

Ministers Reflect

Alun Davies



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Biographical details

Assembly history

2007–11: Labour Party member of the Senedd for Mid and West Wales

2011–present: Labour Party member of the Senedd for Blaenau Gwent

Government career

2011–13: deputy minister for agriculture, food, fisheries and European programmes

2013–14: minister for natural resources and food

2016–17: minister for lifelong learning and the Welsh language

2017–18: cabinet secretary for local government and public services

Alun Davies was interviewed by Akash Paun and Alex Nice on 12 October 2021 for the Institute for Government’s Ministers Reflect project. The interview took place remotely due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Alun Davies reflects on his ministerial roles in the Welsh government, including as minister for natural resources and food, and cabinet secretary for local government and public services. He discusses the challenges of ministerial office, the experience of working with EU officials and UK government counterparts, and the impact of the EU referendum.

Akash Paun (AP): You first became part of the government after the election in May 2011, when you were appointed as deputy minister for agriculture, food, fisheries and European programmes. It’s quite a mouthful of a title! What was it like to be appointed a minister for the first time, what did it feel like walking into government, and what was your first day in office like?

Alun Davies (AD): Well, it was enormously exciting, of course, and a privilege, as I suppose any minister would say. It’s also incredibly bewildering, because of course you come up against the civil service for the first time. And you know, it’s very rare, where you enter an organisation of that sort where you have very little experience or knowledge, as one of the leaders of that organisation. Almost everybody who is supporting you knows more about your brief than you do. That’s something which I learnt very, very quickly.

I’d spoken to the first minister [of Wales, Carwyn Jones] before the election, so the appointment to government itself wasn’t necessarily a surprise. He was indicating that he wanted to bring me into government. The role was a bit of a surprise. You say it’s a mouthful; it certainly was a mouthful, but it was also a chunky role for a deputy minister, because you had at that time the renegotiation of the CAP [EU common

agricultural policy], the renegotiation of the fisheries policy and the renegotiation of the financial framework of the European budget, and the renewal of all the European programmes. So, that's a very wide brief for somebody who is, in constitutional terms, a deputy minister and doesn't have a budget of their own.

So, it was enormously exciting. It was a job I wanted to do as well; it was a job I was interested in. I'd chaired committees in a previous Senedd, looking at some of these matters. It was something I wanted to get my teeth into, and I had ideas of things I wanted to do. You know, you can always say that the worst thing government has to deal with is a minister with his own ideas – and certainly I had some very clear ideas about what I wanted to achieve at that time.

So you do have that sense of a whirlwind. I met my senior official for the first time on my first day in office, and he very gently told me that all of my ideas were completely without merit and he led me gently and knowingly along a path which he wanted to tread. And that was fair enough. I appreciated greatly the support I received from him as an individual and from other teams. I was very engaged with the talent and the ideas within the civil service. I felt there were other aspects of it, with the European programmes, where we needed to look a lot harder at certain things. We were a spending department in many ways, and I felt we needed to become a lot more of a policy department as well. So there was a lot of really chunky issues to get your teeth into.

AP: You said that you weren't expecting to be given that particular portfolio, and yet you came in with lots of ideas of what you wanted to do. Where did those ideas come from? Were they things you were specifically asked to focus on by the first minister, were they things from the manifesto, or were they just things you'd already been thinking about as a politician before you became minister?

AD: All of those things. If you take agriculture and the CAP, for example, the CAP was up for renegotiation, as it is every few years. So, we needed to look at that. I'd chaired the [Agriculture and] Rural Development Committee in a previous Senedd, so we'd looked hard at how the CAP was operating and how [the] CAP was working. So I was very clear in my own mind.

