times past.

We shared a large yard behind which had a number of stables, now used as a store house where my friends and I used to play. Several of the windows in the property had been bricked up – giving rise to my first lesson about taxation as the windows had been blocked up to avoid the window tax which had been introduced over a hundred years previously.

Moving to Cardiff (early 1940s) and the Welsh Language

And then, we moved to Cardiff in 1941. One of my father's younger brothers, Dic, kept a newsagent shop in Crwys Rd, Cathays. One night in 1941, while his wife was visiting her parents in Lancashire, he fell down the stairs in his haste to go on duty as a fire warden during a bombing raid. He was found dead at the bottom of the stairs the following morning. My father sold the shop in Leamington and we moved to Cardiff so that he could look after the shop for his brother's widow. I never asked him why he did so, whether mainly out of concern for his sister-in-law or whether he felt that Cardiff would be safer than Leamington. Possibly his main motivation was to move back to Wales.

By that time, my brother Gwynfor was in the Air Force – and after the war he went back to his job in the English Midlands. He has never lived in Wales nor learned to speak Welsh but considers himself a proud Welshman.

Although brought up a Baptist, my father decided to join Minny St Welsh Congregational Chapel, not far from the shop, rather than go into the middle of the city to Tabernacle and that is where Megan and I went three times every Sunday. Mother joined the English Baptist Church in Woodville Rd. It was then that I started to learn Welsh and my father started speaking Welsh to us. I spent a year in Gladstone Primary School and then on to Cathays High School. There were three forms each year in Cathays, two teaching Spanish and only one teaching Welsh.

I joined the Welsh class of course where Elvet Thomas taught us Welsh. I did not think there was anything remarkable about Elvet's classes at the time – apart from the way he would tug the hair at the back of your neck if you displeased him in any way! But there must have been something special about him. When I started at Cathays, Maxwell Evans was Head Boy. He later became vicar of Dewi Sant

Welsh Anglican Church in the centre of Cardiff. Following him were a number of boys from non-Welsh speaking homes, who became very proficient in the language, including Pat Wainwright, Bobi Jones, Tedi Millward and Alwyn Prosser.

These last three attended the same Sunday School class as I did, under the leadership of Llew Walters, of whom I have very fond memories. We had lively discussions on all sorts of subjects and between Elvet at school and Llew at Sunday School we all became fluent in Welsh. I can remember not being able to speak or understand Welsh, but I cannot say that I had to make a great effort to learn the language in that environment. Since then, I must confess that I feel I have lost out considerably from not being brought up in a Welsh speaking community – having missed out on “y pethe”. Perhaps the fact that I followed a political rather than an academic path emphasised this feeling of loss (I still say I intend to learn how to write cynganedd properly – but when?).

My language skills improved considerably when we moved to live for a while with Modryb Bet at the end of 1943 when we moved from the shop and my father was looking for a new job – although even she, like my father and many other Welsh speakers from the north unfortunately, used many English words such as “bildio” and “stesiwn” rather than the Welsh “adeiladu” and “gorsaf”. I don’t recall GJ ever doing that – but then he was from Ceredigion. My Welsh is far from perfect – I still am not sure when to double the “n” or what a word’s gender is. But, as a result of Modryb Bet and Uncle GJ’s influence, I still go wild at the use of English idioms in Welsh which have become quite common.

This is difficult to explain. It concerns the use of “fel” (“as” in English) as meaning “in the condition of” whereas in Welsh it means “like”. So when people intend to say things such as “He was appointed as a teacher”, they are actually saying “He was appointed like a teacher”, which doesn’t mean the same thing at all. The use of the word

“cychwyn” to mean “start” in any context also annoyed my uncle. To him, “cychwyn” meant to start in motion. The word to start in the context of time is “dechrau” (to commence).

Another annoying linguistic error is to say that somewhere is “nid nepell” from somewhere else. This actually means “not not far”. It is true that the double negative is sometimes used in Welsh where it would not be used in English, but this is not one of those occasions. It is also common now for people to translate the English idiom rather than use the much more straight-forward Welsh one when saying something such as “He said he had been”. Unfortunately, many of the staff of the BBC and S4C use these ugly Welsh translations of English idioms when they should be setting a standard for good spoken Welsh.

Worse than all, perhaps, is that many documents are translated from English to Welsh almost word-for-word – and the result is often unintelligible nonsense. (One of the reasons why Welsh speakers are reluctant to use Welsh language forms!). When translating, the object should be to convey the meaning – where possible in good idiomatic Welsh – rather than just translate words. A good example of excellent translations are the sur-titles used by Welsh National Opera.

I once had a very unfortunate experience as a result of someone translating words rather than meaning. Another car had driven into mine at the corner of Flora St and Cathays Terrace in Cardiff. I had the right of way, but the other driver refused to recognise that and the matter went to court. I did not endear myself to the Stipendiary Magistrate when I insisted on using Welsh – and refusing to take the oath on the Bible. They had to send for an interpreter, who turned out to be Emrys Cleaver, a Welsh folk music specialist – who was, of course, fluent in Welsh but had little experience as a translator. The Magistrate’s attitude improved when every time I addressed him as “Your Honour” Emrys translated this as “Your Majesty”!

I smiled at that, of course, but worse was to follow. The other driver maintained that I had cut the corner. I said that that was impossible because there were bollards in the middle of the road and I had gone the correct side of the bollards. In translating, Emrys said that I had gone on the “right side of the bollards”. Now that, of course, is the wrong side of the bollards, so I had to intervene and do my own translating. I still lost the case!

Years later, Margaret and I had to go to court for refusing to pay Thatcher’s Poll Tax. The Magistrate went wild when he realised when our comments were translated that we had been making political speeches – but it was too late to stop us then!

Welsh History – and its importance

While learning Welsh I also began to learn a little about Welsh history - and came to realise that an almost complete lack of knowledge of our history is an even greater loss than loss of the language. Unfortunately, it is not only non-Welsh speakers who suffer that particular loss. I learned a little Welsh history in school and a little more in college, but it was not taught as the history of a people but as a fairly insignificant note in the margin of English history.

I came to appreciate that the nation and the language were formed by the interaction of the Romans and the Latin they spoke on the native Brythonic peoples and the Brythonic language – in much the same way as the English and their language were formed by the interaction of Norman French on the Anglo-Saxons a thousand years later.

It is generally believed that the Normans eventually conquered Wales too. We lost a considerable number of battles on the way, of course, but it was we who eventually triumphed when Harri Tudor took the English crown on Bosworth Field in 1485 – and gave the English the only effective royal dynasty they have ever had! Another general misconception is to praise the princes of Gwynedd, including Llywelyn Fawr and Llywelyn ein Llyw Olaf, for uniting the Welsh peoples and winning several battles against the Normans.

This may seem like heresy to some, but the truth is that the Welsh had been resisting the Normans quite effectively from valley to valley and community to community. The Normans won battles here and there but they never came near to subduing the Welsh people. What the princes of Gwynedd did was to unite the Welsh and thus create a stronger fighting force. But in truth they had no hope of defeating the much larger Norman forces. And the result? Once the Normans had defeated the princes of Gwynedd they had beaten the whole of Wales – much as they defeated the English virtually in one day by killing their King Harold.

But the struggle against the Normans continued after the death of the Llyw Olaf – especially of course under the leadership of Owain Glyndŵr. And only some 70 years after he disappeared, Harri Tudur raised his banner and the Welsh flocked to it. It can be seen quite clearly from reading the work of Welsh bards of the time that he was regarded as the Mab Darogan – “he who was to come” – to defeat the English once and for all. And that is what happened at Bosworth. Harri played up to this feeling by naming his eldest son Arthur. Unfortunately, it was not long before the Welsh realised that we had lost more than we had gained by the military defeat of the English. The economic growth of Germany and Japan in the twentieth century shows once again that it is not necessarily the military victors who gain the most.

Another complaint I have against the princes of Gwynedd is that they copied many of the attributes of Norman life. One of the reasons why Wales was not as unified as the Normans was our system of inheritance. Whereas under the Norman system when a man died all his estate went to his eldest son (and if he died without heirs to the king) under our system the estate was divided equally between male and female heirs (and if a man died without heirs his estate was divided amongst the community). Our laws, brought together by Hywel Dda in the tenth century, were amongst the best in Europe and far more civilised than those of the Normans.

The princes of Gwynedd, however, saw personal advantage in copying the Norman laws. At the same time, they tended to sponsor the religious orders favoured by the Normans rather than our indigenous Welsh orders. Whether they realised this or not, the process of the Anglicisation of Wales began under the House of Gwynedd. And that is why Owain Glyndŵr burned down some Norman monasteries – but spared the indigenous ones – a little over a century later, as well as advocating a Parliament and two universities for Wales.

Miraculously, to a considerable degree the difference in social attitudes of the Norman English and the Welsh have persisted to today. There are many exceptions, of course, but by-and-large we have been far readier to accept equality of men (and women) and to encourage co-operative methods of working. It is no coincidence, in my view, that Robert Owen was amongst the first to promote co-operative working, nor that Henry Richard was among the first to campaign for international peace and for the establishment of a fully representative international body to solve world problems.

It is no coincidence that Lloyd George introduced unemployment pay and old-age pensions or that Jim Griffiths established the social security system and Aneurin Bevan the National Health Service. This attitude of caring for one's fellow man, whether a Welshman or a foreigner, and whatever label you give it, is somehow natural or congenial amongst Welsh people. In realising this, I developed my political beliefs – i.e. a tolerant, co-operative based community socialism and internationalism based on respect both for other nations and one's own. To me, that is more or less a definition of democracy too, which should be far more than our present system which consists of voting every few years for the candidate or party we dislike least.

The whole world cannot be ruled from one single centre: various layers of government are necessary reflecting the nature of the issues under consideration. Far too often the world's big powers have divided the rest of the world by drawing meaningless straight lines on a map or according to some other whim – usually to promote their own interests. It is obvious to me that the different units wherever possible should be homogeneous or organic, such as local communities where local issues are concerned and nations at another level. That is the way to ensure that the largest proportion of every community is happy with their government, rather than have large units in which comparatively small majorities force their ideas on

substantial minority populations. One of the main measures of democracy in my view is the extent to which ordinary citizens can influence the decisions of their government. The country that comes closest to answering all these tests is Cuba, and that is why I have been a firm admirer of Fidel Castro since 1960 and am still an active member of Cymru-Cuba.

To me, Castro is the greatest figure of the twentieth century. Ghandi and Mandella, of course, also command huge respect for freeing their countries from tyranny. But Castro did even more. In the face of American might and all their efforts to kill him and overthrow the democratic government of Cuba, Castro has succeeded in building a civilised society that gives priority to health and education and gives more medical and other emergency aid to other peoples than any other country in the world. It will be a great privilege, when we win our rightful place in the world, for Cymru to be seated next to Cuba in the United Nations!

The main reason why I could not personally settle for domestic self-government and believe that Wales must have its own voice in world affairs is because our international ambitions are so different to those of the English. I cannot accept a situation where we would be bound by a foreign policy determined by an English majority.

Sunday School and religion

I began to formulate my views on religion when at school and Sunday School. I can't remember making any firm decision in either area. I am not a great philosophical thinker – what's needed is a good dose of common sense. Unfortunately, the paradox is that common sense is not very common in my experience! My own views developed naturally in the same way as I learned to speak Welsh naturally. The turning point as far as religion is concerned probably occurred when all of us in Llew Walters's Sunday School class were invited to become members of the church. All the others became members but I declined, explaining that I could not believe in a god that was concerned about the individual fate of each one of us. About this time, I decided I was an atheist. In spite of that, I continued to go to church and was even appointed as Sunday School secretary – on condition they understood that I was an atheist!

It is obvious that some force created the world, but I cannot believe that that force has any human attributes. Whilst religious people believe god created man in his own image, it seems obvious to me that in fact it has been men throughout the ages who have created gods for themselves in their image. At first, gods were an attempt to explain natural phenomena, such as the sun and moon, thunder and lightning, wind and rain. People feared these things and tried to please the gods to pacify them.

