



Darlith Addysg Cymru
The Wales Education Lecture **2008**

*Schools in the community:
hubs of change*

The Rt. Hon. Professor Shirley Williams



Cyngor Addysgu Cyffredinol Cymru
General Teaching Council for Wales

The General Teaching Council for Wales

The General Teaching Council for Wales is the statutory, self-regulating professional body for teachers in Wales. It seeks to raise the status of teaching by maintaining and promoting the highest standards of professional practice and conduct in the interests of teachers, pupils and the general public.

The principal aims of the Council are:

- to contribute to improving the standards of teaching and the quality of learning, and
- to maintain and improve standards of professional conduct amongst teachers, in the interests of the public.

General Teaching Council for Wales
4th Floor, Southgate House
Wood Street
Cardiff
CF10 1EW
Tel: 029 2055 0350
Fax: 029 2055 0360

The Wales Education Lecture

On 10 November 2008, the Wales Education Lecture was delivered by The Rt. Hon. Professor Shirley Williams at the Hilton Hotel, Cardiff.

The Rt Hon. Professor Shirley Williams, Baroness Williams of Crosby

The Rt Hon. Professor Shirley Williams is a Member of the House of Lords, where she was Leader of the Liberal Democrats from 2001 to 2004, and is heavily involved in the current debate regarding the reform of the upper house. She began her career as a journalist for the Daily Mirror and The Financial Times and in 1960, became Secretary of the Fabian Society. Earlier in her career, she was a Member of the House of Commons and served as a Labour cabinet minister of Education and Science. Outside her career in government, Baroness Williams served as Public Service Professor of Elective Politics from 1988 to 2000 at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.



She lectured at numerous universities including Princeton University, University of California at Berkeley and Cambridge University. She is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations International and serves on several other boards, including the Moscow School of Political Studies and the International Crisis Group. She advises the British government on nuclear proliferation issues. Baroness Williams holds 11 honorary doctorates from British, Belgian and U.S. universities. She received a BA in philosophy, politics and economics from Somerville College, where she also received an MA, and attended Columbia University on a Fulbright Scholarship.

Schools in the community: hubs of change

I am delighted that so many of you have come and congratulate all of you for having this lecture in Wales. I'd like to see many more such lectures up and down the whole of the United Kingdom and I'll come later on to one of the reasons why I think it's so important.

I'm also delighted that one of the 'Great Janes' of Welsh education should be with us this evening – Jane Hutt. Many of us in distant Westminster are aware of what we call the 'Giant Janes' in Wales and we have a great deal to learn from them. So thank you, and thanks to your predecessor Jane Davidson, for the way in which you have worked out a new approach in Wales, and one that gives us a great opportunity for comparing different parts of the United Kingdom and drawing from them the best of each.

Let me add one word about my impressive Chairman, Mr. Mal Davies. When I looked up his C.V. I discovered to my amazement that, apart from being an outstanding teacher, and outstanding Headteacher, and someone deeply involved in Welsh education, he seems to have time for no less than three sports. Now, I understood rugby, because it's very well known that in Wales people use rugby to great effect in order to keep order in the schools. Some of it is due to strength, and some of it is due to example. I was a little bit surprised to see that his second sport was show-jumping until I learnt that perhaps it was not so much him but his family that were outstanding at show-jumping, but I also see the point of that. In a world that is full of exams we have to cross, what better training than show-jumping, a particularly dangerous form of examination? What I think did throw me a bit (and perhaps Mr. Davies will take the opportunity at some point to explain this) was the third of his sports, which turned out to be yachting. So I thought to myself, well, perhaps he can be challenged to take a trip around the Mumbles, perhaps even to load on one or two distinguished Russian oligarchs. So – I give him that challenge. On the one or two occasions when I've actually sailed around parts of the UK, any boat I've ever sailed has never had room for more than two people in it.

I want to divide my lecture into two parts. The first part is about a serious comparison between what are now effectively three education systems in the United Kingdom. I perhaps should say four, because of course there is the Northern Irish system which is a traditional system based upon selection. So we have there an example of a system which is not now widely practised in the other three countries of the United Kingdom but nevertheless has its own model to supply.