I'll give you an example of what we did do from that. You've pillar 1 and pillar 2 [of the CAP]. Pillar 1 is basic agricultural business support, and pillar 2 is almost everything else in terms of supporting supply chains, environment projects and the rest of it. I was very clear that European budgets were going to erode over time, and that there needed to be a move in focus and emphasis from pillar 1 to pillar 2. I moved money from pillar 1 to pillar 2 in order to invest in the viability of farm businesses, in order to invest in landscape management at a much wider scale, and to invest in supply chains, which meant that the income that was being derived by communities from agriculture was spread more widely and we were able to add more value within rural communities. So it

was much more of a rural development plan as well as an agriculture development plan. I had very clear ideas, which we largely delivered on.

In terms of European programmes, I felt we had to be far more honest about how they were going and what we were achieving in those programmes. I felt we needed a far greater focus on outcomes, rather than administration. As a spending department, we were very good administrators, and I felt that was a good thing. It's not a bad starting point is it?! But you know, if you're in government, you shouldn't just be administering funds, you need to be actually using those funds in a more creative way. And, one of my first jobs was to publish the final report on the objective 1 [use of EU structural funds to promote growth in less-developed regions], in the first round of European funding in Wales and the UK, from 1999 or around 2000, and we needed to learn those lessons. I was very lucky as a minister, because the report reflected my own prejudices, so, I was very much implementing something which I felt was going in the right direction, and where I didn't feel I was being pushed in a direction I didn't really want to travel in. So, there were a number of different areas where I felt we needed to make significant policy changes in order to deliver on a much wider agenda.

Alex Nice (AN): As you say, at the point when you became minister, the EU budget was being renegotiated. How much interaction did you have directly with EU officials? And how did you find the process of trying to ensure that the UK's negotiating position on the EU budget and the CAP reflected the interests of Wales?

AD: Do you know, that's one of the things I was thinking about, as I was thinking about this interview today. If I look back over my time in office, I'm reasonably content with most of the decisions I took as a minister. I think some of them were the right decisions. Ten years later, you'd look at other decisions and you'd think: "Did I get that right, yes or no?" And that's more of an open question and I think that's probably true of most ministers. But, if I think about an area where there's clear disappointment, it's in the relationships with the United Kingdom [government].

To answer your question, I was in Brussels every month at the [EU] Agri[culture] and Fish[eries] Council and I went to the General Affairs Council as well on budgetary issues. And the relationships we had there were very good and very strong. The Welsh government's office in Brussels is a good office, it works well and it's well funded, with good officials working hard. They know their stuff and they're well plugged in to the networks around the Berlaymont, and Schuman, that sort of area of Brussels [where the European Commission and the European Council are located]. So, it's a good platform there.

European officials were always very welcoming; they were always ready to help. The UK rep [the UK permanent representative to the EU] was excellent; Kim Darroch was the UK rep for most of that time. I think some officials occasionally felt torn, because they had a secretary of state going in one direction, we didn't quite go in the same direction

and some of those officials were certainly shocked at the way I and others spoke about the UK government occasionally, which they didn't expect in some of our interactions. But overwhelmingly, the system worked.

We had a good relationship with Scotland. Northern Ireland was always there and not there – you always had to make allowances for the situation in Northern Ireland. But that wasn't difficult, everybody knows the situation, everybody knew around the table the context, so that wasn't difficult really either. But, we had a very good relationship with the Scottish government.

And, for most of the time, we had a very good relationship with the UK government. I think one of the things we forget today, in the disaster that is intergovernmental relations in the UK, is how good the relationship could be and has been. I dealt with UK ministers who were mostly Conservative – there were a few Lib[eral] Dem[ocrat]s in the mix, but mostly Conservative. And when the door is closed and when the cameras are switched off and when there's no microphones around, you have a good and rich interaction with UK ministers. Fiona Hyslop from Scotland [former cabinet secretary for culture, tourism and external affairs] led a negotiation on a protocol governing the role of devolved ministers in European councils. William Hague was the [UK] foreign secretary at the time, and we agreed a protocol, which would be unthinkable today, frankly. It just would be unthinkable that you would be able to reach such a far-reaching agreement with the United Kingdom government, which gives devolved ministers entrenched rights to speak and to attend and to shape the UK message at [an EU] council.