Later people began to give these gods human attributes – power, anger and love. We began to create gods in our own image. And, of course, man could always appeal to his god to be on his side in any dispute with others. And god always responded favourably to us – naturally enough as we, whoever we were, had created him in the first place.

I do not presume to know how the world came into existence or what keeps the show on the road as it were. I am certain, however, that

creating a myth about some human yet super-human god contributes nothing to our understanding. Instead it clouds our understanding and induces each group to proclaim that theirs is the only true god.

I am not an evangelical atheist. That is, I am quite happy for people to believe in a god if they wish – though they strike me as children who still believe in fairies or in Santa Claus – so long as they respect people who have a different religion. In theory most religions are tolerant, but in practice Christians and Muslims and Jews and Marxists are often very intolerant and breed wars and all sorts of other horrors. Perhaps the disappearance of religions would not solve all international problems, but it might make a significant contribution!



Dr William George presenting the torch to runners en route to the Parliament for Wales Rally in Cardiff in 1953.

Among the runners are
Chris Rees (left) and Emrys Roberts (right)

Politics – the 1945 General Election and resisting conscription

In the years following the 2nd World War Mahatma Ghandi was my hero and his assassination in 1948 inspired me to try my hand at poetry. My first political act, perhaps, was when I refused to take part in a play in Minny Street Chapel produced by Rachel Hywel Thomas who was beginning to make a name for herself and became a household name in Wales shortly afterwards. I do not recall precise details, but I remember feeling that the play condemned all Germans without differentiating between the Nazis and ordinary citizens.

My first recollection of party politics was the 1945 General Election when I supported the Labour Party – who won with an overwhelming majority of course. I remember one boy in our class at school saying he supported the Tories. I was amazed that anyone was prepared to admit such a terrible thing as I thought it would be something to be ashamed of. Since then, to my surprise, I have met a number of very decent people who have supported the Tory party, but I still despise their politics.

After all, the basis of capitalism is the belief that money is more important than people: that money should control people rather than people control money. There is plenty of room for debate how money and men's trade with each other should be managed. But I can see no argument in favour of capitalism which devalues human beings and turns them into industrial or marketing units.

I am not sure when I became aware of the existence of Plaid Cymru. In 1943 the shop in Crwys Rd had been sold and my father was looking for work. He hoped to work in a woollen mill in Drefach-Felindre with an old Czech character called Gustav Brdlic. He made enquiries about Megan and me attending Llandysul Grammar School. But he failed to find a home in the area and eventually obtained a job with Glamorgan County Council and we moved to a new home in

Monthermer Rd, just round the corner from the shop in Crwys Rd. in 1944.

In the meantime we went to live with Modryb Bet and Uncle GJ in Gwaelod-y-Garth just outside Cardiff. I had to move for a term from Cathays to Whitchurch High School, as Whitchurch was also outside the city boundaries in those days. By then, Megan and I could speak a certain amount of Welsh with Modryb. Perhaps it was then that I learned about Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru as it was called in those days.

The small southern group of nationalists – that joined with a similar northern group to form Plaid Genedlaethol Cymru at the 1925 Pwllheli National Eisteddfod – used to meet in Modryb's house in Penarth. The minutes of the first meeting of the southern group in January 1924, in Modryb's handwriting, are now in my possession. The others there were GJ of course and Saunders Lewis and Ambrose Bebb.

Over the years Modryb and GJ's house – Bryn Taf in Gwaelod-y-Garth – played a significant part in the development of other national institutions. It was there they discussed the formation of the first Welsh medium primary school in Cardiff (which was called Bryn Taf) and I remember discussions with Gwyn Daniel about the formation of a Welsh Teachers' union (UCAC) and about a National Folk Museum (St Fagan's) with its first Curator, Iorwerth Peate.

Naturally, therefore, I became a nationalist myself. When I left school in 1949, military conscription was still in force. Most of my friends and I were conscientious objectors. The others based their objections on pacifist grounds and were registered without trouble. Though also a pacifist, I decided to object as a nationalist on the basis that England had no right to force me to fight their wars for them (English forces were fighting in Korea at the time and I could not see any justification in interfering in the affairs of that country). In addition, the majority of

Welsh MPs had voted against peace-time conscription, so my stand was also an expression of the democratic will of our public representatives.

These arguments bore little weight with the tribunal in Cardiff. Indeed, they became quite annoyed when they asked me why, as I was a nationalist, I was working as a civil servant in the National Assistance Board (the forerunner of Social Security). In truth, I had had to wait over 2 years for a tribunal hearing and that was the only job I could find, but I replied that I was getting experience for the day when Wales would require its own civil service. They refused to register me! – though they did publicly admit that they felt I was sincere in my beliefs.

In law, if anyone had a truly conscientious objection, they were entitled to be registered. The tribunal had no legal powers to determine whether they liked my particular kind of objection or not. So we went to an Appeal Tribunal in London where I was represented by Hywel ap Robert, son of RJ the Minister of Minny Street and later a prominent barrister and Plaid parliamentary candidate in Ceredigion.

The panel heard quite a number of appeals the same day and at the end of the hearing issued their decision in every case but mine. We had to wait several weeks before hearing that the appeal had been turned down. It was obvious to me that the panel did not wish to make their own decision in my case and had consulted their political masters about what should be done. (Many years later I was the Welsh representative on the official Council on Tribunals whose job was to advise the government on the appropriate powers and operational methods of new tribunals and to monitor the work of existing tribunals of all kinds – from Employment Tribunals to Immigration Tribunals, Mental Health Tribunals, Social Security Tribunals etc. If the Council had been in existence at the time of my

Appeal in 1952 I am sure they would have had some probing questions to ask about the process adopted in my case!).

Prison: 1952

The result of all this was a sentence to three months' imprisonment over the summer of 1952. Some have called this a brave stand, but in fact it is what I and my family had expected – not only foreseen, but expected of me as well. It would have been a far braver stand not to have fulfilled those expectations!

There were some 8 or 10 of us being received into Cardiff prison on the same day. After undressing we had a shower (pretty cold if I recall correctly) and then had to stand in a row in the middle of the prison to be told some of the basic rules and regulations by one of the screws (sorry, warders). I was standing next to a lad who seemed rather hard of hearing and he asked me what the warder had said. The warder bawled at him to be quiet but he continued to turn to me for an explanation. Without warning, a whole horde of warders descended on him, from where I have no idea, hit him mercilessly and dragged him away. We never saw him again and I have no idea what happened to him.

At least in those days we had individual cells. The first Saturday, before I had got used to the drill, I wrongly locked myself in my cell after slopping out and washing (as we did every other morning), instead of going with the others for physical exercise in the yard. Just before lunch time, a warder opened my cell before the others came in from the yard. You'd better go and get your lunch straight away, he said, and while you're there, pinch a bit of fish for me! I thought you were here to help persuade people not to thieve, I said, not to urge them to steal, and I refused. Needless to say, I was never one of his favourites! Some, however, were quite reasonable. One even brought me regular news of what was happening in the National Eisteddfod.

I recognised some of the other prisoners who had been "customers" of the National Assistance Board. They came up to me full of

admiration, assuming I had cheated the Board out of a lot of money. I went down quickly in their opinion when I told them why I was inside!

The most memorable – and most ghastly – thing that happened while I was there was the last hanging to take place in Cardiff Gaol, a Somali convicted of murdering a shopkeeper in Bute Street. He was found guilty on the evidence of a man who was found guilty himself of a similar crime some years later. I also understand the police refused to take notice of the evidence of a lady who had seen the shopkeeper alive and well after the Somali had left the shop. They felt she could not be relied upon because she was having treatment for depression. Years later a friend of mine had a discussion with the officer who had led the police investigation. She told him that she felt there was considerable doubt as to whether they had got the right man.

Apparently he replied: Well, what difference does it make? He was a rascal who deserved to die anyway. Years afterwards, of course, it was officially acknowledged that they had got it wrong and he was given a posthumous pardon. If anything was needed to convince me that capital punishment could not be justified, this was it. It was a dreadful miscarriage of justice that could not be put right: it took his life and ruined that of his family.

On top of that was the terrible way in which they went about disposing of his body. There were men and women prisoners in Cardiff at that time, kept entirely separately, of course. The prison garden was divided in two by quite a large hedge. I had noticed earlier that part of the hedge appeared to be completely dead, but I did not know why. When the man was condemned to death he was put in a special cell, with much larger windows than the rest of us. There were three young Cardiff lads of Somali origin in the prison, some 18 or 19 years old, found guilty of Grievous Bodily Harm. They were given the task of digging up the withered part of the hedge, digging a large hole there and then fetching quicklime to pour into the hole to eat up the body of the condemned man. I and many of the other prisoners could

see him looking out of his window witnessing these horrific scenes. I have never felt such a cold shudder down my spine and I think everyone else there felt it too. A civilised society indeed!

College – and public speaking

I was sacked from my civil service job, of course, and found myself out of a job. I was lucky enough to be accepted at University College, Cardiff to study Welsh, English and History. I am not sure how seriously I took my studies. I decided the best way for me to promote things Welsh in the college was to become president of the Students' Union, so I joined all sorts of student societies as part of my campaign. The liveliest society in those days was the Debating Society. I had already won a schools debating competition in Cardiff, with the Western Mail comparing me to Winston Churchill (I am not sure what sort of compliment that was!). Anyway, I attended debates every Friday and spoke in most of them. The standard of debate was quite high – I was told years later that students at Exeter University used to hire a coach every Friday to come to listen to us! These debates were a very good preparation for public speaking. I am still friends with some of the other debaters, like Mair Rees (Garside soon afterwards) and Brian Watkins.

As a result of this grounding, I became a fairly proficient public speaker. In later years, as well as sharing the platform with most of the main Plaid Cymru spokesmen, I debated publicly with a number of prominent speakers, including Jim Callaghan, George Thomas, Michael Foot, Arthur Scargill, Clive Jenkins, Leo Abse, Leon Brittain, Jim Sellars and Margo MacDonald. These last four and I took part in a live televised debate from the Oxford Union at the time of the 1979 devolution referendum. Michael Foot and I also appeared some years before that on BBC radio's Any Questions (with the Tory Teddy Johnson and Antonia Fraser). Michael and I agreed on almost everything!

Some speeches remain in the memory, others not of course. I never wrote a speech nor read from notes – which apparently is why I was likened to Churchill. Later I was likened to Lloyd George and found that far more acceptable! Among the speeches I remember best was

one at the Plaid conference in Swansea's Patti Pavilion when we were discussing the forthcoming 1979 referendum. I had always felt that we could not win self-government in one fell swoop, but that we would need to win a victory here and another there along the way (much as we had fought the Normans in times past) and that it would seriously weaken the cause if we had a poor referendum result. The debate at conference was going against this point of view and we were in danger of losing the argument. Luckily, I managed to persuade conference to accept my point of view.

After the disappointing result, many Pleidwyr started arguing that we had made the wrong decision and blamed me for that. But they did not think that way at the time the decision was made. Indeed, at the same conference I was elected Vice President of the Party (I had not been anxious to put my name forward but was persuaded to do so by Gwynfor Evans. I tried to discuss with him what the duties of a Vice President were, but made no headway!). The weakness of that referendum was that the Labour Party as a whole did not campaign for its own policy and very few Plaid members made any real attempt to secure the highest vote possible. I still believe we made the correct decision in 1978. Our failure was in not following it up with an effective campaign.

Other speeches that still remain in the memory include one that I made at my adoption meeting in the Merthyr Tudful by-election of 1972 (when members of the audience were laughing one minute, cheering the next and weeping the one after that) and two that I made in the Students' Union in Cardiff. One was on the occasion of the Franco-British invasion of Suez in 1956. We won the argument condemning the invasion and afterwards the students, many from the Middle East, marched around Cardiff carrying flaming torches in their hands and me on their shoulders!