What we have before us here is a remarkable basis of comparison. Maybe we should go for what is sometimes called 'evidence-based learning' and look much more than governments or assemblies or devolved parliaments like to look, at what is actually the effect of different forms of education. We need, I think, to divorce ourselves from automatic political positions and look at the impact on our children and what the lessons are about what works and what doesn't.

I'll begin by admitting, very frankly, that my predilections are closer to the Scottish and Welsh systems as compared to the present English system. I said my 'predilections' – I believe that, at the end of the day, Wales and Scotland will have chosen a better approach than England. But it would be wrong for me to just make that assumption without asking you, and your colleagues in Scotland and in England, to look very carefully indeed at what is the impact on the children that you are trying to educate so that we can draw conclusions for all of us that would make our educational system better than it is today.

Let me say why I feel these comparisons should be made. I have always had a long relationship with Wales. Probably very few of you know that I spent no less than four years whizzing up and down from Port Talbot to Swansea, lecturing for the WEA (the Workers' Educational Association) and the National Council of Labour Colleges. In the course of that time I saw both the rise and then the gradual decline of the steel and coal industries (which were obviously central to that particular part of Wales) and where I also saw the effects of changes in occupation of a dramatic kind from what was a manufacturing economic base along that valley to a services base and a professional base. I'll come back to that in a moment or two.

In our devolved United Kingdom where we have these very widely different approaches to education there are a few things I want to pick out. If I go back to the time when I was Secretary of State for Education & Science, education was characterised by three things. The first of those was the drive towards comprehensive schooling where the drive itself was supported by huge popular opposition to the idea of the 11 plus. The 11 plus was essentially killed by the distaste of parents for a formal selection that started as young as eleven. That was as important in its own way in reflecting the views of parents and the views of teachers as anything that has happened since. There was very little opposition (people forget this now) to comprehensive schooling. Indeed, I remember when I went to some of the most solidly Conservative counties what I found, broadly speaking, was quite strong support for comprehensive education. My predecessor Sir Edward Boyle – a Conservative Education Secretary – strongly favoured it. He once told me in a rather charming joke that his agent had been to see him and said to him shortly before the 1970 election “Sir Edward, Sir Edward! We’ve given you comprehensive schools, we’ve given you teachers; for God’s sake – give us capital punishment!” You can make your own comparisons.

So there was indeed, until the birth of the so-called ‘Black Paper Writers’, a strange mixture of journalists and MPs - all of them very dogmatic, a relatively easy passage for the comprehensive approach. And of course my predecessor, that very distinguished and very strong-minded man, Tony Crosland, managed to sell the whole of the Labour party at that time on the idea of the opportunities being spread as widely as possible among all the children that went to state schools.

It is also true to say that at that time there was broad support for the idea of a very high degree of autonomy and freedom among teachers themselves. Up until 1988, and Kenneth Baker’s major Education Bill of that year, teachers had a great deal of say about how their schools were organised and almost total control over what method of teaching they adopted. The curriculum gave teachers freedom to choose what subjects they would concentrate on and what they wouldn’t. I’ll say in a moment or two why I think that could not have been sustained, but before I do I’m going to say one hard thing.

As an Education Secretary deeply committed to comprehensive education throughout the United Kingdom, I found the actions of some of the 'rank and file' teachers, specifically in London, very difficult to handle. Some of you may remember the stories about primary schools where some teachers refused to teach literacy and numeracy at all on the rather surprising grounds that this was in the interests of the class enemy. We did have a fair amount of dogmatism to deal with, just as later we had dogmatism on the other end of the spectrum of politics to deal with, both of which in their different ways did damage to education and a certain amount of damage to the reputation of teachers. We have to face that, because it is so easy to pretend that there is no responsibility that lies on us.

