

PEOPLE DON'T CARE IF YOU'RE ON THE LEFT OR THE RIGHT

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At what age did your interest in politics develop?

I was interested in politics at school — I did British Constitution at O and A level — but I wasn't committed to a political party. I went to Aberystwyth University and joined the Conservative Association at Aberystwyth, but wasn't active. It was actually Neil Hamilton who chaired the Association, and the political slant wasn't to my liking. But I remember hearing Harold Wilson speak — and I met him — and also Tony Benn. Interestingly I came up against him later when he fought the Chesterfield by-election, and I was the Conservative candidate. I rather respect Benn, in a personal way, but politically I didn't agree with much of his analysis. After Aberystwyth I went to Cambridge for two years post-grad and became very active in the Conservative Association there. It was then the second largest society in Cambridge after the Cambridge Union. It had 1000 members, and I became its Treasurer. There was more happening at Cambridge, as it is much closer to London. We had a very good stream of people coming to talk to the Conservative Association, and also I was there during the time that Margaret Thatcher became leader, during the two 1974 General Elections and for the Referendum on Europe. I was active on the "Yes" side and involved in the Young European Democrats, which drew people from other political parties as well. So it was a time of great political activity.



Have you always been pro-European?

Yes. I have never wavered on that, though I wouldn't call myself fanatically pro-Europe by any means. But it has always seemed to me to be the right thing for Britain to be in the European Union, or Common Mar-

ket as it then was. I was always politically involved at Cambridge — it squeezed out other things really. But it was a great opportunity to go along to listen to speakers and to get involved in debates. There was the issue then of who would take over the Conservative Party after Edward Heath. So we had a lot of visiting speakers like Willie Whitelaw, Margaret Thatcher, Jim Prior and Geoffrey Howe.

Was there a battle going on then between the “One Nation” Conservatives and the “New Right”?

I don't think it looked like that at the time. My feeling then was that Margaret Thatcher was seen as challenging the Establishment. The Establishment was Ted Heath and the default Establishment candidate was Willie Whitelaw. I think that she was perhaps seen as more right-wing than Willie Whitelaw, but it wasn't perceived as a battle between Right and Left. It was more the Establishment candidate and a woman. I don't think it seems quite as remarkable now as it did at the time, but this was the first woman leader of a major political party in the West. It was a massive breakthrough and for the Conservative Party to do this caused a certain excitement. Also, though she'd held office as Education Secretary, all of the other candidates had held higher office, so it was seen as a gamble. I didn't think that it was.

Was the perceived radicalism of Thatcher what attracted people? Was it the supposed “desire for change”?

I don't think she was seen as particularly radical at that stage. She did develop policies in Opposition but I don't think she did when seeking to become leader. She was the person who'd had the courage to stand against Heath, though all of the perceived wisdom was that he'd win it. I remember organising the public speaking classes at Cambridge, and we were all listening as the result came through, and people were stunned. It was a great surprise or shock, depending on your viewpoint. I was pro-Margaret Thatcher despite the fact that I'm much more to the Left than her. I just thought that she'd have the courage as there was a certain quality about her. At that stage she didn't seem particularly right-wing. I'm not sure she was, in some ways. The great feeling in the party, though, was “what a breath of fresh air”. After all we'd had a party that had been run by the so-called “Magic Circle” for so long, and then here came this woman who didn't seem stuffy. Whatever criticisms you want to level at Margaret Thatcher, she was always up for a discussion. It seemed like a great change and indeed it was.

Does it say something not just about the Conservative Party, but about politics in general that people go along with a certain set of ideas for

10, 15, or 20 years, and then suddenly a wave comes and people desire, and demand, change?

I think that there is some truth in that. To be fair, Heath had made the breakthrough in that he was a non-patrician leader whereas Alec Douglas-Home, Harold Macmillan and Winston Churchill were pretty much blue blood. Heath was the first to be democratically elected and from a different background. But he nevertheless fitted the Establishment mould whereas Margaret Thatcher didn't seem like that. So it was a period of excitement that, I suppose, you could equate in fairness with Blair coming in, as he was different to previous Labour leaders. It happens once in a generation. I think that David Cameron has some of the same qualities, though his is only a break with the past in some ways — every so often a leader comes along who looks different and I think Cameron is one. Certainly Thatcher was. I don't think she was particularly radical with her policies at the time because they were developed in Opposition and in Government. I don't think the word privatisation was uttered until well into Government. The thing most thrown at Margaret Thatcher was her supposed inexperience — it wasn't that she was right-wing, it was that she was never going to win an election. She probably wouldn't be up to it as she isn't strong enough. There was a slight element of sexism about it.