The other occasion was in 1962 after I had left college. I was invited to debate with Neil Kinnock whether English troops should be kept in

Northern Ireland. I was against and he in favour of their continued presence. (Incidentally I did not list Kinnock among the notable speakers with whom I have debated as I never considered him a good speaker – he made a lot of noise and spoke at length, but that is not the same as being effective!). The news that Kennedy had been shot came in the middle of the debate and we had a short break before returning to the debate, which was resoundingly successful for our side. That’s not how Kinnock remembers it, of course. He says he was debating Socialism and that he won the debate!

When I resigned my post to fight the Merthyr by-election, Gwilym Prys Davies – then Chairman of the Board and a man for whom I have always had the greatest respect – tried to persuade me to take leave but not to resign my post. Gwilym always insisted on the highest possible standards. I have never had higher praise than when Gwilym said to the Chief Medical Officer that a report I had prepared for him on his visit to North Wales to discuss hospital reconfiguration was an “excellent lawyer’s brief”.

One useful trick when speaking in public is to lead the audience to think that you are going to say something, but then say something completely different. I remember on one occasion in a Plaid conference we were discussing some rather foolish comments made about nationalism by Tony Benn. Several speakers had roundly condemned him so I decided to praise him for his attitude on a number of issues. I could see that Winnie Ewing of the SNP was beginning to look rather anxiously at me. Tony Benn’s heart is in the right place, I declared. Silence all round. It’s his head that I’m worried about! (I am not sure everyone got the bilingual pun!). Laughter, and Winnie and everyone else breathing freely once again.

Back to college: I was elected President of the Student’s Union for the year 1954/55. There were no such things as Sabbatical years in those days and I had to take on the leadership of the Union (including moving lock, stock and barrel to our new premises in Dumfries Place)

while doing my Honours degree in History the same year. I had hoped to do Honours Welsh the following year. Professor Chrimes joined the History Department that year and although he did not lecture to us regularly, he thought we should have the benefit of at least one or two lectures from him.

I remember one in particular on the English constitution. I sat there enthusiastically taking down notes and he was visibly pleased that he had such an attentive student. But then he came round and looked over my shoulder and saw that I had taken it all down in light satirical rhyme! I was not one of his favourites after that. Indeed after the final Honours examination he said to me, 'The trouble with you Roberts is that you try to understand history. All we want are the facts!' No, standards in the History Department – at least those with whom I came into contact, apart from Henry Lloyn – were not very high in those days. I was fortunate that passing exams had always come quite easily to me from school days onwards and I secured a 2A degree with not a great deal of effort.

My main headache as president of the Students' Union was how to respond to the visit by the Duke of Edinburgh. Rightly or wrongly I decided not to boycott the event but to welcome him as Vice-Chancellor of the University rather than as Duke and the Queen's consort. On going into the hall to address the students he got in quite a state because he could not see the Equerry who had his speech. I had to calm him down and find the speech for him. But once it was in his hands, he never looked at it.

The most memorable part of his speech on the value of education was the phrase: It's brains you want. This was greeted with hoots of laughter and raucous applause and he turned to me to ask why such a reaction to a commonplace statement. I explained to him afterwards that Brains is the Cardiff beer, and "It's Brains you want" was their slogan, plastered all over the city. I heard him refer to this incident some 30 years later on the radio when talking about his

legendary gaffes. The incident obviously made an impression on him as well as on the students, who were campaigning for a bar in the union.

I had to appear before the University Court to argue their case – unsuccessfully at the time. The Court was a very conservative and docile body. I became a member of it some years later when on the council in Merthyr Tudful. Following the presentation of the Annual Report on one occasion the Chair invited questions. He looked at me incredulously when I said I would like to ask one – apparently no one had ever dared do that before!

Plaid Cymru – campaigning in the Aberdare by-election, 1954

I cannot point to any significant success for the national cause flowing from my being president of the Student's Union. However, it drew me to the attention of the Plaid leadership. I was chosen as one of a small group of young men who ran from Machynlleth to Cardiff, transferring a flaming torch from one to the other throughout the journey. It was all part of the Parliament for Wales within Five Years campaign, with us running from the site of Glyndŵr's parliament in Machynlleth to Cardiff where we hoped the new parliament would be established. I have very fond memories of jogging at dusk down the shores of Cardigan Bay with the shadows rising and falling in rhythm with my running. I also had the privilege of carrying the torch into the large marquee in Sophia Gardens where a large crowd was waiting for us.

In 1954 I was chosen to represent the students at the World Festival of Youth & Students held in Warsaw. I found myself conducting a Welsh choir in the vast Palace of Culture and reading a peace poem I had written on Radio Moscow. I was asked for permission to translate the piece into Russian, but have no idea whether that ever happened. I also remember watching the ballet Swan Lake on a small island on a lake in one of the parks. There were real swans swimming between the dancers and the audience who were watching from the shores of the lake. While there, we also helped resurface some of the main squares in Warsaw with cobbles that had disappeared during the war.

That was also the year I made my first speech in support of Plaid – it was in Hirwaun, during Gwynfor Evans's by-election campaign in Aberdâr. Two years later I was chosen as Plaid candidate in a by-election in Newport. I returned from my honeymoon to fight the campaign and enjoyed it a great deal, learning among other things how to use a loudspeaker effectively. The reaction of a large proportion of the people of Newport was, Why are you standing here?

Newport is in England. I had fewer than 2,000 votes, but I think we sowed a few seeds. Very few people in Newport today would consider the city as part of England rather than Wales.

I was not given permission to do a second Honours course in college but I did secure permission to do research in the Welsh Department. The subject I chose was 'The influence of the National Eisteddfod and the Welsh Press on the growth of national consciousness in the latter half of the 19th century'. Before permission came through to commence my research I spent some months working for Guest, Keen & Nettlefolds in Cardiff docks. I was a Fitter's Mate and our job was to erect a large new steel chimney. It was in sections of about 10 feet long with a protruding lip around each end. All we had to do was bolt one section to the next, with about 12 holes around the circumference of each lip. All the two of us did throughout a full 12 hour shift was to bolt one section to the next – two of us to tighten one bolt per hour. The fitter was not allowed to carry his own tools – that was my job; and I was not allowed to tighten the bolt – that was his job. I soon realised that private industry is not always more efficient than the public sector!

It was in GKN that I had the worst scare of my life. On one occasion a small group of us was working in the mill that produced steel rods for use in concrete and during our tea break we went to sit on a pile of old railway sleepers. While we were there, one of the red-hot rods jumped off its rails at great speed and sped towards us. It went right through the sleepers on which we were sitting. A few inches higher and it would have gone clean through three of us. There was not a great deal of attention to Health & Safety in those days!

In 1957, some months after I had begun working on my research project, I had a long conversation with Gwynfor Evans. Capel Celyn and Cwm Tryweryn were then being threatened by Liverpool Corporation and Gwynfor persuaded me to give up my research work and join the staff of Plaid specifically to organise forms of direct action

against the take-over of the valley. That is when my relationship with Gwynfor really began.



Party Officers during a rally in Rhos in 1953:
Gwynfor Evans, Emrys Roberts, Glenwen Evans, Nans Jones
Elwyn Roberts and Glyn James

Gwynfor Evans, Ebbw Vale by-election 1960 and Plaid's pirate radio

What is there to say about Gwynfor? Hmm!

The first thing to say I suppose is that – although I joined the staff of Plaid in 1957, was General Secretary of the party from 1960-1964 and was Gwynfor's Vice-President from 1978 to 1980 and shared many public platforms with him – I never really knew the man. He had a number of friends with whom he met regularly at his home in Talar Wen, Llangadog (the Llangadog Court as some people came to call them) and no doubt some of them came to know him and get behind the public mask he wore. I was never a member of that group and found it extremely difficult to elicit any response from him to any suggestions I made about either policy or organisation. To me, he remained a two-dimensional figure.

As the campaign against the drowning of Tryweryn gathered momentum, we collected the names of members who were prepared to take part in direct action. One Summer School I overheard a member expressing doubts about this kind of action to Tudur Jones, the party Vice-President at the time. Don't worry, he replied, we're not intending to do anything: it's merely a device to keep the hot-heads quiet!

Eventually the Plaid Executive Committee asked a group of some 20 of us to consider the most effective forms of direct action and to bring our recommendations back to them for approval. We met in the White Lion in Dolgellau, but instead of getting down to discussing different forms of direct action Gwynfor immediately argued that any such action would be harmful to the party. I argued strongly against that point of view, but the only person who supported me was Pedr Lewis. Everyone else agreed with Gwynfor.

I was very disappointed, of course, but I had to accept the majority point of view and expected to have another chance to argue my case when the group reported back to the Executive Committee. But that chance never came. Gwynfor immediately reported to the press that Plaid had changed its policy, that it would no longer consider any form of direct action and would stick to constitutional methods.

To do that before the Executive Committee had had a chance to discuss the matter seemed to me non-democratic and unconstitutional. I thought seriously about resigning my position – after all, I had been appointed specifically to organise direct action. Several of us who had declared our willingness to take direct action began to plan to fast in protest on the steps of Liverpool City Hall, but we were eventually persuaded by Gwynfor not to do so. That now seems ironic, of course, as he later won his most famous victory by threatening to fast over the question of the Welsh television channel. I do recognise, however, that the two sets of circumstances were very different: we were a group of unknown young men and women in the 1960s whereas by the time Gwynfor took his stand he was a figure of national significance.

Plaid's inactivity over Tryweryn led to the formation of Cymdeithas yr Iaith. In my opinion, it was the Cymdeithas that gave Wales back a little self-respect and it was that which eventually turned the tide for us. Without Cymdeithas yr Iaith, Wales may well have soon become little more than an historical footnote. I believe Gwynfor was glad that the Cymdeithas was so active although he felt that, as a responsible politician, he could not admit that at the time.

It was also interesting to note that whereas the party establishment strongly condemned the direct action at Tryweryn taken by the lads from Gwent, Dave Pritchard and Dave Walters, when one of their own – Emyr Llew, who was related to some of the Executive Committee members – did something similar, they were full of praise for him!

Whatever, I said to Gwynfor that if we were to be a constitutional political party we would have to overhaul the party structure if we were to be effective. I do not recall all the details now but the three main areas of concern were the membership, the branches and the overall structure of the party. At that time, anyone who had ever paid just one year's membership fee or had donated as little as five shillings to the party was considered a member (Richard Burton fell into that category according to our records). We published membership figures which were a complete fantasy and I thought it better to be honest with others and ourselves and not to waste money chasing people who had not shown any interest in the party for years.

Our branch network was also a fantasy. The party had indeed established local branches and got them to elect branch officers, but if any local action needed to be organised or any statement made on local issues, the central officers of the party would usually ignore the branch officials and contact their own personal friends in the area. That, of course, only served to undermine the local branch and its officers and as a result the number of effective local branches was very small.

As far as responsibility for the party structure as a whole, I felt the party needed someone who would chair the Executive Committee and the Conference effectively and would be prepared to be quite tough on central staff and local branch officials if they were not doing their job properly – someone not afraid to be unpopular if necessary. I did not think the President should perform this role. In my view his role should be to act as the public face of the party, to inspire people to join the party and inspire party members to work effectively.

I was not happy either, though a member of CND myself, when Gwynfor asked me – as part of my duties as a member of Plaid staff – to establish a national structure for CND in Wales. I did manage to get a structure off the ground with John Dennithorne, a Quaker from Merthyr, as Chair and me as Secretary. We used to meet regularly in

the Friends' Meeting House in Charles St, Cardiff and organised a number of very successful public meetings, rallies and exhibitions.

At that time I represented CND Cymru at meetings in the home of Canon John Collins in London. I also spoke at the meeting in the Temple of Peace in Cardiff which established the Welsh Anti-Nuclear Alliance (with Julie Christie in the audience) and sometime afterwards at a meeting in London chaired by Arthur Scargill where we formed a British-wide Anti-Nuclear Alliance.

In 1960 I was chosen as the Plaid candidate in the Ebbw Vale by-election following the death of Aneurin Bevan. We had a lively, old-fashioned campaign. Everyone who was there recalls the debate between me and Michael Foot in the "Bullring" in Sirhowy. Michael was chosen to speak first, but my supporters were making such a noise that he could not be heard and I had to get up and appeal for silence for him to continue.