There were three factors that began to change education policy towards the 1988 Education Bill. The first was that the mobility of the population had become much more rapid than in the 1950s. People moved a great deal in the 60s and 70s from one place to another, with the result that very often when a child moved from one school to another school, especially from a primary to a secondary, where one local authority had one system and another one a different one (for example middle schools versus all-through comprehensive schools and so on), children were often very lost. What was typical for a long time of the armed services (where people moved from base to base and barrack to barrack) became much more generally true of the population as a whole, especially the urban population, with the result that many parents felt their children were not following through a consistent and steady form of education.

The second factor I've hinted at already, when I was talking about the route that went from Port Talbot through to Swansea. In many cases occupations changed dramatically too. We don't talk much about the mobility of occupation but it's something very important if one's trying to deal with an educational system and to give children a chance in life. If your father had for many years been a coal miner in the culture of mining and then suddenly found himself being part of a long assembly line at a factory with no strong sense of confidence in himself, it had quite devastating effects on the family, not least in the great manufacturing centres of the United Kingdom, like the Welsh Valleys and the Central Belt in Scotland.

The third big change that occurred was that some methods of teaching were felt to be too soft, too ineffective, too sprawling, too anarchic. So you've got these three things coming together and they paved the way to a much more rigid and much more formal system of education.

I saw it coming, because in 1978 I produced a green paper which proposed a core curriculum. What do we mean by a core curriculum? We mean a curriculum which was based essentially on the key subjects (at that time we would have added History to the key subjects; later we didn't). That would have been the basis of a core curriculum covering about 50% of the time in school; nothing like 90 or 95%, but 50-60% with a good deal of discretion for teachers and headteachers to decide how the other 35 or 40% was to be used. The purpose of that was to make education loose enough, flexible enough to be able to reflect local communities and to be able to reflect the needs of those communities. It became much more difficult with the very rigid curriculum that emerged from the 1988 Education Act.

It wasn't only a fairly rigid curriculum, some will remember as well - it introduced the regime of testing all the way through from Key Stage 1 to Key Stage 4, and then after that, children were handed over to the examination system which obediently set a whole lot more tests that started when they were 13 or 14. So it was a very tested system, a very examined system, a very geared system - geared to the passing of tests and the passing of examinations. It was then complemented by a later Secretary of State than Kenneth Baker, John Patten, who invented the league table and then finally made the link between the two. I shall be very outspoken on this; I believe that the link between testing and league tables is disastrous for education. I think we've paid a terrible price for it and I think we're still paying a terrible price for it, but I think it may be about to be going very slowly, and I welcome that.

What I think is worth mentioning is the extent to which some of the creativity has been driven out of education. When I go round schools (and I went to about six in the last few weeks), I find the best teachers feel that the creativity that they can brilliantly elicit from their children (because the best teachers can elicit creativity from their children), are hampered by the fact that there are so many tests to pass

and targets to attain. I notice that you have looked very closely, as in Scotland, at the whole question of the level of bureaucracy that is engendered by the testing regime and the extent to which that testing regime has become dominated by teaching to the test. The disaster of league tables is that if you know the status of your school (and often its funding depends upon where it stands in the league tables), you'll be very, very influenced by your need to try to get higher up those league tables. It's only the most brave teachers today, the most brave headteachers today, who will take on more than the minimum requirement (for example, of special needs children, of children with difficulties with dyslexia and dyspraxia) because they know it's going to reduce their chances of climbing up the league table.

I'll tell you a story. It's a true story, but it's anonymous for obvious reasons. A headmistress of a primary school, a very good primary school in an area I know well, a primary school that is very near the top of the county's league tables for those sorts of schools was asked whether she would take on (and she's a good, and warm and generous teacher) a couple of additional ESN children, children who were just within the mainstream - not actually statemented children, but children with obviously great needs that would put considerable demands upon her teaching staff. Reluctantly, she said no, because she knew that if she took those children on, almost certainly her school's league table placing would slip by two or three points. It would no longer be the top of the county; it would probably be somewhere in the top third in the county. It's a very big temptation for a good headteacher to cling on to the status on the ladder which he or she has got. If you've ever looked at the outside of Bath Abbey, the famous 'Jacob's Ladder', you'll see what happens to some headteachers if they miss the rung and fall all the way down to the bottom of the ladder. It's a bit like that. You may think I'm putting it too strongly - I don't think that I am.

