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The Bevan Legacy

By
Rhodri Morgan

Annual Lecture 2010

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The Bevan Foundation

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It's a great honour for me to be delivering this lecture on the Eisteddfod Maes at the Blaenau Gwent National Eisteddfod in 2010 on Aneurin Bevan's inheritance in the year where we commemorate half a century since Nye's death in 1960. What makes 2010 even more significant is that it is also the sad commemoration of the Six Bells colliery explosion in the Ebbw Fach Valley next door. Thirdly it is the year in which we lost Michael Foot whose connections with this constituency as Nye's biographer and his successor as an MP could not be stronger and who was the sole remaining link we have with Parliamentary democracy in the 1930s in this county, as he stood unsuccessfully as Labour candidate in the Monmouth constituency in 1935.

1958 was also very significant in Gwent for another reason that it was the year the Llanewern steelworks opened twenty miles to the south. This was seen by everyone in the heads of the valleys as a major threat to the future of the RTB steel and tin plate works on this very site where the Eisteddfod is being held. Eleven thousand workers worked here, half a century ago and if Aneurin Bevan came back today he would be wondering what on earth people did for a living now in this area, given that the backbone of economic life in this part of the Heads of the Valleys has disappeared.

Of course it is not true to say that the heavy industrial character of this area has been totally transformed. There is a steel plant still here. Indeed it is one of the best trick pub quiz questions to ask "who was the last Prime Minister to open a steel plant in Wales?" Does anybody here in the audience know the answer? No? Well it was Indira Ghandi who as a friend of Lord Swaraj Paul and Michael Foot opened the natural gas tubes steel plant in the 1970s. Just to the East of here in Blaenavon, although not in the Blaenau Gwent local authority, industry is still dominated by Doncaster's forge, probably the longest lasting industrial plant on the same site anywhere in Europe. Of course it doesn't forge iron now but rather titanium to make the turbine blades for Rolls Royce aero-engines with more than 500 people still employed there.

No doubt Nye would be unsurprised that there was still a passenger railway from Ebbw Vale to the coast. He would not realise that it had been closed for over forty years between the Beeching cuts and its reopening by the Assembly a few years ago. He would certainly be surprised that it runs from Ebbw Vale to Cardiff and not Newport.

I don't want to be over-psychological but I do believe that every politi-



cian is a creature of their upbringing and their environment. Nye Bevan was the archetypal product of his birth and upbringing in Tredegar as a town that developed in the first wave of the Industrial Revolution and was totally dependent on the iron and coal industry. It was pretty much a one class, working class town. He took enormous pride in this upbringing in Tredegar, in Monmouthshire, in Wales and as a fully paid up member of the British Working Class. As he reminded his audience in his speech in the Eisteddfod pavilion in 1958 he was from Tredegar and NOT Ebbw Vale. He was very proud of being a Monmouthshire man and did not approve of the expression "Wales and Monmouthshire", still common at that time. He jokingly told the audience that if the expression was "Monmouthshire and Wales" he might find that slightly more appealing but it was time to bury "Wales and Monmouthshire."

Blaenau Gwent today to some extent would still be the same kind of one class, working class and no middle class community that Bevan grew up in. The enmity between Tredegar and Ebbw Vale and between both and Brynmawr and Abertillery still remains. The key difference is that this one class, working class community back in 1958 and in Bevan's upbringing before World War One worked in very large enterprises, were represented by Trade Unions, belonged to very strong Institutes, Clubs and Associations either linked with work or the terraced houses or council estates where they lived.

Today's working class is much more dispersed and does not instinctively think together and act together as part of a unified Labour Movement because the big workplaces have gone.

Think back again to 1958, when the famous Bevan-Robeson Double Act took place at the Eisteddfod. It is astonishing to think that the National Health Service was only ten years old at the time, barely a pimply teenager in terms of the overall history of the NHS today. It was only twenty years since the new steel works had been built on the floor of the Valley where we are meeting today. It was only ten years after the nationalisation of the steel industry, only thirteen years after the ending of World War Two. RTB, who owned the Ebbw Vale steelworks, remained the only nationalised steel works although the rest of the steel industry had been privatised early in the life of the Winston Churchill-led government elected in 1951. They made an exception of RTB.

It was RTB as well who had just finished construction of the new steel works at Llanwern near the East on Newport.



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While regretting the passing of the bulk of the heavy industrial phase of the Heads of the Valleys, Nye would have approved of the reuse of the three mile long site for the new hospital soon to be opened and named after him as well as the much larger Ysbyty Cwm Rhymni in Ystrad Mynach two Valleys away from here.