After the two of us had spoken, the chairman asked the person who had been leading the heckling against Michael – Ivor Davies, later a Plaid Cymru councillor in Merthyr – what he wanted to say. Ivor looked at him blankly and the chair invited him again to speak. Oh, said Ivor eventually, I only wanted to ask if we'd have an opportunity to ask questions. Yes, said the Chairman, now is your opportunity. What is your question? Ivor scratched his head for a few moments and eventually said, Well I don't have any questions myself! There was immediate uproar, the whole place became a bedlam – everyone was shouting, Harri Webb jumped on someone's shoulders, jabbed the air and tried to put everyone in his place and then someone started throwing chairs around. The meeting had to be closed then and there – but what a traditional, fiery election meeting!

Another feature of that election was the public recording of a programme for Radio Wales in the Workmen's Hall in Ebbw Vale immediately after one of the campaign meetings. At the time Plaid

was denied the right to party political broadcasts as the rule was that a party had to contest at least 50 seats before securing that right – yet there were less than 40 seats in Wales. We had therefore been transmitting pirate broadcasts with our own transmitters on the BBC Television channel after close-down – which was about 11pm in those days.

There were several transmitters in different parts of Wales – a transmitter was found near Aberystwyth in 2010 and some people have argued this shows that people in the area were in contact with Moscow: it's far more likely that it was one of the old Radio Wales transmitters. I was involved with the transmitter in south east Wales – the most active by far. I usually scripted and recorded the programmes and Glyn James and I would go from place to place to transmit them.

One night, we used a flat in the tall block in the middle of the Gabalfa estate in Cardiff. A policeman lived in the flat immediately below. The following morning he assured the tenant of the flat that we had used that they were on to us by now and nearly caught us the previous evening! At the Ebbw Vale by-election we decided to challenge the authorities by publicising the fact that we would record the pirate programme in public in the Workmen's Hall. My wife Margaret (though still in school at that time) was there together with Glyn James, Noel Williams and John Bevan. Before beginning to record, I went to look in the rooms behind the stage and found a room full of policemen. Oh well, I thought, it's off to the cells now. But they were there on some training course, not to interfere with us! The recording went ahead and was broadcast the same evening as usual without any hitches.

We had an excellent campaign and although I did not win many votes most people were very supportive and thoroughly Welsh. I was later offered a job as Public Relations Officer by the local council, but the investiture of Carlo was looming and I said that I would not be willing

to organise any events relating to that. I did not get the job, but understand that Ron Evans – top dog of the local Labour Party and Michael Foot's Agent – had voted for me. When I was not offered the post he drew my attention to a similar post being advertised by the Welsh Hospital Board – and that was the start of my connections with the NHS.

I spoke on the same platform as Michael Foot on several occasions after the 1960 by-election, sometimes on behalf of CND and later in favour of a Yes vote in the 1979 devolution referendum. Michael always had considerable sympathy for our point of view.



Emrys Roberts recording
one of the pirate Radio Wales broadcasts

Plaid Cymru General Secretary – early 1960s

JE Jones, the party secretary, also retired in 1960 and I was appointed General Secretary to succeed him. I tried to discuss my ideas for improving party organisation with Gwynfor Evans, but once again without any firm reaction either way. When I tried to discuss these issues at meetings of the Executive Committee several members complained that I was always going on about improved organisation and that they had better things to think about. Strangely enough no one argued that way when the Treasurer, Elwyn Roberts, talked at length about the party's finances, as he did at every meeting.

It was probably out of frustration at this attitude that I told the Executive on one occasion that they were like a Sunday School trip and that they treated Gwynfor like some sort of Christ figure – they were happy to listen to him and praise him and to put some money in the collection, but then they expected him to achieve salvation for Wales without having to make much effort themselves. I should have realised that such comments would not be very well received! I still think, however, that they were pretty near the mark.

Since no one else seemed very interested, I began discussing how to improve party organisation with a small group of interested people. We used to meet from time to time in Garthnewydd, Merthyr Tudful. Once we had come to some general agreement we went to see Gwynfor in Talar Wen to explain our ideas to him. He listened to us patiently enough – but once again we had very little reaction from him.

We started developing policies for discussion at Conference and published a booklet "How to Win an Election". Many people laughed at our arrogance in adopting such a title, but these were exactly the methods we used years later to win control of Merthyr Tudful Borough Council. At this time the party began to arouse more interest in the

south east and other industrial areas. Until then Plaid had appealed mainly to Welsh speakers, but non-Welsh speakers now began to realise the party had something to offer them as well – e.g. there was a very active group of young non-Welsh speakers in Cardiff.

I was not aware of this at the time, but it appears that Gwynfor thought that all of this activity was designed so that I could replace him as President of the party. I have no idea how he got such an impression, but then Gwynfor always was very poor at judging people's character. Everyone knew that he looked on Elystan Morgan as his natural successor. Once, Elystan said to Margaret – before she was my wife, of course – that my trouble was that I was more of a socialist than a nationalist. Shortly afterwards he joined the Labour Party. I am not sure what that says either about him or the Labour Party!

Another who was treated badly by the party was dear old Pedr Lewis, who was formerly a member of the Welsh Republicans. Ray Smith, the well known actor from the Rhondda, was on the party's staff for a while and set up a number of active branches in south eastern Wales. When he returned to acting, Gwynfor insisted on appointing Pedr to replace him. Although I was very fond of Pedr and found myself on the same political wavelength as he on most things, I did not think he had the necessary attributes for that particular job and I tried to persuade Gwynfor not to appoint him, but to no avail. Shortly after I was dismissed from my job, Gwynfor realised I had been right about Pedr and insisted on getting rid of him too – and that in a rather underhand way, casting aspersions on Pedr's mental condition without giving him any right of reply.

The biggest mistake Gwynfor made in relation to judging character was in relation to Brian Kelly, with whom an agreement was made for Kelly to form a company to publish Welsh Nation. The two had met on a train and Gwynfor knew very little about him, yet persuaded a considerable number of party members to invest in Kelly's company.

Chris Rees, who was Vice-President at the time, and I had severe reservations about Kelly and tried our best to persuade Gwynfor not to enter an agreement with him, but Gwynfor insisted on going ahead.

I decided the best way to try to safeguard the money which had been invested was to work for Kelly and hopefully keep an eye on things and I was appointed Circulation Manager of the paper. After a month or two Kelly transferred large sums of money from the Welsh Nation company to another of his companies. According to the agreement made between Kelly and Gwynfor we could not legally stop him doing that and several Plaid members lost quite large sums of money. Gwynfor, however, had been wise enough not to invest in the company himself and therefore suffered no losses.

I heard fairly recently that some stories were circulating about that time that I had swindled the party out of funds. I can only smile at such stories when I remember the large amount of money I have spent on Plaid Cymru over the years and on various voluntary organisations since. Perhaps it was this doomed agreement between Gwynfor and Kelly which gave rise to these stories. Although I worked for his company for about 2 months, I did so to try – unsuccessfully admittedly – to safeguard the investment made by Plaid members – and I never received a penny wages from him either.

Getting the Sack

To return to our attempts to modernise the party, I was on the staff of the party and expected to remain so for the rest of my working life. I could not, therefore, stand for any elected office in the party. In any case, if Gwynfor had known me better he would have realised that I am not one to harbour personal ambitions. My father was a man who worked hard all his life, mostly back-stage as it were – even in his nineties – and I am quite like him in that respect (though not as hard working!). I have always been one to turn my hand to the small humdrum tasks, as well as making the occasional speech.

Gwynfor, however, determined sometime in the early sixties (unbeknown to me at the time) that he wanted to get rid of me. I have only recently (2010) learned that he tried to get rid of me when he became a board member of Teledu Cymru in 1962. Apparently he tried – without telling me – to persuade one of the company's senior officials to give me a job. All the jobs were filled by then so I remained for the time being with Plaid.

Another golden opportunity presented itself in 1964 when I separated from my then wife and Margaret (my present wife) separated from her husband. At the time, Margaret was Secretary of the Plaid Youth Section and had been a parliamentary candidate in Ogwr and some of the press made quite a splash about the situation. In the next Executive Committee Gwynfor said the whole thing had brought the party into disrepute and invited me to resign. I did not think personal matters of that nature were a reason to resign, so I refused and a motion was put before the committee that I should be sacked.

I was given an opportunity to speak, but had little to say. I felt each member of the Committee had to make up his/her own mind on a moral issue like that. A few members – I remember Dafydd Als (Dr Dafydd Alun Jones) in particular – spoke up on my behalf but when the matter was put to the vote just before lunch the Committee

decided to sack me. After lunch Dafydd came up to me and said: You devil, I didn't know you were scheming to get rid of Gwynfor.

Apparently, Gwynfor had sent a secret letter without my knowledge to those committee members whose support he felt he could count on saying that I was scheming to depose him and take his place. Several members had voted to sack me because of that letter. If I had known about the letter I would, of course, have answered the points made and explained that Gwynfor had misinterpreted my position. I tried to re-open the matter in the afternoon session but was overruled.

That was when I realised that Gwynfor could be pretty effective at times – but unfortunately in order to safeguard his own position rather than further the interests of the party. Following the publication of Rhys Ifans's biography of Gwynfor, his son Dafydd gave an interesting insight into his father's thinking during a television interview. He said that his father was worried that someone else might put Wales on the path to self-government before he could and that he agreed with most of my ideas for modernising the party but resisted them because he thought I might displace him as leader. He was putting his own personal interests before those of the party and of the nation.

This reminded me of a comment he made to me years earlier when Wynne Samuel became Town Clerk of a local council in Pembrokeshire. He'll never be a figure of national significance in a job like that, he said. It was obviously important in Gwynfor's eyes to be a figure of national importance. A few years after getting rid of me, the party in fact adopted most of my recommendations – perhaps because Gwynfor no longer felt under threat. It was then that the party began to enjoy a degree of electoral success.

After my sacking a small group of us – John Legonna, Ray Smith, Harri Webb and I – published a small magazine called “New Nation”

in order to continue the debate about the best way to pursue our objectives. John insisted that we needed some visible symbols of nationhood and, although I was not entirely on the same wavelength as he, I went along with the group's plans to organise the first Llywelyn ein Llyw Olaf memorial event in Cilmeri – which by today is an annual event and draws a substantial following. John had prepared a somewhat florid declaration to be read at the memorial stone in Cilmeri. On that day in 1964, however, the weather was atrocious and travelling in the countryside discouraged because of the foot & mouth outbreak. I was the only one to reach Cilmeri – and there, in fog so thick I could hardly see the wording – I read out John's declaration, somewhat ironic really remembering my attitude towards the princes of Gwynedd!



Harri Webb and Emrys Roberts

Jobs – more than 20 of them

I had expected to remain working for Plaid all my life, but now I had to look for another job. I applied for I don't know how many jobs, but it seemed no one in Wales wanted to employ me at that time. My father had been a bit of a nomad as far as jobs were concerned and perhaps for that reason had never accumulated a great deal of wealth. A rolling stone gathers no moss, they say. Or at least, they used to until the advent of the Rolling Stones! My father was like that, and so was I.

I was prepared to turn my hand to anything with little thought of career or ambition. Between everything I have had over 20 jobs, so perhaps I should list them now:

Clerk in the Inland Revenue, Executive Officer in the National Assistance Board, Postman, Parcel Delivery man, Mailbag forwarding worker on the railway, fitter's mate in a steelworks, Floor Cleaner for Marks & Spencer, Assistant Secretary and then General Secretary of a political party, Organiser of an International Music Festival, Extra-Mural College Lecturer, my own Public Relations Agency (not a great success!), administrator for a teachers' union, taxi driver, Circulation Manager for a monthly newspaper, Editor of a local weekly newspaper, Newsreader in both Welsh and English on the BBC, Public Relations Officer to the Welsh Hospital Board, Executive Director of a Public Relations company with offices in Edinburgh, London and the Hague (the other two directors were prominent Scotsmen, one of whom, Douglas Crawford, later became an SNP MP), Printer in the Rhondda – (where I worked 12 hours a day, 7 days a week for 9 months and no pay in order learn the ropes. I wanted to buy the business and turn it into a co-operative but in the end I failed to raise the necessary cash), Chief Officer of South Gwent Community Health Council, District Health Manager of Torfaen and lastly, a part-time position after retiring, Welsh member of the Government's Council on Tribunals.