When all of this was going on, you were reading law. How did that shape your political views? As a political theorist, I think of Jeremy Bentham and the idea that to change society you have to change the laws, and you need to change government through changing the laws.

Politics operates through a legal framework, and I suspect that the rule often is “can we do this legally or do we have a voluntary code?” How do we shape society? Legally is not the only way, but I suppose that's what attracts lawyers to Parliament and maybe the reverse effect as well. It isn't necessary to have an interest in law, but they are the tools of the trade. When you think of some of the great social changes of the last twenty or thirty years, laws have had a role in that. Take something like the smoking ban; though it is partly that society's attitude has changed. Is a law reflective of the change or does it influence or create the change?

If you are making political judgements, how far does your reading of the law fit in to your overall political philosophy?

Yes, I suppose your view is shaped by your experiences as a lawyer. There may be a danger that lawyers may become too obsessed with the legal aspect of governing a country. There is another aspect — the ed-

educational aspect — and seeking to get people to do things without having a law. I suppose that brings us to the classic dilemma of the traffic lights. Do people stop at red traffic lights because it is the sensible thing to do, or do they stop there because they know if they don't then they'll probably be fined or imprisoned? Probably the former more than the latter, to be honest. So it is the difference between conviction and law. It is a fascinating area. Occasionally we have to go along with laws that we don't like, but then again that is the rule of the game.

I first got to hear about you when you were an active politician in the build up to the “No” campaign for the 1997 Referendum. It must have been quite a difficult decision for you to decide to head that “No” campaign. Or did you feel so strongly against the setting up of the Assembly that it was the only thing that you could do at the time?

I don't think that would be true. At the time I'd just fought the 1997 General Election in Worcester and enjoyed the campaign, but everything had gone in spades against the Conservatives. I wasn't going to win, so it was just a question of making sure that we were a respectable second, which we were. After that I thought, I really am going to concentrate on the law and do something else. But all of a sudden the Labour victory meant a referendum here. I think that everybody was surprised how quickly that referendum was scheduled, as it was a matter of months after the General Election. I was asked by fairly influential people in the party who wanted me to be involved in the “No” campaign. I met up with Viscount Tonypany at his home in the Heath, in Cardiff, to talk about it because I had the view that if the referendum was going to be won it wasn't going to be won by any surge of Conservative feeling in Wales — particularly given the way that the Election had panned out, and that we hadn't got a single seat in Wales. While some people talked of it being a Conservative “No” campaign, that's wrong. There was a “No” vote in Torfaen, and in areas that clearly didn't have a Conservative majority. There probably still isn't a majority in favour in Torfaen, for example. It was an all-party campaign. I said that I'd get involved and then things snowballed. I met Robert Hodge, who was helping the campaign by providing some finance and premises. The Conservatives had campaigned against it, and so we were not now suddenly going to say that we were in favour of it. There was going to be a referendum, and we knew there would be plenty of people who wanted to vote “No” so we needed a campaign. It would have been a bit David and Goliath as all of the big institutions — all the big battalions — were on the other side of the argument. So that is how it happened. It wasn't part of any great career plan or anything.

Did you think at the time that if it was a “Yes” vote — which it turned

out to be — then the Conservatives will have to change their view on the Assembly and take part? Or were you of the opinion that the Conservative Party should be reluctant to go in to the Assembly?

I don't think that I gave it a lot of thought to be honest. The campaign was so frenetic, and it was a bit of a shoestring operation as there were not that many of us heading up the "No" campaign. We were up and down Wales and backwards and forwards. Nowadays that sort of campaigning wouldn't exhaust me the way it did, as you have to remember that I had the day job as well. I didn't think that the result would be as close as it was, and I think we thought that we'd lose more heavily than happened to be the case. I didn't think "what if" until after the vote was announced at the Royal College of Music and Drama. All of a sudden we then had to think about things, but before that we were so caught up in the campaign and doing television and radio that we didn't think ahead, and you don't think about how you are going to adapt if you lose.