I found that a very, very enjoyable part of the job, because we would sit around before an Agri Council [EU Agriculture and Fisheries Council], it's the easiest example, a table, four governments there, we would have a speaker note, which had been largely agreed by officials beforehand, and we would go through the speaker note, we would go through the agenda. It's usually chaired by the UK minister, and we would then agree the note, we would agree a UK position, and I tried to push the idea of a single UK voice speaking in different accents. So, for example, if we were talking about sheep farming, for argument's sake, then it would clearly be something that the Welsh government would want to take a lead on because it's more relevant in Wales than elsewhere. But if we're talking about the cod recovery plan, then clearly that's more relevant to Scotland than it is to Wales or England.

So, there were lots of different issues where we had different strengths. And I thought that was the UK working at its best, where the different strengths of the governments in the different parts of the UK added to the totality of the whole. And the same was true in [EU] general affairs and in budget negotiations. Wales, for all the mistakes we may well have made, had far greater expertise in the administration of European programmes than they had in the relevant Whitehall department.

And so, we seconded people, we worked together, we worked with [the] UK rep, and I felt we worked very well together in those days and we actually achieved a very powerful voice for the United Kingdom, by working together. And I am exceptionally disappointed that, looking back with hindsight, so much of that relied on goodwill, and structures that can be thrown aside by the UK government, that frankly wants to steamroller devolved administrations today, rather than look at the strength of the UK as a whole.

AP: How did the relationship work between you, as the deputy minister with quite a wide-ranging set of responsibilities of your own, and the cabinet secretary, Edwina Hart, to whom you reported to? To what extent were you just a minister by another name? To what extent were you reporting to her as your boss?

AD: At the time we were ministers and deputy ministers, and I've always thought that's a pointless designation or differential. Because, there were [only] rare occasions when myself and Edwina needed to sit down and sort out a difficulty. My responsibilities were all wide and very chunky. Edwina had forceful views on lot of different things, but she didn't have strong views on large parts of my brief. So, she didn't seek to involve herself in anything. And Edwina was also very keen on just letting people get on with things. The structures, I think, baked in a potential for conflict. But, that didn't occur.

I think there were one or two occasions where myself and Edwina had really tough conversations about different things, and it was about support for individual businesses and different things, where I felt we should be more proactive in particular ways or, I just took a different view to her, and that's all fine. But I couldn't deliver any of that because I didn't have a budget, and a lot of my work was policy rather than delivery. So budget issues didn't figure very greatly in my day-to-day work.

But I'm not convinced of the structures. I think being a deputy minister mattered more for people I was meeting, who were sometimes quite put out to have a deputy minister in front of them, quite frankly, than it mattered in terms of the day-to-day administration of government or conduct of government in Cardiff. It was a little bit more difficult sometimes to get to meet the right person in Brussels. The minister or whoever it happened to be or the [EU] commissioner was always very happy [to meet], but quite often the people around them, their private office, would say: "No, we don't want to meet a deputy minister, we want to meet the minister." And, so there were difficulties there, every so often. But I don't want to overegg that either.

My feeling is that government operates better when you've got ministers who are working together to deliver a programme. And when you've got a hierarchy of ministers, that sometimes creates some difficulties in a small institution like the Welsh government. Certainly when I had a deputy minister later on in life, I told her that I had no interest in getting myself involved in her brief – it was up to her to deliver on her brief. We would meet for a coffee every Monday and we would talk through things, in

an informal way, you know, no officials, a spad [special adviser] in the room, but no other officials. And we would chat through different issues, but I had no interest in sort of trying to second-guess her. We were dealing with some difficult issues. She was a housing minister, it was after Grenfell. There were lots of really difficult issues around budgets and about legislation and about the safety of high-rise buildings and the reports from Grenfell were beginning to be published. My clear view was and is that we need to respond to that as quickly as possible, and to do that as comprehensively as we need to guarantee public safety. And also the lives of people who live in these buildings, in term of finances. We've all seen those stories. But I never wanted to intervene in her work, because you trust your colleagues, and if you have a disagreement with your colleagues you have a disagreement with them, and it's better to work on the disagreement rather than in [a] hierarchy.