The other thing that worries me a great deal about league tables is that outcomes from schools very closely relate to parents' incomes. The incoming children, if they come from one kind of social background, will give a huge initial bounce to the school's placing on the league tables. The amount of difference (what is nowadays I think very usefully called the 'value added'), is even in the very best school compared to the very worst school less than the difference that's made between the entry from

a leafy suburb and the entry from a rundown inner-city. And that's what is so unfair to teachers who have given a great deal of their time and effort to trying to make a difficult school in a difficult area better.

Don't take it from me, I'm going to quote to you from a very unexpected source and you may have seen it before. In an indignant outburst, the High Master of the independent St Paul's Boys' School, rated the best boys' school in the country by the Sunday Times in 2007, called league tables "a cancer on the face of education". Dr Martin Stephen went on to say that "League tables are the worst thing to have happened to education. My heart goes out to schools which draw from the lowest 30% of the ability range where they do not get the credit for the good work that they do". The headmaster of another distinguished independent school, Wellington College, Anthony Seldon (biographer of Tony Blair, by the by) declared that the league tables were, and I quote, "pernicious and corrupting". "League tables", he said, "based only on exam results are bad for parents, bad for children, bad for teachers and bad for schools". And I say to that, Amen - I agree.

Let me move on from that however, contentious as it is, to talk a little bit about some of the other characteristics that Wales and Scotland in particular have moved towards in the last few years. Both of you have decided that you don't want to have league tables but there is a slightly interesting difference between the two. Wales has just said no, we won't have them; Scotland rather cleverly decided that they would keep them but they would list all their schools in alphabetical order. They rightly judged the academic capacity of newspaper journalists and discovered, not totally surprisingly, that once they'd put the whole of Scotland in alphabetical order, most newspaper journalists just couldn't be bothered to work out league tables in order. So I have to commend the Scots for this to the Welsh; they rather slyly made sure that league tables cease to be any use without actually contending with those parents who thought that league tables were wonderful. Very clever – Scotland 1, Wales none, and England minus 1.

The second thing that Wales did (in this case Wales, I think, was rather ahead of Scotland), was to adopt the exciting idea of the Welsh Bac. The Welsh Bac, I think,

is a very interesting form of testing and examination for youngsters in the second stages of secondary education, and to my mind it has two huge benefits. One is that it doesn't limit itself to strictly academic criteria, nor does it narrow a child's education in a way that 'A' Levels do. I just about survived trying to change 'A' Levels. Every time I tried, the Prime Minister of the day - a Labour Prime Minister, incidentally - would always override it because of the overwhelming desire to satisfy the Daily Mail. The Daily Mail has a terrifying effect on Prime Ministers – they all get wobbly, terribly wobbly at the knees when anyone suggests the disappearance of the 'A' Level.

You again, cleverly, in Wales found your way somewhere through this thicket. Being simple-minded, and I'm not entirely an Englishwoman (I'm partly Welsh and partly English) my English bit wanted to take it on head-on. A person who tried to take 'A' Levels head on was of course Mr. Tomlinson, who produced, I think, a wonderful idea for secondary education which widened out the concept of the overarching diploma to a very wide range of forms of intelligence. It was that great educationalist Timothy Brighouse who said to me on one occasion, "intelligence is not as the universities think, limited to classical academic intelligence". There are many forms of intelligence: there is practical intelligence, there is skill intelligence, there is community intelligence, there is human relationship intelligence. All of us have friends who reflect one or other of these, none of us would want to narrow our friendships down to only the academically most outstanding because we know in our own lives that people with a brilliant capacity for human relationships, people who are brilliant athletes, people who are wonderful musicians, all enrich society and yet they might not have got through 'A' Levels if they had tried them in any subject except the one that they were brilliant at.

So, I liked the ideas of Tomlinson; I still think it's a huge missed opportunity in England, that Tomlinson was put on the shelf. I'm pleased to see that the present Secretary of State is quietly trying to take it off the shelf when nobody's watching, and don't look, please don't look, because I think it may happen if you don't look – but won't if you do!