On top of that, I was appointed PRO of Welsh National Opera in 1966 but before I commenced the job the position was axed (after I had given up my existing job) due to Selwyn Lloyd's Credit Squeeze and the company could no longer afford the salary. I was also offered a teaching post in Bridgend, but declined the offer as I could not see myself as a teacher. As mentioned previously, I was also offered a job as PRO to Ebbw Vale council but could not accept as it would have involved organising events to celebrate Carlo's investiture.

I hope I have not forgotten anything. At least, with this range of experience I feel I have a better understanding of the ordinary person's hopes and fears than someone who has led a sheltered and privileged life and often gone straight from university to working for a well-known politician to being an MP or even a Government Minister themselves. There are far too many of those around these days.

Whatever, having failed to find work in Wales I got a job organising the first Teesside International Industrial Eisteddfod in Middlesbrough. ICI had a large plant on Teesside and were finding it difficult to persuade professional people to move to the area – they thought a bit of culture might help. The first Eisteddfod in 1966 was a huge success, with over 3,000 overseas competitors. Elizabeth Schwarzkopf, one of the star attractions at our evening concerts, was so pleased with her experience with us that she returned a substantial part of her fee. Another of the professional artists there was Julie Felix, who insisted on drinking 8 straight Guinesses before going on stage. The Eisteddfod still continues today, every second year, but in a considerably different format and under a new name.

I am very fond of opera, having attended the first ever performance of Welsh National Opera in 1948 and I was looking forward to taking up my job with them in autumn 1966, so the disappearance of that job even before I started was a big disappointment. Out of work again, Margaret and I decided we had to return to Wales as we wanted the

boys to go to a Welsh medium school. We eventually rented a flat in Penarth.

We became active in Plaid once again, first in Penarth where Margaret was Maxwell Evans's agent in a local election, and later in Cathays after we bought my old family home in Monthermer Rd. I spoke at a number of public meetings, several on the same platform as Gwynfor Evans, during the Rhondda By-election of 1967 where Vic Davies nearly captured the seat. During the 1968 Caerffili By-election, Margaret looked after the Ystrad Mynach office. By that time I was Editor of the local newspaper which, surprise, surprise, came out strongly in support of Phil Williams. I also spent several months helping to establish the Bargoed branch in the Rhymni Valley.

And then, some party members from Merthyr Tudful approached me to ask if I would be the prospective candidate there. The Labour Party had ditched S O Davies in favour of Tal Lloyd at the previous election, but SO stood as an independent and easily kept his seat. SO, who some years before tabled a Bill asking for a Parliament for Wales, had considerable sympathy with Plaid and had apparently let it be known that if Plaid chose a candidate of whom he approved he would urge his supporters to vote Plaid next time. They had approached me as they thought he would approve of the selection. I agreed, and indeed Margaret and I began looking for a home in the constituency intending to move there as soon as possible.

Then one night Harri Webb called at our flat in Penarth. Slowly, over a cup of tea, he got round to telling us that he had been sent by the Executive Committee to tell me that whilst I might be allowed to stand for the party in an unwinnable seat, they would not let me stand in a winnable seat and certainly not in Merthyr Tudful. So that was the end of our search for a house in Merthyr. When SO died early in 1972 the Labour Party insisted on calling the By-election within 3 weeks or so and Plaid Cymru still had not chosen a candidate.



1972 By-election leaflet

Merthyr – the 1972 by-election

The party turned to me, why I don't know. Probably because they could not find anyone else at such short notice. We had a truly memorable election – due largely to Glyn Owen's flare for campaigning. Members from all over Wales flocked to Merthyr and canvassed virtually every house.

Scores put in a lot of hard work – but we had a great deal of fun as well. Motorcades with flags flying toured the area, broadcasting Heather Jones singing "E for Emrys, M for Merthyr, R for Roberts, he's your man" etc. Everyone seemed to be wearing colourful "I'm for Em" T-shirts – indeed many people wore them on holidays years afterwards.

I used to get up before 5 am and travelled on the commuter buses and trains to talk to people. Most of the day I was accompanied around the streets of Merthyr by Meredith Edwards. Everyone wanted to meet him, so I got to meet them too – he chatted so naturally with everyone. In the evening, I would go round the pubs and clubs with Penri Williams, my agent. I don't think I ever went into a pub or club where people did not know Penri, so again I had a great introduction. How many pints I drank each night I've no idea, but with so much work to do it never seemed to affect me – I certainly could not do it now!

We had a large number of memorable public meetings as well, from the Adoption Meeting in the Miners' Hall to the Eve of Poll meeting in Ivor Davies's Bingo Hall, where music was supplied by Dave Burns. Speakers included Gwynfor, of course, but also one of Merthyr's favourite sons, the actor Philip Madog. Winnie Ewing of the SNP also spoke at several meetings.

We used to enjoy elections in those days and within 3 weeks we came within 2,000 votes or so of toppling the Labour Party. I often

wonder what the result would have been if Gwynfor had not intervened to stop my candidature in the first place. I would have had a year or two in which to get myself known and with SO's blessing we might well have won the seat and that might have transformed Plaid's fortunes, especially in south eastern Wales.

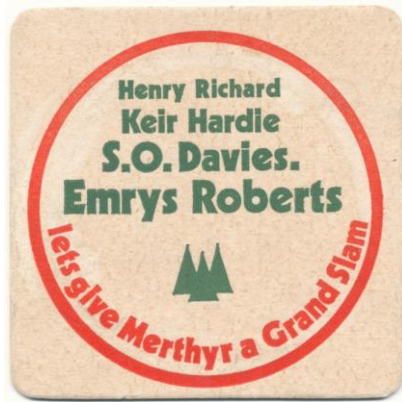
Margaret and I and the family moved to Troedyrhiw in 1973 and set about trying to win control of the local council. We used the methods detailed in our booklet 'How to Win an Election' – i.e. persistently working to listen to people's views and act on them where possible and explaining our ideas and policies to them and how they would benefit the local area. We were, of course, extremely fortunate that Dafydd and Elinor Wigley lived in Merthyr at the time and did a magnificent job in establishing a Welsh medium school in Merthyr even before we found a house in the borough. A small group of us, Dafydd prominent among them, used to meet in our house to frame policies subsequently agreed by Conference on such matters as how to control the excesses of capitalism and promote co-operative enterprises in addition to civilised policies on housing and many other fields.

There had been several Plaid members on the council before then of course, including Gwyn Griffiths and Bill Williams in 1958. Dafydd had also won a seat but the Labour councillors made sure he was not a member of the Economic Development Committee – though he knew far more about the subject than the rest of them put together. Following the by-election, council seats were won by Gareth & Linda Foster and David Williams.

I won a seat on the Council in a local by-election in 1974. One of the first things that struck me when I started dealing with the problems of individual constituents was the number who asked me how much they owed for my services. They obviously expected to pay for such assistance. I wonder why?

At the time, the councillors in each ward had the right to decide to whom any vacant council house tenancy in their ward should be given. I believed we needed a far more transparent and objective system based on family needs, existing living conditions and the length of time people had been on the list. These ideas were discussed at a meeting to which everyone on the housing waiting list in the ward was invited, and as a result our proposals were improved even further. I used this system thereafter in my ward and that was the basis of the new system we introduced after taking control of the Council in 1976.

We deliberately set out to convince everyone, even the Labour councillors, that we would win the next election. I remember the Mayor, Jack Handley, rounding on me from the Chair of the Council on one occasion, saying it was all very well for me to criticise but that Plaid wouldn't find it so easy once we were in power after the next election – and then suddenly blushing bright red when he realised the implications of what he had said. His Labour colleagues were none too happy at this lack of faith in them!



Henry Richard,
Keir Hardie and
S.O. Davies,
supported a
parliament for Wales;

**Our vote for
Emrys Roberts
will win it.**

Merthyr – winning control, 1976

Following the 1974 election there were 3 Plaid Cymru councillors, 2 Ratepayers and 28 Labour councillors. I predicted at the following election there would be 21 Plaid Councillors, just 9 Labour and 3 others. I should have placed a wager! The actual result was 21 for Plaid, 8 Labour and 4 others.

As I recall, only 4 of the Plaid Councillors had any experience of being on a Council and none of us, of course, had any experience of controlling a council. We had to learn on the job, with very little help from anywhere – even Plaid central office. Naturally, the Labour Party tried to belittle and deride everything we did. What we found galling was that many people in Plaid chose to believe their warped version of events. Amongst the things we did were:

- Cutting down on the expenses given to both the Mayor and to councillors
- Cancelling Labour plans for a sumptuous new suite for councillors as we thought other things were far more important
- Using Job Creation schemes to clear many sites of dereliction and prepare them for development
- Distributing funds to each ward for local people to determine how they should be spent on environmental improvements & leisure facilities
- Building a number of Nursery Industrial Units against Labour opposition
- Establishing the Merthyr Housing Association to take advantage of the funds available to build new homes and renovate older ones
- Establishing a new system of housing allocation based on need rather than the scratching of councillors' backs
- Establishing Tenants Forums on every housing estate to determine repair and other priorities

- Establishing children's play areas in every ward and a summer play scheme
- Publishing in the local press details of every planning application
- Holding open site meetings on all such applications where local residents as well as Ward councillors could have their say
- Establishing the Merthyr Heritage Trust to begin promoting the town's superb industrial heritage
- Establishing a Bilingual policy which envisaged a staged approach to full Bilingualism so as to take the people with us
- Increasing grants to local voluntary groups of all kinds
- Adding 1p per year on the Rates to establish a fund to build a worthy swimming pool in the borough
- Undertaking surveys to establish whether people wanted us to keep rates as low as possible or were prepared to pay more provided the increase was used to meet their priorities. In all parts of the borough, from the richest to the poorest, two-thirds of the people wanted us to raise and spend more to provide good services. (Is there a lesson here for today's politicians who seem to think they must always cut taxes even if it means cutting services? I recognise, of course, that some people have difficulty in making both ends meet, but on the other hand many people spend inordinate amounts of money on the latest must-have gadgets and sophisticated games for their children. Some people seem to have to look for something to waste their money on. Many people currently paying tax could afford to pay more to safeguard essential services like health and education. That's another bee in my bonnet).

Another bee again relates to welfare benefits and whether they should be universal or means-tested. Everyone below retirement age capable of working should be expected to work and if no work is otherwise available they should be given work improving the lives of local people and the local environment, and they should be paid a basic wage for doing that by the state. A basic income should also be

guaranteed for all those not expected to work, including the aged, a parent with young children and people with severe mental or physical disabilities or serious long-term illnesses. None of these payments should be means-tested but should be paid as of right to everyone in the respective categories.

All of that income, however, should be included when determining whether people should pay taxes and, if so, what amount. Most people overlook the fact that we are means tested by the Inland Revenue when they decide how much we should contribute to state funds. In those circumstances we might find it tiresome but we do not feel offended. However, it can appear degrading and offensive if a means test is applied when deciding how much one should receive from the state. Operating two systems of means testing is costly, inefficient and unnecessary. If anyone's income falls below the level at which he would be expected to pay tax, payments should be made to him to make up the difference.

Back to Merthyr Council. Others can judge the record I have outlined – by an inexperienced group, often in face of invidious attacks by the Labour opposition and often with little help from Council officials. It must be remembered that the Council at that time was not responsible for important areas such as Education and Social Services. I was working full-time in Newport throughout this period and I was also heavily involved in setting up a workers' co-operative when the Berlei factory in Dowlais closed down. I also played a significant role in setting up the South Wales Anti-Poverty Action Campaign, based in Merthyr and one of the first Welsh organisations to secure European grant aid.