AP: Your next role was minister for natural resources and food at the time of a machinery-of-government reorganisation. How did your role change and what was the rationale for that reorganisation of government?

AD: I don't remember the rationale. There were changes made that Carwyn Jones [first minister of Wales, 2009–18] wanted to make. He wanted to bring the natural resources brief together. He had excluded animal health and animal welfare from my agriculture brief, which is quite unusual. He'd done it because he knew that I was not convinced by the policy on bovine TB [tuberculosis]. I haven't discussed this with Carwyn, but it's my clear view, and I think he's hinted at it at different times, that he gave the animal welfare brief to a colleague, the then the natural resources minister, John Griffiths, because he knew he would deliver the policy. Whereas I thought it was a pretty awful policy if I'm quite blunt. I went to cabinet to argue against it, and I don't think Carwyn wanted to put me in a position of either having to deliver a policy I didn't believe in or basically obstructing a policy that he felt the government had to deliver.

So, that was the one significant change to my range of responsibilities. I had then a wider range in terms of the environment, the creation of NRW [Natural Resources Wales] as a quango, or new environmental regulator as I should say. My memory as I look back over those days is that we were literally firefighting from day one almost. We had the greatest storms that any devolved government has had to deal with. I remember travelling up to the North Wales coast, to just stand in people's living rooms. You know, they'd just lost everything, it was absolutely awful. I remember going to Aberystwyth to see the promenade had just disintegrated; there was some extraordinary damage to the heart of the town. We had to instigate a review immediately into how all of that was working, all of our sea defences. That was a huge thing for a new organisation like NRW to deal with, and for a government which didn't fully understand the consequences, the human consequences, of climate change and the storms that we're more familiar with today actually.

We had the horse meat scandal, of course, which was again another good example of four administrations working together. I remember we were all called up to Defra [the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs]. We turned up there, and the disaster of that was just laid bare for us by officials. And we needed to respond, and we did respond to that. And I felt we responded in a reasoned way, although it was a very, very difficult situation. But, I concluded the negotiations on [the] CAP [and] completed the negotiations on fisheries. I lost the European programme brief, which I'd enjoyed, but, there was a focus on a more climate-orientated agenda, I suppose. One of the things I did, which we're beginning to go back to now of course, you know these things always go round in circles, was a green economy. I went to the Guildhall in London to publish a prospectus on a green investment and a green economy, which I felt we should be spending a lot more time focusing on. And, so there were some changes as there always are. The step from deputy minister to minister wasn't one which affected me in a way which people might necessarily believe. It meant you go to cabinet every week rather than being drafted in, but it wasn't something which I felt was a significant change.

AP: What was your experience of cabinet decision making under Carwyn Jones? Was cabinet a place where big decisions were discussed and jointly taken? Or, was it a bit of window dressing?

AD: It wasn't window dressing. There were solid conversations which took place, and there were people who had strong views on different matters, as you can imagine. We talked before cabinet meetings and if you had an issue you really wanted to get through, you would spend time talking to your colleagues and you would invest in it. Some colleagues would support you, others might be a bit more tricky. So, you would certainly touch base with all of your colleagues if there was a particularly sensitive or difficult issue.

If it was an issue which was especially difficult, then you would have formal meetings of course, and you would involve your colleagues beforehand. Carwyn was very, very clear, that he didn't expect cabinet to be a forum for rows. He wanted us to work in a collegiate way and that we brought presentations to cabinet after conversation with our colleagues and not before. So, he was very, very clear that if we hadn't had those conversations with colleagues that he would not allow a paper to be tabled. So, I found it a very positive, collegiate way of working. I felt that we worked together reasonably well. It was a period where Carwyn was quite distant from us himself, but, it was a cabinet which largely worked quite well together. There are obviously tensions between different individuals. It's not a Sunday-school tea party. But my memories of cabinet at that time were meetings where you would have conversations rather than disagreements and arguments.