When Nye Bevan and Paul Robeson addressed the Eisteddfod in 1958 they did have the all Welsh rule lifted for them. This rule had been established eight years previously at the Caerphilly National Eisteddfod in 1950. Whatever your commitment to the all-Welsh rule however, if you were the Secretary of the Eisteddfod or the Chairman of the Executive Committee - if you were offered the choice between a concert by Jac a Will in Welsh or Aneurin Bevan and Paul Robeson in English, what would you have done?

Nye's speech made it clear that as far as he was concerned, everything good came out of Tredegar. He did want to emphasise the Welshness of Tredegar which was evident to anybody who walked as he did around the mountains, even if the Welsh language itself had disappeared around the time that he was growing up.

His pride in Tredegar and its influence on him is evident from his invention of one of the ugliest expressions, in describing the NHS, when he said it was the "Tredegarisation" of the provision of health services across the UK.

When you think of his attitudes to the Welsh language and Welshness, this must have been to some extent influenced by the very exotically Welsh Christian name that he had been given. Aneurin would have stood out almost like a sore thumb amongst the plain and simple Davids, Thomases and Williams and Bryns, Glyns and Wyns. We all presume his father named him after the 19th century poet Aneirin Fardd, who was in turn named after the original poet Aneirin.

You cannot imagine how hard it was for me to persuade Tony Blair when I was the warm-up act for him when he made a major speech on Europe in The Old Library whose proudest possession was the original book of Aneirin that had been composed in the 6th Century, albeit not written down until the 11th Century.

What Tony Blair found it particularly difficult to understand was that Aneirin composed his poetry in Welsh although he was a native of Edinburgh because Edinburgh was a Welsh speaking city in the 6th Century. It is perhaps ironic that it was the pre-devolution drive to



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create national institutions for Wales; a National University, Museum and Library that led the Cardiff City Librarian J H Balingier to bid aggressively for key Welsh texts, of which this remains the most important when Nye himself to the end hostile to the very end to the idea of Devolution.

Again he would have been aware that Tredegar had lost its majority Welsh speaking status in the very generation that he was born into, even though Rhymney just three miles to the West kept its majority Welsh language status until World War Two.

It was all about the balance between the amount of immigration from West and North Wales into the coalmines and steelworks relative to the immigration from Hereford, Gloucestershire and Somerset.

That is why Ebbw Vale, three miles to the East of Tredegar has retained Herefordshire expressions such as “We’m, they’m and Usbe” probably not heard very much even in Herefordshire today.

When Aneurin Bevan was growing up it was the final twenty years of really rapid growth of the industrial economy of South Wales. The rate of growth was probably fairly similar to that of China today, namely 10% plus every year with new coalmines and ironworks and all of the service industries that went with the increased spending power and likewise for the new chapels as well as the coffees shops and pubs that represented life on the new industrial frontier.

This of course would have had a bearing on the perception of Welshness that Nye Bevan was formed by. Was Welshness at the end of the day about having large numbers of steel works and coalmines and chapels and the workman’s institutes and workman’s libraries, Marxist discussion groups and that evolved as the influence of the Chapels started to weaken. Or was it about the things that made industrial South Wales and Wales as a whole, different from England, even than industrial England? That was the key difference between Aneurin Bevan’s upbringing and Jim Griffith’s upbringing in Ammanford only fifty miles to the West where the distinctiveness of the Welsh culture and the way it blended with the Marxist discussion groups and the Chapels and coalmines would have been the dominant factor, compared to Tredegar where the UK and international working class culture would have been the dominant factor and the specifically Welsh attributes of the culture would have been the recessive element.

Then when you fast-forward to the appalling time that the Welsh Val-



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leys experienced during the 1920s and 1930s, you can imagine how the left-wing socialist discussion groups emerging from the chapels originally and then later the workman's Institutes would have impacted on Bevan. The economy of industrial South Wales received such a huge shock culminating in the closing of the Rhymney iron works and the Tredegar Ironworks and all the coalmines that those companies employed and this was in the run up to Nye Bevan's first election to Parliament in 1929.

Some parts of Britain of course survived the 1930s, pretty well, and that is where many people from Wales emigrated to, namely Slough, Oxford and elsewhere but for those who remained or those who represented in Parliament the Welsh people who remained in the Valleys, it was an incredibly tough time and inevitably if you did have any residual faith in Capitalism by 1929, you had certainly lost it by 1931 when the national government was formed.