We achieved some successes on the Council even after losing control in 1979, especially when the Labour group were thinking of revoking our bilingual policy. Merthyr had twinned with Clichy-la-Garenne just outside Paris and a group from Clichy came to visit Merthyr as part of the twinning arrangements. I spoke in the Council

Chamber to greet them in Welsh and was conscious of the disapproval of the Labour members, so I then spoke in French which rather foxed them (I had practised before hand with one of our younger members, Alain Thomas, who was fluent in French as his mother comes from Toulouse). I later went on to propose that as we were now twinned with Clichy the Council should adopt a trilingual policy. This was too much for the Labour group (nearly all of whom were basically very conservative – with a small “c” of course) who quickly agreed to stick to current policy. That was passed. It was some time before it dawned on them that they had confirmed our bilingual policy! As they say, there’s more than one way to skin a cat.

Apart from French, I have also spoken publicly in Russian and Spanish. I was able to practise my Russian with my daughter Nia, who has a first class honours degree in Russian language from London and a Master’s degree in Russian literature from Bristol and who taught for a while in Krasnodar University in southern Russia (not far from Chechnya). When she began studying Russian, Margaret and I had joined the Cardiff – Lugansk Society (Cardiff – Voroshilovgrad in those days). We joined a group from the society visiting the Ukraine and I was asked to speak on their behalf at the welcome ceremony. After I’d said a few words in Russian people gathered around me all speaking in Russian – and I was at a complete loss. It is relatively easy to speak a language but much more difficult to understand the reply! Margaret is much better than I am in that department.

The speech I made in Spanish consisted of just three words. We were on holiday in Cuba and had taken a huge container full of medication to the hospital serving the copper mine just outside Santiago de Cuba. We just wanted to leave them at reception, but no, we had to see a doctor. The doctor came and insisted we saw the Hospital Director. As it was a Saturday morning he was in a meeting of the Hospital Board and the Director insisted we went into the meeting to meet them. Being Cuba, the Hospital Board consisted

of 2 members of every grade of staff – 2 doctors, 2 nurses, 2 cleaners, 2 clerks etc. etc.. The Director made an emotional speech and then obviously expected me to respond. As I have only a few words of Spanish, all I could think of doing was putting my hand on my head and saying “Non comprendo”, and then putting them on my heart and saying “Comprendo”. I have never had such deafening applause!

Direct Action

Although my main activity by now was in the field of traditional politics, I still believed that direct action had its place and organised a number of such activities while on the Council. Among them was blocking the main A470 trunk road and painting our own zebra crossing in Merthyr Vale, occupying the offices of the Chief Education Officer for Wales to try to ensure the local school in Merthyr Vale was not closed, advising the residents of Hirwaun on direct action possibilities to stop a huge liquid gas tank being sited right next to the village and blocking the main trunk road once again to put pressure on the Welsh Office to build a new by-pass as soon as possible.

All of these activities were successful – i.e. we won the day on every occasion. In fact the arrangements to block the trunk road on the second occasion were too good! Large numbers of villagers in Troedyrhiw turned out well before the appointed time – with the ladies bringing their knitting and enjoying a chat in the middle of the road. This created a traffic hold-up stretching back miles and the TV crew who were coming to film the event couldn't get anywhere near us! But we got the new road not too long afterwards.

By the way, I learned an important lesson when working for the Hospital Board. If we were expecting a delegation including a Mayor or Council Chairman or MP to discuss some issue of local concern, the Board officers knew they faced nothing more than a civilised chat. But if we expected a group of angry women, they were nervous, running back-and-forth to the toilet all morning knowing they were facing a tough time. That's why I took a group of angry mothers when we occupied the Education Secretary's office. They pulled out their vacuum flasks and put their feet on the table. The Chief Officer suddenly found that he had an important meeting in London and fled, but the school was saved!

Not all of our forays into direct action were successful, of course. Amongst those from which we gained very little were the occupation of the Steel Board offices in Cardiff and the demonstration outside the plush home of the boss of British Steel in a wealthy little village in England. We also failed to save the Triang factory in Merthyr. On one occasion a group of us occupied the offices of the President of the Board of Trade in the middle of London for a couple of hours and on another we went to listen to a debate in the Welsh Grand Committee in Westminster. The Secretary of State for Wales was trying to justify returning money to the Treasury at the end of the year. What could I have spent it on? he asked. So I shouted out why not help bale out Triang in Merthyr?

Within a flash, I was pounced on by strong arm practitioners from all sides – just like that poor boy in Cardiff prison years earlier. I was frog-marched away, thrown into the cells below St Stephen's Hall and told I would have to remain there at least until the day's parliamentary session was over. Eventually Ted Rowlands, my victor in the Merthyr by-election whom we had labelled Yellow Teddy because he had rejected my challenge to a public debate, came to see if he could help, fair play to him. But he was too late. Gwynfor Evans had already come down, told them that I was basically a decent guy and secured my release. Fair play to him as well!

With a good political record and a number of direct action successes, why did we lose control of the Council in 1979? Firstly, of course, the election was held just a few weeks after the 1979 referendum which had turned out so badly for us and made the whole national movement very depressed. On top of that, the local election was held on the same day as the General Election. That meant that there was a far bigger turnout than usual and most of the additional voters were people who did not take a great interest in local politics but voted the same old traditional way out of habit. As a consequence, several of our councillors, though increasing their vote, still lost their seat and we were back to only some 3 or 4 councillors. We began preparing

for the next election, but to be honest some of the zip had gone. It also seemed to me that several of our members had been sucked into the political game – Ok, you beat us this time, we'll beat you next time – without really thinking about what we would want to do if we regained control. I was very down-beat because of that and about the same time I began to disagree fundamentally with the party leadership on the issue of the Common Market.

The European Union, Das Kapital and Plaid's Commission of Inquiry, 1980-81

I have always been opposed to the European Union. Not because I am against international co-operation: that is necessary and I am all for it. But it seemed obvious to me that the aim of European politicians has been to create a powerful economic bloc similar to the USA – based of course on the principles of capitalism. I cannot approve of that.

It seemed to me that the Plaid leadership were entranced by anything that seemed to promise the loosening of Westminster control, but I fail to see how putting our fate in the hands of Brussels, where we would count for virtually nothing, would in any way be better than being run by London.

It can be argued that the union has by now established a regional structure in which we have some influence, but the truth is that the Union is moving slowly but in my view inevitably, to a federal system that in the long run will entail the death of small nations like Wales. And, of course, the Union continues to promote capitalism, i.e. the system that favours large international companies at the expense of local communities. That is why the Union wants to swallow up smaller or weaker countries to the east. On joining the Union they are forced to privatise their public services so that the capitalists can pick them off whilst transferring manufacturing activities there to take advantage of their cheap labour – irrespective of the fact that this is causing unemployment in the west. The shift of the balance of trade becomes obvious when driving on the continent – articulated lorry after articulated lorry bringing cheap goods from the east but very rarely any western lorries travelling in the opposite direction.

(Das Kapital)

I have put this heading in brackets because this section is a bit of an aside and not fundamental to my story. But what is the point of reading Das Kapital if I make no comment on it?

I am not a great reader for pleasure (apart from the detective novels of Donna Leon and the wonderful novels and short stories by Bulgakov), but I do read things that seem important. One of my holiday reading books some years ago was Das Kapital. I had already read the 1848 Communist Manifesto in attempt to understand what communism is all about. I was no wiser when I finished. The only memorable thing about the Manifesto is its famous last lines about workers of the world uniting because they have nothing to lose but their chains. Unfortunately, capitalists have taken that more to heart than the workers. They have ensured somewhat better conditions for the workforce and promoted the idea of a property-owning democracy, thus ensuring that workers do have something to lose and are therefore less willing to unite to defend each other's interests. So I turned to Marx, only to find that there is no answer in Das Kapital either. It is a very strange amalgam of a book. It traces the way in which capital has come to own and control the worker and seems to yearn for the days of master craftsmen and their feudal guilds. At first, technology helped the workers do their jobs more effectively, and that was a good thing. The turning point, according to Marx, was when technology was developed to the point where it could supplant the workers. That is what gave the capitalists a chance to take over.

A large part of the book is full of facts and figures about industrial production in Britain in the nineteenth century and there is an attempt – which looks slightly ridiculous today – to express social developments in terms of algebraic equations. One must, however, remember that maths and the sciences were becoming increasingly important in Marx's day and he no doubt felt it essential to win

support for his ideas by claiming they were scientific. (I visited a man in Grangetown once who claimed to have translated the Bible into mathematics. But that's another story).

Sometimes Marx makes the same statement time and again without getting anywhere in the long run (like a Wagner opera!). On other occasions he throws out interesting concepts but fails to develop them in any way. It's obvious, of course, that he is on the side of the workers and their unions, but he does not suggest how the existing system should be changed and does not set out any political agenda. At the end of the book, I came to the conclusion that Marx's attitude was pretty similar to that of Ted Heath!

I am sorry if these remarks offend some of my Communist friends, but I cannot understand why Marx is some kind of god to Communists, in much the same way as I cannot understand why Gwynfor Evans is some kind of god to some nationalists.

Back to Europe

Anyway, to get back to Europe, my holiday reading some years ago consisted of the Draft Treaty of Lisbon. I experience great difficulty in getting hold of a copy. Indeed, I was told by someone in an EU office that the British Government did not want it widely distributed here! I eventually secured a copy through my old (sorry, ever-young) friend Owen John Thomas who secured a copy as a Member of the Assembly. Among much else, it contains details of the powers of the centre and those of individual member states. Supporters of the Union make much of this principle of "Subsidiarity". But there was also a clause there saying that the centre could withdraw any of the powers of the individual states at any time if it wished – well, I suppose that's what being subsidiary means!

I discussed this with an MEP (not one of Plaid's members, by the way). She did not seem to know about that important little clause and

argued that it was not important anyway as even if the right existed it would never be used. If so, I said, why include the clause at all? – and even if the present generation of MEPs would not wish to use that power, how about those who come after you?

I must admit that I do not know whether that clause has been included in the constitutional amendments the Union had to fall back on when it failed to get the Lisbon Treaty accepted by all concerned – but it shows clearly the direction in which European politicians wish to travel.

And that is another reason for opposing the European Union as well as their rapacious capitalism. It is large states that threaten world peace, not small ones. It is the large states that lust for an empire or insist on trying to force other people to comply with their view of how society should be run. And it is the large states that are in a position to exploit (funny, but we don't have a word in Welsh for that!) other countries for their natural resources. Some argue that we need strong civilised states to withstand the evil ones, but the motives of the "good" states are often suspect. Of course, a strong central body is required to ensure international peace, but the only acceptable way of creating such a body – as Henry Richard realised well over a century ago – is to make the United Nations an effective body.

In English history, there were continual battles between the powerful barons and peace was not achieved until a central power was established too strong for individual barons to challenge. It took a long time to bring that central power under some form of democratic control, but the lesson is obvious. International peace will not be achieved until the United Nations is stronger than any individual country. Such a body, for example, would not allow Israel to commandeer Palestinian lands, to turn the Palestinians out of their homes and to bomb them indiscriminately. And as numerous UN resolutions have shown, it would not allow the United States to try by military or economic means to undermine the democratically elected

government of Cuba just because they refuse to embrace American capitalism.

We should be working towards ensuring the well-being of small democratic nations and a strong, democratic United Nations rather than supporting European politicians and bureaucrats in their attempt to establish a powerful bloc for themselves and their capitalist friends in Europe.

Back to Plaid Cymru

Following the 1979 referendum, the party appointed a 'Commission' to analyse the reasons for our failure and to chart the way forward. I was chosen to sit on this Commission and we met quite frequently over a number of months. One of our greatest headaches was how to keep the differing factions within the party together. By then a small but influential group under the leadership of Dafydd Elis Thomas and Robert Griffiths – General Secretary of the Communist Party of Great Britain by now, but a member of Plaid's staff in those days – were urging the party not only to adopt socialist policies but also to adopt radical socialist jargon. This had alienated a large part of the membership who did not identify closely with the pro-active radicalism of the industrial south east.