There was some mudslinging afterwards with people saying the Conservatives are hypocrites, as they'd been in the "No" campaign and now they want to be in the Assembly.

If we'd taken our ball and said we don't want anything to do with it, people would have said that the Conservatives can't adjust to reality. If you have an elephant in the room you can't really ignore it. In so far as criticism came from the Labour Party I remember saying to them that nobody is more avid and fanatic about Europe now than you, but you wanted to pull us out of Europe in '83, and I think '87.

So it wasn't a major hiccup for the Conservative Party.

It wasn't a major hiccup for me as William Hague and I discussed it quickly after the result was known. Our view was: this has totally changed the topography of Welsh politics. There is no point in re-fighting the battle that we have just lost. That was the view of most people, though not everybody, in the party. Some didn't want anything to do with it, and that was reflected in the turnout in '99. It has changed. People throughout Wales, and not just our party membership, have a different view now. For me it wasn't a difficult decision as I thought no matter how slender the majority, that is it.

So, ten years on, has it proved to be less of a disaster than some people in the "No" camp predicted?

Yes. I certainly think that there were two particular arguments that the “No” campaign put forward. One was the cost. I don’t think we were wrong there. In fairness, people on the “Yes” side said democracy doesn’t come cheap. Resources have been used, sometimes to good effect, but where I think we were wrong was in the threat to the Union. I think that was a genuine fear that has been proved wrong. I think the number of people wanting Welsh independence has more or less flat-lined over the last decade. People may want extra powers but that is not inconsistent with having a strong Union; far from it. I think we were wrong on that. Maybe not on the cost but having invested so much time, energy, and money in it we’ve now got to make it work.

Do you think that Britain has taken on the shape of somewhere like Germany, which has an effective regional set up in the Lander but still has a strong national government?

That’s an interesting model, and it is a model I’d like to see us following in some ways. But I think that one thing that’s unusual in Britain is that England is so much larger in population than the other component parts of the Union, and it clearly doesn’t want regional assemblies. If there was any lesson to be read from the fairly clear vote in the north-east it was that if you can’t sell it in the north-east then you won’t sell it anywhere. But there is still the issue of how the English dimension is dealt with — it is the dog that, so far, hasn’t barked — and therefore I think that we have to take account of that and systems and mechanisms have to be developed. But I’m not a great believer in symmetrical devolution. I’m always wary when people say we want to be just like Scotland. I think “why?” We don’t want to be just like Scotland or England or anywhere. We are Wales. So I’ve never accepted this argument that devolution has to be symmetrical. But there are plenty of models where devolution works effectively and Germany is certainly one.

In your role as an AM representing Mid and West Wales what are the pros and cons of that role as opposed to the role of a constituency member?

I’ve never been a constituency member so it is difficult to say with precision, but I suspect the big advantage I have is that it is a terrific area and a joy to represent as it has fantastic scenery and lovely people in great communities. The disadvantage is that there is a lot of country to cover.

Is it too big an area? If the boundaries are redrawn in the years ahead should we cut down on its size?

I'm not sure it is as we have first-past-the-post members as well. If I were the only member for that area then it would be too much; but I'm one of five and there is some cross-party work on certain issues and co-operation with Westminster and different councillors as well. My postbag doubled when I became Conservative leader, and that is what really increased my workload, remembering that I'd been a regional member from day one. I try to hold surgeries around the region. I try to meet people, schools, and institutions around the region. So it is a lot of territory to cover, but I've never felt that it was too much.

I've heard AMs say that it is so much easier being an AM than an MP because there is a closer link between the constituent and the Assembly. Is that true or is it a myth?

No, I think it is true. I speak to people who've been in both places, like Cynog Dafis, who lives near me in Aberystwyth and can make the comparison as he briefly was an MP and an AM at the same time. Cynog said that it is harder work being an Assembly Member but it is far more open, and he found it much more rewarding. I think most AMs think that as well and I think that as an institution we are more open, and the public say that. Again, I can't make a direct comparison but it feels like that to me. It is easier for people to get to us and so it should be.