As a matter of interest 1929 was also when my mother in seeking her first job actually was given a post in Rhymney at the Western and most Welsh speaking and most cultural end of Nye Bevan's new constituency.



Eighty percent of the local population was unemployed and when my mother arrived at the station from Cardiff of course she was greeted by Tom Price the Headteacher of the Secondary School (can you imagine these days a Headteacher going to the station to greet a new teacher a day or two before they arrive for work?) And as Mr Price saw my mother looking around the town from the station and seeing the boarded up shops and the air of depression which had landed across the small town, he must have had a vision that she was going to turn on her heels and get on the next train back to Cardiff.

So he proudly boasted to her "never forget, Miss Reece – this is where Tom Jones the Cabinet comes from" referring to Tom Jones the Deputy Cabinet Secretary, probably the most famous native of Rhymney before or since. Indeed my mother did have a very tough time teaching in Rhymney simply because the children had had no breakfast and no evening meal the previous night most of the time and on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday they were quite unable to learn with their heads dropping onto the desk with a lassitude caused by lack of nourishment.

Amazingly Friday was regarded as 'learning day' because on Thursday afternoon a van would arrive from Eastbourne distributing food

parcels around the town and so the children would get a square meal on Thursday night and breakfast on Friday morning. So they were bright and breezy on Friday but only being able to teach properly on one day per week, my mother found it absolutely heartbreaking and only lasted two years before she applied and got a job back in Swansea.

It was the toughest possible baptism in teaching, leaving aside the fact that everyone was very proud that Rhymney was 'the last Welsh-speaking village or town in Monmouthshire' and was exempted from the general hostility to the Welsh language of Monmouthshire County Council.

As one other afterthought on my mother's teaching career in Rhymney, the beginning of the term during the staffroom lunch breaks as the new teacher she was cross-examined by all the other teachers as to what she had had to buy the Councillors on the Education Committee in order to get the job. My mother was utterly bewildered by this because no such transaction had taken place in Monmouthshire County Hall in Newport. She asked them what they mean and they said that they had all had to buy a piece of three piece suite of furniture in Roath Furnishing in Cardiff for a Councillor or two and that the only way you could get a job in teaching in Monmouthshire was through making a contribution to a Councillor's living conditions in this way.

I just presume that getting a Welsh teacher to go to Rhymney was considered so difficult that nobody dared ask my mother for anything otherwise they feared they wouldn't get a teacher at all!

If it was that tough for my mother who played no part in the public life of Rhymney, you can imagine how that formed Nye Bevan's attitude to all of those who said that industrial South Wales occurred simply to participate in the trickle down of wealth from the more prosperous parts of the UK which were recovering well from the Wall Street Crash, areas of the new motor industry or the new consumer goods industries within a hundred miles or so of London roughly from Leicester southwards and roughly from Bristol eastwards.

I did open a new school in Rhymney as First Minister some years ago and I tried to explain to the children and the staff how Eastbourne had adopted their town and used to bring food parcels on Thursday and that was the only day that people had a square meal in the evening and a breakfast and they thought I was talking about the middle ages or another planet. They just simply could not believe



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that it could possibly be true.

The key arguments in the 1931 national government, from which the vast majority of Welsh Labour MPs absented themselves and stayed out, despite Ramsey MacDonald going in and Philip Snowden going in as Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer respectively, was about public expenditure cuts. It is very redolent of the present arguments about how you cut public expenditure to make sure that you can finance your debts or whether you do what Keynes was asking and you seek to stop the rocketing of unemployment by pumping public money in. This was a particularly difficult question in Britain where the banking system did not collapse - unlike the USA - and where the country was so sharply divided between the rocketing unemployment between the North and Western half of Britain where the old industries of coalmining, and the steel, and shipbuilding were located and the South East and adjoining areas which did pretty well in the 1930s and where because there was this itinerant Labour Force from Jarrow and South Wales etc which could act as an easy new labour force, you could buy a house for 200 pounds and therefore you could soon become from being a production line worker at Vauxhall in Luton a become a homeowner as well as having a good job in industry.



If you were outside that golden triangle of Great Britain of course this was the worst slump that anybody could remember for well over a century and unlike the New Deal in the USA, these areas were not quite abandoned since the distressed areas did seek to develop new jobs by developing the new industrial estates in Treforest, Hirwaun and elsewhere nothing happened to alleviate the unemployment until World War Two came.

The great thing about Nye Bevan is that he never became so embittered that he was completely outside the political system so that when the war ended and 1945 came and he was given the opportunity not to be a permanent outsider, standing on the back benches, screaming abuse at all of those in the establishment and screaming abuse at the Capitalist system, he was able to take his great opportunity to do something really transformatory and permanent.