Time after time I argued that labels were not important, but rather the content of our policies. But that was not sufficiently trendy for Dafydd El. I cannot remember many, if any, serious difference on policy matters between the two factions. The policies themselves were obviously socialist. But we had numerous debates about the language we should use – one approaching the matter from the perspective of political philosophy and the other from that of the organic structure of the traditional societies to which they belonged. What did that matter if we were all agreed on the policies themselves?

The Commission tried to resolve the situation by urging the party to adopt as its principle a decentralised, co-operative form of socialism and words to this effect were subsequently included in the party constitution after which party members began to co-operate together more effectively. I must say, however, that I found the superficial but uncompromising attitude of some members somewhat hard to tolerate at the time. After that, of course, Robert was at least consistent and joined the Communist Party while Dafydd El went to the House of Lords. Hmm!

Welsh TV Channel Campaign and moving to Maesycwmer, early 1980s

This was also the period, of course, when it became necessary to fight the new Tory Government's proposal to break its promise and deny us a Welsh language TV channel. There were many and varied protests, of course, but it was Gwynfor Evans's threat to fast to the death which forced them to change their minds once more. I spoke on the same platform as Gwynfor in many rallies at that time, but the best of all was the one we organised in Merthyr. We had commissioned a large number of old fashioned pottery beakers inscribed with the name 'Gwynfor'. We presented the largest of them to Gwynfor himself but sold the others to raise funds for the campaign. And in the end, of course, we managed to turn the lady who declared she was not for turning! Undoubtedly, this was Gwynfor's greatest victory.

I have not yet answered the question I posed near the start of these musings – i.e. what should be said about Gwynfor? He was a very complicated character, not easy to get close to or understand. He certainly had a strong personal ambition – not an ambition in the usual sense, but an ambition to be a leader who would save his people – and unfortunately that ambition was sometimes stronger than doing what was in the best interests of the national movement. He was not a natural politician, and often misjudged other people and their intentions, but one thing he possessed in spades was the determination to stick to his path through thick and thin. He preferred to act like an Old Testament prophet rather than a modern politician. Yet he failed to make a stand on Tryweryn while conducting a protracted rearguard action against those of us who wanted to turn Plaid into an effective political party.

His failure to take action on Tryweryn led to the formation of Cymdeithas yr Iaith and its many successful campaigns. I wonder what might have happened if Plaid itself had taken firmer action over

Tryweryn? It was the Cymdeithas campaigns rather than any political activity by Plaid that forced the Tories to promise a Welsh language TV channel. But it was Gwynfor who forced them to keep their promise and the nation is certainly deeply in debt to him for that. It is interesting to note that he won his greatest victory by acting like an Old Testament prophet rather than as a politician!

Maesycwmer

About this time, in 1981, my mother died at the age of 90. We decided to invite my father, who was 92, to come to live with us, but our house in Troedyrhiw was not really big enough so we started looking for a new home somewhere between Bargoed, where Margaret worked, and Newport where I had been working since 1974. To be honest, at the time I also felt I needed a break from intense political activity.

We considered houses in Bassaleg and Caerffili, but eventually settled on a cottage in Maesycwmer. Well, it was really two cottages knocked into one which had formed part of the workshops of the French company which built the Maesycwmer viaduct (or the Hengoed viaduct as people on the other side of the valley called it!) which was opened in 1857. They were the end two cottages in the row with a side extension on one and a back extension on the other.

I soon found out that I had skills I had not been aware of. The cottages contained two large bedrooms, and one fairly small and another very small bedroom. As we wanted separate bedrooms for the three children, within a fortnight I moved the wall between one of the larger bedrooms and the smallest to create two reasonably sized rooms. I also built a new lobby to provide separate entrances. The top of the stairwell came up through the other small bedroom, so I built a bed on top of that to provide more space.

Over the following years I laid new slate tiles in the large hallway downstairs and colourful ceramic tiles in the kitchen, made a range of built-in wardrobes for the largest bedroom, built a new toilet and shower room and a new washroom in the rear extension (with new timber ceilings and floor-to-ceiling wall tiles), demolished the old fireplace and built a new stone one with an inglenook beside it in another part of the rear extension and put in a new electricity circuit and extended the central-heating system to the rear extension.

Outside, I had to reroute the mains water supply and move part of the garden in order to move one of the rear doors further back so that I could build a new, larger window in the back room. I laid new paving stones in the front and back gardens and built new stone steps to the rear garden which was at a higher level than the house. I had never done work like this before and found it a pleasant change from politics! I must say, I enjoyed working by hand like this and achieving immediately obvious results. I must have inherited some of the skills of my father's grandfather who was a carpenter and built the first Welsh Tea House in Patagonia (currently used as the Music College in Gaiman).

I had not turned my back on politics, of course, and began attending Plaid meetings in the Rhymni Valley, where the party had also been in office as in Merthyr, but unlike us without an overall majority. I was disappointed that so little prominence was given to the Welsh language. All our literature in Merthyr was bilingual but it was English only in the Rhymni Valley. I had to argue for some time before it was agreed to include a paragraph in Welsh in election literature and I was then asked to write it myself. Naturally, I did so, but it was never actually used!

Newport National Eisteddfod, 1988

Shortly afterwards, when I was still working on the house in Maescwmer – my father by the way went to live with my sister Megan and only stayed with us once or twice before his death in 1983 – the news came that the National Eisteddfod was to come to Newport in 1988. I had been working there since 1974 as the Chief Officer of the South Gwent Community Health Council. Dr John Hughes, the senior Psychiatric Consultant in Newport, was chosen as Chairman of the Executive Committee and another consultant, the senior surgeon Gwilym Griffiths was elected Chairman of the Literature Committee. I knew them both, of course, because of my job in the in Community Health Council.

John asked me to chair the Publicity Committee, and I agreed as I felt that promoting the language and Welshness generally was probably more important at that time than party politics in Newport. Margaret and I served as stewards throughout the week of the Fishguard Eisteddfod of 1986 in order to observe, make notes and prepare a report and recommendations to the Newport Executive. I worked almost all week outdoors outside a little chapel some distance from the Maes which was being used as the Music Studio. We suffered torrential downpours every day and that is when I began suffering from arthritis.

The main thing the Publicity Committee was expected to do in those days was to agree a list of goodies to be sold in the Eisteddfod shop on the Maes and in a local shop especially opened for that purpose. Perhaps there was little need for publicity in the more traditional sense in Welsh-speaking or rural areas but I felt that something much more ambitious was needed in Newport. I persuaded the Executive to engage the services of David Williams, former PRO to the Llanwern Steelworks, and we set to to plan a comprehensive publicity strategy for 1988.

The strategy was based on the principle that we should promote general awareness that something special was to happen in Newport in 1988, but not to give too much detail until much nearer the event. We were afraid people would become too familiar with the detail too soon and would become bored with it by the time the Eisteddfod arrived – very much like the old military command not to shoot until you could see the whites in the enemy's eyes! The Executive were very dubious about this strategy at first, but we managed to stick with it.

And it proved very successful. We produced large colourful posters to display on the side of the main roads and smaller versions for display in shops and offices. Over a period of several months, Margaret & I visited almost every shop in Gwent to urge them to display our posters – and very large numbers did so. We also took a publicity stall to almost every fair or other event held throughout the county over the two years before the Eisteddfod. We had a small number of enthusiastic members who helped man the stall: one of the most faithful was John Hughes himself, Chairman of the Executive Committee.

We also felt we should try to get children in Gwent interested in the event and published a specially produced bilingual comic which was given to all the school children in the county. We also persuaded the Executive to give cheap entry tickets to everyone living in the immediate vicinity of the Eisteddfod on the opening Saturday.

We made a special point of urging the town's larger shops to prepare special window displays and put out plenty of bunting. Many of them responded. I cannot remember any other locality welcoming the Eisteddfod so flamboyantly! Everybody knew that something special was happening and we were very lucky, of course, to be able to mount it in the grounds of Tredegar House – one of the very best sites the Eisteddfod has ever visited. We had a very memorable Eisteddfod.

Among the most memorable events were the success of a Gwent lad, Robat Powell, in winning the Chair, Daniel Evans winning the inaugural Richard Burton Prize, a wonderful Cymanfa Ganu and the enthusiastic welcome by the people of the town and by the local Council, fair play.

Shortly afterwards, the first Welsh medium primary school was established in Newport. Margaret and I attended the opening ceremony. There were tears in many eyes, including our own, when we were all encircled by the children holding hands and singing “Dan ni yma o hyd” (Dafydd Iwan’s famous song “In spite of everything, we’re still here!”). It was probably as a result of our success in Newport that I was invited to join the Eisteddfod’s central Marketing Committee of which I became Chairman when Owen Edwards found it necessary to stand down. During that period we introduced better reception facilities at the Eisteddfod, ensured far more tracking to protect the Maes from bad weather, established the Friends of the National Eisteddfod and much more.

Following Newport, Margaret and I were quite active for the Rhymni Valley National Eisteddfod of 1990 and later the Urdd National Eisteddfod when it came to Cross Keys. We adopted a very engaging little mascot for that Eisteddfod. There was a small tump on the top of a nearby mountain (probably an ancient burial mound) known as Twm Barlwm. It only needed a very small change to turn this into Twm Bwrlwm to convey the frenzied activity of an Eisteddfod. We also had tremendous support from Gwent Youth Theatre who prepared a lively show featuring Twm Bwrlwm which they performed in scores of schools across Gwent. Margaret & I would usually go with them with a more traditional Eisteddfod publicity stall.

That Eisteddfod was also a great success. The tremendous local support for these eisteddfodau clearly shows that the majority of the people of Gwent have no doubt about which nation they belong to!

The National Health Service, 1960s and afterwards

Although I have had a wide range of jobs, I worked for over 20 years in the National Health Service – first as PRO to the Welsh Hospital Board from 1968 to 1972, then as Chief Officer of the South Gwent Community Health Council from 1974 to 1993 and finally as District Health Manager of Torfaen from 1993 until I retired in 1996.

By the way, I had a number of interesting experiences in applying for various jobs. When I applied for the post of Secretary of the Teesside International Industrial Eisteddfod in 1964 I had to attend a fairly formal dinner in the middle of a rather large hall. Someone kept filling my glass until I really had little idea how much I had drunk. Before the end of the dinner I felt the need to use the toilet, but to reach it I would have to cross this large open space and I was not at all sure that I could manage to do so in a straight line. I nevertheless decided it was better to risk that than have an accident at table, so off I went. I have no idea how well I walked, but I got the job.

I learned a number of useful tricks when attending interviews. When I applied for the Welsh Hospital Board job I was confronted by about 20 members all given the opportunity to ask questions. I was convinced that one member – head of the Government information service in Wales at the time – would probably oppose me because of my political affiliations, so I decided I would have to try to show that his opposition was rather frivolous. And the opportunity came. He asked how much importance I attached to issuing regular press releases. I was Editor of a local paper at the time, so I replied: Not much: I get scores from you every week and most of them go straight into the bin! Everyone laughed, he turned purple and no one took much notice of his opinion of me after that!

Before accepting the appointment I made it clear that I regarded Public Relations as a two way traffic. While part of the job would be explaining the Board's policies and actions to the public it was equally

important for the person appointed to listen to the public and transmit the local community's views to the Board. There is little doubt that it was the enlightened attitude of the Board Chairman, Gwilym Prys Davies, who endorsed this point of view, that ensured I got the appointment.

When applying for the job of District Health Manager for Torfaen, I challenged the Gwent Health Authority to dare not to appoint me. One of the main jobs of this new officer would be to listen to the views of local communities. As Chief Officer of the CHC I had been presenting the views of individual users and of local communities to the Health Authority for years. Who better than I to appoint? I asked. And if you do not appoint me, I added, the people of Torfaen won't believe that you really want to listen to their point of view! I had previously asked them to postpone the interview date as I had tickets booked for the opera in La Scala on the day they had chosen! Mind you, it did no harm at all as one of the interviewing panel was Chairman of Welsh National Opera at the time!