I've recently heard Conservatives saying that they want to devolve more, and they talk about "street level" politics.

I am very keen on that, and the group is very much united on this. We had the debate on the Welsh Language LCO, and we totally support the principle. We had a Shadow Cabinet to decide our stance because I wanted to ensure that we got clear backing for the line. Backing for it was unanimous. So the view of the Conservative group is in favour of extra powers, not taxation powers but certainly primary legislative powers. That has been pretty much the view here for some time.

So when the referendum comes, and I know that there is the True Wales set-up already, do you envisage splits in the Conservative Party?

I'm not sure I'd see it as a split because in a referendum people will have different views. Certainly there will be Conservatives on either side of the argument, but I suspect that will be the case with the Liberals and Labour as well, possibly even Plaid Cymru because many of them would like to go further. There are differences, and that is why you need a referendum. I suspect that within the Conservative Party there will be tolerance in any referendum. There was in the last one. The "No" campaign was sometimes characterised as a Conservative

“No” campaign, but there were people in the party who were pro-devolution, including the Chairman of the party at the time. The make-up of opinion of the party has changed, but there will be divergent views.

What about the future of the Conservatives in the Assembly? I remember reading years ago that Wales was unique in that, post-World War One, it has always voted for parties on the Left. In the 1950s the Conservatives were dominant in Scotland, but that hasn't happened here. So can you see a time where the Conservatives are in the majority in Wales, or even holding the balance of power or in coalition? Can you see a time where you have 28, 29, 30 or more Assembly Members?

Yes, though I don't think that it will happen at the next Assembly election. I've heard so many people say that it is unthinkable that the Conservatives could be in a coalition, but I always thought that that was hogwash. The only thing that stopped us being in coalition was that the Liberals don't believe in casting votes. So coalition could certainly happen, and if you look at the last Assembly election, Labour had 31 per cent of the vote, which is an historic low for them. What is very marked in Wales, just as in England, is that there has been a breakdown in class-based politics. You see seats in England that Labour now hold that used to be Conservative seats with massive majorities. Opinion is now pretty fluid and we nearly made breakthroughs in the last Assembly election, nearly winning seats like Gower which we've never held. When I go out campaigning, people don't really care whether you are on the Left or the Right. There was a time when people took a step backwards if you said that you were a Conservative as the brand was seen as toxic, but that is pretty much true of the Labour Party now. I don't think that it is to do with whether you are on the Left or the Right. I think that people have just got fed up with Labour because they have done the wrong things on Iraq, sleaze, etc. I don't find when I go campaigning that people say, "I can't vote for you as you are right wing." It is more a case of what are you intending to do about education, law and order, defence, and health. So I just think that people are more receptive to messages rather than thinking about Left and Right.

Taking you outside politics, what are your interests?

One thing I do a lot of is walking; that is a great joy in Wales, and elsewhere. I'm trying to do chunks of the Ceredigion coastal path and the Ystwyth Trail. I try to attend sport when I can. I follow Welsh rugby. I get to the gym when I can. I do a bit of swimming. I go to the cinema. *Slumdog Millionaire* was the last film I saw. *Quantum of Solace* before that, and *The Changeling*, which was harrowing. I go to the theatre occa-

sionally and I play badminton a little bit. I read when I can.

Do you mostly read politics?

I do read political biographies but I try to switch off with stuff from Robert Goddard, who I enjoy. I've fairly catholic tastes in literature.

Do you think that it is important, for instance, that the Assembly Government backs the Millennium Centre?

Yes I do. But I think that it is a challenge when we think that here we are in Butetown ward in Cardiff and part of the ward has the WMC and restaurants while for other parts of the ward, that part might as well be the dark side of the moon. I go over to the Butetown Pavilion, which is a fantastic project with great voluntary efforts put in. Loads of youngsters go in there, and they learn skills and get careers advice, but they'd no more think of going in to the Millennium Centre than fly to the moon. Why not? That has to be all of our faults in a way. That is a challenge for them as well as the Assembly. But it shouldn't be seen as something elitist. The WMC belongs to all of Wales; when you have people on the doorstep who'd never think of going there, that is a problem.