His pride in his local area was also very important to him which was why he used this extremely ugly but very effective expression about "Tredegarisation" of the health system in Great Britain. That in effect was what the National Health Service was all about. He had been brought up under a socialised system of medicine. The Tredegar Medical Aid Society like the Blaenavon equivalent had been formed

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in the late 19th Century as the miners' and ironworker's way of trying to cover themselves for the fact that you might be quite well paid and you had the industrial job one week but the next week you might have a metal splash or a roof fall and you could be severely injured and so could all your sons as well who worked with you and then you simply would be unable to afford the medical bills.

That's why they had developed the system of paying into a kitty while you were well so that you could hire doctors who would treat you when you were ill or injured.

That was the basic principle of socialised medicine which is fascinating to realise that the USA has begun to make tentative steps in a very milk and water way in the year 2010 along a path that Tredgar and Blaenavon had taken a hundred and thirty or so years ago and that Great Britain took as a whole back in 1948.

As we see today, the national debt had absolutely rocketed during the war and the repayment of debt was one a high priority but the opportunity to do something totally transformative to British society was too good to miss.

Nye Bevan was immensely clever although he had no previous Ministerial experience in getting the doctors on board by hook or by crook. He split the consultants off from the family doctors and he took the full flak of the BMA's opposition and the conservative Press' opposition that what was being proposed was mad and far too radical and used his skills to ensure that the civil servants in the Ministry of Health stuck with him and got the political impetus and the professional interest in the end to accept what they have never accepted in most other countries which have remained with insurance based systems, to have a tax based system of socialised medicine.

What is interesting as well is that most recently in Wales we have started to see a return to the original Tredgar model which actually directly employed the family doctors in the Valleys. During the first decade of Devolution in Wales, salaried Doctors as distinctive from the independent contractor doctors that was the NHS model in 1948 have appeared. This is partially a response to a recruitment crisis as the older generation of mainly Asian doctors who dominated the provision of GP services in the Valleys have retired and re-recruitment from Asia was impossible and of course a response to the feminisation of the medical profession in the UK and as the numbers of medical graduates leaving medical schools had got bigger and had gone from being a third to two thirds women, many of the women prefer to



opt for General Practice rather than hospital Consultancy career paths and were happy to be salaried as GPs rather than always go for the purchase of an equity stake in a practice.

Its remarkable even now that when final year medical students in the USA are asked whether they want to become family doctors or hospital doctors only 2% opt for a career in family as GPs, compared to 62% in the UK. Some of that is related to salary but some of it is related to feminisation because women doctors tend to define what is the predominant factor in becoming a good medic, following the social model of medicine rather than the technology model of medicine.

Whereas therefore Nye Bevan might have been thought to be far too inexperienced to handle the biggest transformation that was being offered to the British Public in the Labour manifesto in 1945 but he had the ability to do it from a standing start with no Ministerial experience.

He also had to withstand an enormous amount of adverse personal propaganda which picked him out as a potential weak link for being too extreme and too Welsh. In one of the most famous attacks on him by the BMA, Charles Hill, late the radio doctor, but at that time the General Secretary of the BMA, referred to him as 'the Tito of Tonypandy'. It was a curious choice of expression, in that Tito was not particularly unpopular as a Communist and nor was Bevan from Tonypandy but rather Tredegar but it presumably was that Tonypandy was much more definably Welsh as a location and therefore if you wanted to diminish somebody because he was (a) an extreme socialist and (b) Welsh and you wanted to use a bit of alliteration to add some pizzazz to your criticism, then Charles Hill may have thought that 'the Tito of Tonypandy' would flatten Bevan's political career. It did not. It certainly was not a great example of Charles Hill's PR skills. As a tribute to Bevan, perhaps the ultimate signal that what he did was of fundamental, long-term and transformatory in its character was that Margaret Thatcher thought about but in the end did not privatise the NHS and that David Cameron because of his personal experiences with his late disabled son Ivan became a huge admirer of the NHS and has not only said that it will not be privatised but has also promised to protect it in some shape or form from the swingeing public expenditure cuts being faced today.

What Bevan represents therefore is a combination of brilliant oratorical skills, stunningly good heckling skills when someone was trying to knock him off course and supreme administrative skills when given his one great opportunity in practical politics as a cabinet min-



ister.