The next thing I want to commend both Scotland and Wales on, and in this case, Wales more than Scotland – was the decision to look at the foundation years of education. I understand in Wales the foundation years are seen as three to seven; in Scotland they're more narrowly tied to the first one or two years of schooling. But you're absolutely right – what we don't recognise is that many of our children, especially in the most beleaguered and disadvantaged areas, are no longer able to play. They can't play in the streets, because the traffic is too dangerous. Their parents – I think, sadly – believe they can't play in the parks, because everybody has been filled by the media with the feeling that every other person is a paedophile. It really is, frankly, absolute rubbish. Again I'll be very outspoken – paedophiles, of course, are dangerous people, but I have no reason to believe that there are any more than there were when I was a child (I certainly encountered some), but they were hidden away, particularly in schools, so that nobody actually talked about them all the time. One of the things that I find very sad is that because of our fear of paedophiles, we're now closing down on our children's sense of adventure, their sense of excitement, and their sense of something absolutely crucial in the modern age, which is their awareness and sense of risk. Health and safety are trying to take risk out of life – it can't. And the life that's coming in front of us isn't going to be less risky, but more risky. When you look at things like climate change, it isn't in my view helpful to children to try to exclude them from risk, because that's to exclude them from life.

When I see completely crackers councils cutting down chestnut trees in case a conker falls on a child's head, or trying to stop children climbing trees, you cut down the most dangerous trees, but for goodness' sake, let them squirrel their way up oaks, as I did as a child. You've got to give children a sense of adventure, a sense of creation, and a sense of risk. And we are now in danger of driving all of them out, partly for fear, sadly, of insurance companies saying to us that they won't insure our playground any more.

In looking again at the foundation stage, you'll give back to children, hopefully, a sense of what it is to play, a sense of what it is to run free, the sense of what it is to be a child. It's very hard to be a child, very tough. And so I commend you on that. I haven't

got time to commend you on everything; I'd like to, but I'll say just one or two other things.

One of the things I want to find out from the Scots is how they manage to produce so many fewer children who are excluded from school for any length of time than either Wales or, even more, England. We now know, terrifyingly, that if a child is excluded from school, even at a very early stage in his or her life, their chances of ending up as a young offender are massively multiplied. So we've got to find ways of identifying much earlier on a child who needs help, whose parents need help, who needs opportunities to be adventurous without being dangerous, because otherwise we are literally breeding, in a desperate attempt to make our schools look as if they're doing even better, the very children who are going to make our society very unpleasant if we go on behaving in this way. I think I'm right in saying that England has a very much higher proportion of excluded children than Scotland has; I don't know about Wales, you can answer to me. I do know that we should avoid long exclusion from school. Well, having said all this, both our systems, the English system – fairly rigid, very test-related, very performance-related - and the Welsh and Scottish systems – more relaxed, less inclined to test kids all the time, disinclined to have league tables, are all going to come under a lot of pressure. You've got it in Wales, Scotland's got it, England's got it. Where does that pressure come from? It comes from the fact that we're going to go through three or four difficult economic years, and in Wales, there's a special additional difficulty that, (admittedly on advice from the Treasury) a very substantial number of Welsh local authorities put money into the Icelandic banks. It's estimated that in Wales there's something like a £60m shortfall as the result of those now lost loans – higher than for any other part of the United Kingdom. The other area where we're all going to be tested is in terms of the likelihood that there will not be an overall increase in the money going to education in any of our three countries, and although I know there's a perfectly, in my view, justified Welsh argument with the present Westminster allocation, the blunt truth is that whatever the allocation, the overall figure is going to be certainly no higher than it is at the present time, and could be lower. So we're going to have to learn how to pull in our belts.