Does that go back to the old ideas of class and the notion that opera is a middle class or upper class activity and therefore, the working classes think they will stay away?

I'm not sure that is right. I think that it is at that conceptual level. I'm not sure that people necessarily know what's on in the WMC. It is just that somehow that is considered a public building which has nothing to do with us. It may partly be an age thing also. The young people of Butetown may not go there, but their parents wouldn't either. It is truer here than in other parts of Wales. But great stuff goes on in there, and there is something for everyone. It isn't just opera, which may not be everybody's cup of tea. It is only latterly that I have started to enjoy opera. But there is stuff that goes on in there that would appeal to most people so I don't think that it is a class thing. It may be partly a question of marketing but I don't think people see it as a question of class.

The WMC has become an iconic building and is seen as a representation of Wales. I was listening to Radio Wales one day, and I heard a woman from Seattle who said it was her ambition to come to Wales so that she could visit the Millennium Centre.

Well, it is a fantastic icon. When you come down Bute Street and you see it lit up at night, a bit like the Guggenheim in Bilbao, it is a fantas-

tic vision. I think that people do identify Wales with that.

If we are talking decentralisation, however, do we need Millennium Centres rather than just one Millennium Centre? What about smaller scale centres in Aberystwyth, Wrexham and so forth?

There are some things that have to be in a capital city. Remember we had this debate about the Assembly. We are currently, in the party, having a debate about a National Art Gallery for Wales. We have always been in favour of one, but now one or two people are asking whether it has to be in Cardiff. I tell them to go away and find me a National Art Gallery that isn't in a capital city. In Australia it is in Canberra rather than Sydney. So there are some things that you need in your capital city because it is your capital. There is of course a danger that everything is focussed on south-east Wales, where it used to be focussed on south-east England. But that said, Aberystwyth does have the National Library. It also has a very good theatre, admittedly by virtue of having the university. But also places like Wrexham, Swansea, Bangor, and Llandrindod Wells have to be catered for. Perhaps if you had a National Art Gallery in Cardiff you could have regional centres where the art goes out on tour. For example, the National Museum has sent about thirty Impressionist paintings around America — admittedly we are getting well-paid for it — but if we can send them around America then surely we can send them around Wales, and we should be doing that. You shouldn't expect people from Holyhead, Llangefni or Connah's Quay to come to Cardiff to see these treasures. So they should go around Wales.

Is it important that we have a sense of not just a united political Wales but also a united cultural Wales, and possibly even a united linguistic Wales? How important are those things to you and the Conservative Party?

Very important. There is a Welsh culture and language. Taking the language first, and I am a Welsh learner, I think that the language belongs to me just as much as someone who speaks it fluently. It is something that we should all be proud of. We should be proud of all aspects of Welsh culture although we may not wish to participate in all of them. Bilingualism is important to Wales and I'm glad that there is a consensus on that issue, as it helps Wales as a nation. Cultural identity is important. We do need a dedicated National Art Gallery and we need a National Record Office, so that we could have the repatriation of records held at Kew to Aberystwyth, possibly, or somewhere else in Wales. That seems to me to make perfect sense. So I do think that we need national institutions and we have to develop as a nation.

Some of these arguments — the nation-state building argument — were being held about 120 years ago, at the time of Cymru Fydd, etc. If these were to occur now, whether seen as good or bad, would the Conservative Party's support for the Union be under threat in the years ahead? That is if there was a much stronger "Welsh" identity in terms of language, culture, etc.

I've changed my view on that, as I've indicated. There was a time when I'd have said that it might be a threat but, quoting back your example on Germany, I've been to Bavaria where people are very proud of being Bavarian, and they have their own dialect, but they are still very much German. I don't think that a strong Bavaria takes away from a strong Germany. So I accept that. The evidence that I've seen over the last ten years is that you can be both Welsh and British and that a strong Wales won't take anything away from a strong United Kingdom; anymore than a strong Scotland should. I think that the evidence tends to bear that out.

What about Gordon Brown's raising of "Britishness"? Should a politician, such as the Prime Minister, be leading a campaign on "Britishness", for example?