His heckling skills were demonstrated in a meeting in the 1955 General Election, in Swansea when the young Michael Heseltine and some of his Oxford friends had gone to a mass meeting in the Brangwyn Hall and when Bevan was reaching his peroration. And said 'no true Welshman could be a Tory', Michael Heseltine with his long mane waving was alleged to have stood up and said 'I say – that's going a bit far' in impeccable Shrewsbury and Oxford accents, to which Bevan responded instantly 'See what I mean' getting a huge response of laughter and applause from the audience.

He was also famous for the walkabout amongst the civil servants of the Ministry of Health and Housing in the 1945-51 period in which he would attempt to find out what the middle ranking civil servants and juniors were thinking so that the views of the permanent secretary and the very senior people who directly reported to Bevan were not the only views that he heard.

That is something I attempted to replicate during my ten years as First Minister and I found it enormously valuable as well. It did not discourage disloyalty among junior and middle ranking members of staff but it certainly did give them a sense of involvement in the whole enterprise. I wish I'd done it more often looking back now.

What else therefore can you say about Bevan's legacy today? His legacy today could never be more relevant because we are in the middle of a leadership election and the five candidates could learn a great deal from how you do walk that tightrope between dogmatism on the left and careerism on the right.

You do need to make inspirational speeches to party audiences and wider audiences. You need to be able to attack the government in power if you happen to be on the opposition side. You need to be able to do that in Parliament and at Party Conferences and these days on Radio and TV as well.

Whoever is elected to Labour leader will presumably have to do four years and more in opposition before getting the opportunity to put your skills to the test in government.

Can you therefore find a Labour leader who combines that ability to inspire the crowds and to inspire party members to get out working and organising and to increase party membership and all of those party leadership skills in opposition with being able to implement



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what's in the manifesto if you actually get the chance and overcome the kind of stakeholders who might be resistant to Labour ideas when at the next election, Labour would hope to be able to move the Conservatives aside again and get back into power.

The only criticism that I ever heard of Nye Bevan was of his attitude to constituency casework. That would not pass muster today. I did hear him demonstrate to a new MP how to deal with correspondence in the House of Commons and to the young MP's amazement he picked up this huge bundle of correspondence and put it in a bag and dumped it in a bin in the House of Commons and told him 'that is the way you deal with constituency correspondence'.

Of course in those days there was no secretarial allowance and you were only allowed six free stamps and letters per week to reply to letters so it must have been a very expensive personal pursuit for those who did not have the independent means to hire a secretary.

It also indicated that Bevan really did want to concentrate on being able to attend in the House and to attend conferences and take the opportunities to make brilliant speeches outside the House rather than be writing letters as a kind of substitute parish priest and social worker.



These days there is no alternative to being a Parish priest and a social worker as well as being , if you can do it, a brilliant debater and a good administrator.

The great challenges of the health services have changed enormously since 1948 and they are particularly poignant in the Welsh Valleys which gave rise to the Health Service in particular. There was a naive belief in 1948 that as soon as the National Health Service was up and running and once it had bedded down that GP services and dentistry and optometry would have been made available to the masses, that people would get better of a large number of their complaints and therefore the cost of the health service would fall away as the population simply became in general free of ill health.

Nothing could be further from the truth in the way things developed with people living longer but not necessarily living healthier and the skills of the NHS in keeping people alive for twenty years more than they did in 1948 was associated with the periodic illnesses that you inevitably get as you get older and also some of the new illnesses that you get which are the by-products of prosperity not poverty. This could be directly from eating too much and obesity and type II Diabe-

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tes or it could be the indirect effects of unwise lifestyles as well in terms of abuse of drugs and alcohol and eating the wrong kind of food and the impact of too much of the wrong kind of food on heart disease, and strokes and the lack of physical exercise.

The relative poverty occurring within a broadly rich country also seems to have had some side effects which would never have been anticipated in 1948 and the increase in accidents in the home among the less well off, suicides on a differential basis especially among young men and it is perhaps ironic that the health needs of the heavy industrial population which caused the Tredegar Medical Aid society to make the big breakthrough into socialised medicine had now been replaced by the acute health needs of communities which have a mixture of both the physical ill health and some of the mental ill health problems that have concentrated on the post-industrial communities of the Heads of the Valleys in South Wales and show no sign of lessening yet.

What is needed to solve those problems involves a new kind of partnership between the citizens and the medical profession and all of the other professions allied to medicine as well, in addition to the social and economic improvements which we need to see to provide a new direction for the Heads of the Valleys, now that so much of the heavy industry has disappeared and the diversification of the economy into either new high-tech industries or into the service industries has proved to be so difficult to achieve.





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