It was probably as a result of my work for the South Gwent CHC and the Association of Welsh CHCs and as District Health Manager of Torfaen that I was invited to become a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) shortly after I retired, when John Major was Prime Minister. In reply I said I was mystified as I thought the British Empire had disappeared years ago and that in any case the Empire and the Tory part were two of the things I hated most in the world. I had a polite little letter back saying that John Major was sorry I felt unable to accept the invitation! He probably knew absolutely nothing about it.

Mental Health Services, the 1990s

Shortly before I retired in 1996, Margaret persuaded me to become involved in Rhymni Valley Mind. She was Glamorgan County Council's Senior Social Services Officer for Mental Health in the valley and was amongst those who had established the Local Mind Association and secured a grant from the old Welsh Office to purchase a property in Ystrad Mynach to use as a charity Shop and Step-In Centre. I became Treasurer of the Association and still haven't found anyone else to take on the job in 2010. In recent years we have been employing staff, opening a larger shop next door and introducing all sorts of new services. I have been almost as busy since retirement as I was before – searching for grants here, there and everywhere, turning the charity into a registered charitable company, renting and refurbishing the premises next door etc.

I was also for some years Chairman of ForUs, a borough wide group for users of mental health services in Caerffili, representing the group on a number of local committees. Mental Health services have always been bottom of the priority list. We are very envious of the amount of support given to services for people with a learning disability. Even when the authorities adopt a strategy for improving mental health services it is never backed up with new cash. By today the statutory authorities pay scant regard to the needs of people whose illness is of a chronic nature. If people cannot get better and return to work in a relatively short time, the statutory services seem to have no interest in them.

To return to the NHS as a whole, it seems that politicians of all colours cannot keep their hands off it. People working in the NHS face one reorganisation after another, having to deal with a new reorganisation before they have got to grips with the last one. Time, energy and money are wasted on administrative issues rather than improving front-line services for patients.

Many academics talk a great deal of nonsense about the NHS as well. I remember, shortly after first joining the NHS in 1968, listening to an eminent professor in a medical school saying how much money hospitals could save if only they discharged patients as soon as there was no medical reason for keeping them. He failed to realise that the cost of keeping them in hospital those extra days was relatively insignificant, but if they were sent home and more seriously ill patients admitted instead, whilst the cost per patient might be reduced the overall cost to the hospital would be increased.

This is a paradox that few seem to understand. Whenever there is a seemingly endless demand for services as in the NHS, making those services more efficient is actually costly. The cheapest way of keeping costs down is often to be inefficient! Cost, of course, should not be the only (indeed, often not the most important) yardstick, but people should bother to examine the true implications of their proposals.

Bureaucracy, and the lessons of Sweden

On top of that, bureaucracy – in many fields, not only the NHS – has run out of control. I remember going to the first meeting of a new sub-committee. The Chairman – himself a bureaucrat with the Local Authority – presented a list of Aims & Objects which he felt the committee should adopt. The first was that the Committee should meet monthly. I argued that whilst it might be necessary to meet monthly, or even more often, that could not be viewed as an Aim or Objective. He did not seem to understand the point. To him the process had become the objective.

Years before I had listened to a professor explaining what factors might reduce life expectancy. He assured us that research had shown that suicide tended to reduce life expectancy. What a surprise! I pondered over why he felt the need to say that, but then realised that the NHS had been modelled on the pattern of heavy industry. Hospitals were regarded as industrial units turning out fit patients, and that is why they had been amalgamated into large District General Hospitals to do the job more effectively. By then, it had been realised that computers were being used to control industrial production and the NHS once again tried to follow the industrial model. Human beings know that suicide reduces life expectancy without anyone having to prove it, but computers don't unless someone includes that fact when programming them.

Politicians and Managers have lost faith that professionals can be left to do their work as they have been trained to do. All sorts of rules, regulations and monitoring systems have to be introduced, just like a computer programme – often designed by people who don't really understand a great deal about the issue. They have created a tick-box culture, which undermines the confidence and morale of the people actually doing the job and often gives a very false impression of what is really happening. Large numbers of politicians and

bureaucrats live in a fantasy world about the services for which they are responsible but which bears little resemblance to reality.

In a fairly recent meeting, someone posed the question: What should be the drivers of our local strategy for mental health services? As no one else responded, I said: The identified needs of people in our area who suffer some form of mental distress – and everyone laughed at me. Well, no said the Chairman, we're talking here about what is required of us by the Welsh Assembly Government. Their concern was to tick all the right boxes and satisfy WAG rather than meet the needs of people coping with a mental illness. I never bothered to attend meetings like that again!

My job in the Community Health Council was to help individuals secure the best possible service, to help ensure a thorough investigation if anything went wrong and to assist council members in their job of monitoring local service standards and commenting from the community perspective on any proposals to change or develop services. I like to think South Gwent was one of the best CHCs in Britain. I was elected first Chairman of the Society of Welsh CHC Secretaries and was later appointed Secretary of the Association of Welsh CHCs.

I helped lead the campaign against the Tory Government's proposals to disband CHCs (those in England were later disbanded by a Labour Government but we managed to keep our CHCs in Wales). On one occasion the British Association of CHCs was on the point of disbanding because of fierce disputes about the annual fee charged each individual CHC. I persuaded the Annual Conference that the subscription fee should vary according to the budget of each Council and the Association was saved. Something similar happened some years later when small Local Mind Associations were finding it difficult to meet the annual subscription fee to National Mind. Again the matter was solved by adopting my proposal of different subscription rates according to each local association's budget.

In our system in Britain, clinicians are very reluctant to admit that anything has gone wrong with the care or treatment provided to any of their patients for fear of legal action against them. In many cases all the patient, or his or her relative, is seeking is a truthful explanation – and perhaps if something has gone wrong and the patient is suffering as a consequence, reasonable compensation. Unfortunately, we now have an array of legal firms urging people to initiate legal action to secure the highest possible payout and as a consequence everyone is afraid to say anything in case it is subsequently used against them.

Several other countries have far better systems, where everyone concerned with the care or treatment of patients is encouraged to be full, open and honest about what has happened. With the best will in the world, treatment cannot always be successful. If something has gone wrong, the best way to ensure it never happens again is to be honest about it. In several countries, if patients have suffered as a result of unsuccessful treatment, they are awarded compensation without their having to prove that anyone was negligent.

For years, Sweden led the way in this field, so I arranged for officials of the Swedish scheme together with a number of Swedish MPs on the relevant supervisory committee to visit Britain. I arranged discussions with the BMA, the British Pharmaceutical Society and other professional bodies and patient organisations, ending with a meeting in Westminster for British MPs. There were no immediate developments following this visit at the time but, very slowly, more and more people in Britain are beginning to think that we need a system of this kind here.

But back to my main complaint about the NHS – bureaucracy. Politicians try to control the bureaucrats and the bureaucrats try to control the service providers, including professional as well as non-professional workers.

I remember one very interesting project undertaken by the nursing staff at the Royal Gwent Hospital in Newport. All the nurses working in a particular ward or department were called together and asked to identify what was good and what not so good about the services they provided. Every group identified some things they could do better and they set about making the necessary improvements, mostly with great success. No manager had to tell them what to do, and the whole morale of the nursing staff improved.

In my view, the important things are to ensure that staff are well trained – both before taking up their post and on the job – and for managers to give them the necessary support to enable them to give of their best, rather than to appoint more and more bureaucrats to tell every one else how to do their job.

A Successful Experiment in Wales – and Tory Folly

Another interesting experiment was undertaken in Gwent in the early 1990s when the Health Authority, under the leadership of its Chief Executive Jeremy Hallett, decided to establish a Neighbourhood Health Planning Team in each of the county's five boroughs. Our job as District Health Managers – with only one or two members of staff to help us – was to prepare a report on the health needs of our population and to recommend to the Health Authority what services should be commissioned to meet those needs.

We were expected to do that by perusing relevant local and national statistics and then by consulting on priorities with local GPs, District Nurses, Dentists, Pharmacists, Physiotherapists and all the other professions and also with local voluntary groups of all kinds, the local council and all interested members of the public. It was then the job of the Health Authority to implement our proposals.

This system was beginning to work extremely well. In Torfaen for example, apart from maintaining existing services and in face of considerable financial restraints, we established a Sexual Health Clinic in the local Sixth Form college, a comprehensive Cardiac Rehabilitation project suggested by one of the nurses, secured funds for a local voluntary group to provide supported accommodation for people with mental health problems, established a small new community hospital in an outlying area and a number of other services.

Unfortunately, the politicians got hold of the idea and decided to abolish all the Health Authorities and devolve all their functions to borough level. Once again, they had no concept of the consequences of their decision. There was no need at all to decentralise all the logistical processes involved in commissioning the services required. The main thing, on which local professional and public input is essential, is to decide what services are needed. It is

not necessary to involve them in carrying out all the resultant administrative functions.

In fact, there were insufficient staff experienced in these fields within the 8 Health Authorities to service all the 22 new Local Health Boards, and the Boards had to spend a great deal of time on organisational and administrative issues rather than identifying needs and providing appropriate services. I wrote on a number of occasions to the Health Minister and to Rhodri Morgan and indeed to all Assembly Members to warn them that their new system would be a failure. But they wouldn't listen and went ahead with their plans. After about 10 years they realised I had been right and are now trying to unscramble the mess they created.

Tory Folly

But that does not compare, of course, with the crass stupidity of the new Tory government in 2010. They favour an American style private health service, ignoring the fact that the administrative costs of such a system are inevitably anything up to twice those of the NHS. That arises because they have to ensure that every patient can either afford to pay the bills himself or has adequate insurance cover. And then, of course, they have to itemise the bills and collect payment.

In such a system there is always a temptation to recommend expensive treatments or drugs which are not really necessary as big dividends must be paid to the shareholders to maintain their investment. Many millions of Americans become bankrupt every year, a large proportion of them because they cannot afford adequate insurance.

Millions of Americans suffer because they cannot afford either the medical cost of treatment or adequate insurance to cover them. As a result, their health status in many fields is worse than ours and even worse than that of their poor neighbour Cuba! Only someone with a

blind faith in extreme right wing political philosophy could ignore the facts and argue that we should emulate America.

And Tory plans to devolve huge commissioning budgets to GPs on the argument that they know best how to spend it are utter rubbish too. Running the NHS is a huge undertaking for which most GPs have neither the training, the time nor the inclination to take on board. Most will depend on private companies to do much of the work for them. And do you know what? Most of these will be large multi-national companies many of whom also run private hospitals. Am I too cynical if I suspect that most of the GP patients will be directed to those hospitals in future?

Of course we must listen to the GPs and all the other people working in the service. But each one has his or her own personal interests and is predominantly concerned with meeting current need. One must look at the whole picture and plan for the future and in doing so consult with the public as well. We were beginning to do that in Gwent without overloading the system with administrative duties. It is a shame that politicians do not have enough vision to see that building on this experiment is the best way forward.

But to return to the coalition government of 2010, there is no doubt in my mind that if they pursue their current policies they will destroy the NHS. But perhaps the Tories are not so stupid after all. That has probably been their secret aim all along.

The Big Society

Another major deception, of course, is Cameron's talk of the "Big Society". In fact he wants to undermine society – and even democracy itself.

In the mid-nineteenth century, nearly all the services on which society depends were run by charities or rich benefactors. Suffrage was

gradually extended with the aim of ensuring that important services were in the hands of elected bodies with some accountability to their local communities. This system has never worked perfectly, of course, and new methods are required to make our public representatives more accountable.

But this is the Big Society. Rather than improving it, the Tories are out to destroy it and put our services back in the hands of charities and wealthy benefactors. Few other people will have the ability or time to get involved or influence the process. The clock will have been turned back 150 years and the main feature of a democratic society overturned.

The only hope is that we in Wales will have enough sense – and enough power – to resist this capitalist tsunami and prevent it from destroying our public services and drowning our nation.

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