A leader does speak for the nation and there is great virtue in Britain. I'm a great believer in Britain as well, but there is a danger in overstating it and gifting it to become an issue of national consciousness, where it is not used as a plus for being British but is used as a minus for being anything else. There's a great danger from the BNP in particular. So there could be a backlash that we should all be wary of.

If the Conservatives win the next General Election, and David Cameron becomes Prime Minister, how do you see Wales evolving in the years ahead?

David Cameron's attitude, from when he first came to Cardiff to meet the Assembly team, was that it was time that we accepted the Assembly and made it absolutely clear to people that we do so. Devolution is here to stay, and we are going to work with it, and that chimes very well with Cameron's instinct for "localism", and decisions being taken at the lowest appropriate level. Things are different now and the status quo is having an Assembly, not rejecting the Assembly. So it is also a very Conservative point of view. None of that would change if David became Prime Minister. We are having this debate about where we go now, but we have the 2006 Government of Wales Act and if there is a request for a referendum it would go to the Secretary of State rather than to the PM. More likely than not, that would be Cheryl Gillan, and

she would have to either say “yes” or give reasons why not. In my opinion the “why not” would only come about if there was pestilence or war. In any subsequent referendum campaign I think that there will be tolerance in most parties because you are asking the people to decide. Political parties will get involved, but I suspect that our party will say that people can campaign on whatever side of the argument they like. The Conservative team at the Assembly would be in favour of greater powers. It will be an interesting argument. You can’t be complacent about this, but I believe that we will have a Conservative government within the next 18 months, and on that basis there will be a period of time, independent of the referendum issue, where a Conservative government at Westminster would have to deal with what is likely to be a Labour / Plaid Cymru administration here. The people here will want it to work, and the people in Westminster will want it to work. There will be a certain amount of grandstanding as that is the political theatre of it, but the idea that there will be malevolence in Cardiff or Westminster or both to try to make it fail is crazy. That is not going to happen. Both sets of people will come at it with good will and our important role then will be to act as a bridge between the administration in Cardiff — who we know on a personal level — and the people at Westminster, who are our friends. I should imagine that our role as brokers may not quite be *la majeure*; an intermediate bridge may be the best way to describe it. So we may carry messages and try to bring sides together.

Finally, how do you see your future in terms of political life? Are you going to do a Ted Heath?

Ted Heath always puts me in mind of sulks. I liked Ted a lot, and he campaigned for me at Chesterfield, but his capacity for sulking was second to none.

But politics is a drug, isn't it?

It is in the blood. I don’t think that you can ever stop being political, if that is what interests you. What I’d like to do, in the job that I have at present, is to ensure that we are moving in the right direction. To ensure that we are stronger than we were at the previous Assembly elections has always been the aim. We went forward from 1999, we went forward from 2003 and we went forward last time. I want to continue that. Also, to ensure that we are more distinctly Welsh and that we are saying things that are relevant, and that we get in to government. Opposition is fun, but it isn’t as important as being in government and being able to do the things that you actually want to do. I know that the Assembly team accept that. We enjoy what we are doing, but we have policies that we know would make a real practical difference, for the

better, to the way that people lead their lives in Wales. We would love to be part of an administration that could put that into effect. I think that would be terrific for us and for this institution. The great danger in Wales, though not in Scotland, is that this is seen as a Labour redoubt, and that could affect turnouts and affect people's attitudes. It is not like that at General Elections because people feel that they can effect change at that time. But to a degree it is at an Assembly Election. People know that there is a chance to get other representation in, but in terms of who runs the show it has either been Labour or Labour-dominated. Given that they are a minority — though a sizeable minority — with 31 per cent they shouldn't always be in government here. It is certainly not healthy for democracy. So I think it would be good for democracy if there was a change of administration and the three other parties, or perhaps a combination of them, came together to offer an alternative. I think that would be good for Wales.

Do you see the slow demise of Labour hegemony?

We are seeing it, and I've never been one to say that everything about the Labour Party is bad, as they've done some great things. But the alternative view that everything that Labour does is good for Wales, and that other political parties haven't done anything good for Wales, is just so much rubbish that it really irritates me. I just think that a period in opposition might do them some good.