I hope, therefore, that you will look at the comparison between the three, not only as they are now, but also as they cope with these difficult financial challenges that are coming to them. Let me talk for a moment about some particular areas of concern and then end up by talking a bit about community-based schooling. I'll list them quickly, because I don't want to keep you here all night, and time is running on, so I'll list them almost alphabetically:

A serious problem about recruiting headteachers, because the burden being placed on them is now becoming almost impossible. They're being better trained by the present government, incidentally – I commend them on that - but it's all very well being well-trained, but then having a burden to carry of bureaucracy, of instruction, of insistence on things being done in a particular way, that actually loads even the finest headteachers with a burden that really nobody should be asked to carry, and that they're not only being asked to carry, but that's being consistently added to.

The second one: class sizes. I'll just give you a dramatic figure on that. The class size of a primary school in the United Kingdom is 24 pupils. The average class size of the European Union as a whole, which includes much poorer countries like Greece or Portugal, is 14.9 - that's nearly 15 - against our 24. The class size in the British private sector is 13. What that means is that state school teachers in England, Wales and Scotland are being asked to teach twice as big a class as in the small independent school down the road. And what that means, and you all know this (and I know this too), is that when you have a special demand for a child who's got special needs, it's almost impossible to cope with, however hard you try.

Last of all, I'll say a word about the 14 to 19s, and this carries me through to the final bit about community-based schooling, what your own recent reports by your inspectors have pinpointed. One of the great things that we can do with community-based schools – and I congratulate the inspectors on some of the examples they've given – is actually involve the 14-19s in making a school community-minded. One of the examples that your inspectors have given to me by way of their report is a school which encourages visiting of both nursery schools and old-age homes by school children in the school itself. It's become a learning centre. Yes, but why not one stage

further? Why not let some of our 14-19s not only visit, but work with children in nursery schools, work with children who've got educational needs? One of the most exciting experiments I ever saw in my life many years ago was the bringing together of children with heavy Down's syndrome and a boys' Borstal. Over three years, the boys in the Borstal and the children who had Down's syndrome founded or formed fantastic friendships, and you could see both sets of children changing before your eyes. Perhaps today we're not even radical enough to consider that, but it was one of the most exciting things I've ever seen.

Right – I won't go on and on – community-focused, then. There are already elements of community focus in all our countries, and they're very important. Teaching assistants have been a wonderful discovery; they're one of things that have made schools more human, more warm, more affectionate, and they're terribly important. In the Teaching Awards, we now have a category of the Most Outstanding Teaching Assistant, and bluntly, twenty years ago, that would have been considered very odd indeed. Governors drawn from the community – please don't go down the route of deciding that you can't have governors from the community, because they are a crucial element and a link between the two. But again, sadly, we're beginning to drive out good governors because the load of work they have to carry is beyond belief. My daughter's a full-time civil servant with two young children; she's the deputy chairman of her own governing body. Every single week, she gets something like eight hours of reading to do because the Department of Education (it used to be called that!) – the Department for Children, Schools and Families are shoving vast quantities of stuff at her, and so like many other mothers of young children, she's considering giving up, although she doesn't want to. The Department have got to understand the load they're putting on these volunteers, and it's not supportable for very much longer.

Finally, on community-based schooling, I congratulate you, but you need to think very hard between whether the right way to go is the way that Scotland's gone, in what it calls Schools of Ambition (concentrating most of the relatively modest sums of money on a small number of schools that are coming up with innovative ideas and exciting practices that might be spread), or the much more thinly spread style that you've adopted in Wales. Frankly, in some cases, this approach is so thin that it's

almost impossible for the schools to do what they want to do. I'm not going to make a judgement; I've already talked about evidence-based learning. I'm only going to say that in this very exciting development, when you can't expect to see huge increases in the sums of money involved, look very hard at things like one or two of the ideas that are in Wales and in Scotland, and for that matter what I've just suggested about the 14-19s, to see how you can make community involvement go a long way on not a great deal of money, but not so little that actually you can't achieve anything very much.

Thank you very much for listening; I hope you don't mind me being audacious in what I've said, but then, what's the point in not being, when you reach my age?! You're safe, much safer than almost anybody younger than you, and if there's any advantage to old age it is for independent thinking.

Thank you for listening.