AP: You were in that role then for a year and a bit. It's on the public record that you were asked to step down from that role. It was reported that this is because you asked civil servants to provide information on the financial interests of opposition politicians relating to farming subsidy payments. Is there anything you wanted to say about that episode and any lessons that you personally learnt from it?

AD: Yeah, I was sacked. You're very kind to try and finesse these things. But, look, I think it is important to review what happened there. I'd already changed the law on this matter to make these subsidies public, because it was part of CAP negotiations. And we'd already agreed to change the law, and if you go to the Defra website, I believe now you can still see all the information on agricultural payments. That's on the public record today, and it would have been on the public record then. I'd agreed to do that about a month before all of this happened. And so there was a very clear political agreement, which Carwyn should have seen, that we'd agreed to put all of this information [declaration of financial interest in agricultural subsidies] on the public record. I was very clear about this right through my period [overseeing] European programmes, that if somebody is speaking on the record, using their parliamentary platform, then you have an absolute duty to say if you have a personal financial interest in that matter. And, there was an instance last week here in this parliament, where a Conservative member had to put on the record that she is a landlord when she was speaking about landlords' rights.

And so, as a consequence of that, the law has changed. The agreement between the four governments of the UK was that all payments made from the public purse to an agriculture business should be available on the public record. It wasn't the case prior to that, and that was the right and proper thing to do. The Standards Commission down here has also said that members who speak on these matters should declare that interest, and should make clear that they have a personal interest in that. So, a lot of the issues I was concerned about at the time are being resolved now.

I think there is an unresolved issue about the operation of the ministerial code. Because, there were two issues in fact, where I was in dispute with Carwyn at that time. And on neither occasion was I allowed an opportunity to actually put my case. Both times – on an economic development issue in my constituency, and on this more substantive issue – I was told: “This is the first minister's decision and this is the evidence he's used to reach that decision, and this is the consequence.” And I thought it was an extraordinary travesty of natural justice, that I was given no opportunity at all, no notice of these issues, no opportunity to put my case and no opportunity to argue my case. And I think that was a really poor operation of the [ministerial] code. And as I said in an earlier answer, Carwyn was a very distant figure at this time – he went through a period of being a very distant figure.

Leighton Andrews [Welsh minister for education and skills, 2009–13] described the atmosphere in government at the time as being toxic. That's on the record as well. And

Leighton isn't far from the truth. The cabinet worked well together, as I've already said to you, but, there was an issue with the relationship between members of that government and the first minister. And, many of us found it very difficult to reach Carwyn at that time, very difficult to have conversations with him. I think what happened to me was partly a consequence of that, rather than a consequence of substantive issues.

AP: Thank you for giving us your side of that story. You then had a period out of government, before being asked to return by the same first minister. Was that the unexpected given that it sounded like from what you were just saying that your relationship had broken down at that point, but within a couple of years you were back in government working with him again?

AD: The relationship did break down. There's no point pretending otherwise. I was not best pleased at the turn of events as you can imagine and I think he found it quite difficult as well. I've known Carwyn since we were teenagers; we were students together. My feeling as I grow older and more decrepit is that life throws a lot of different things at you, and you can either stay in a bad place, becoming angry, talking to nobody except yourself because even the people you live with are no longer interested, or you can actually move forward and try to make the best of sometimes very difficult cases. And you know I make no bones, it was a difficult time, and it was certainly difficult then to walk back into the chamber and to contribute as a backbencher again. It was certainly difficult. However, do I wish to sacrifice a friendship of decades over one particular issue? The answer that I've come to is no. So, we need to think, how do you get over that? I hope that I continued to contribute to politics in the wider sense from the backbench. And I spoke to spads of Carwyn's after there'd been changes to his office and I had conversations with them. So, the move back into government again wasn't a surprise after the election. They'd told me that they wanted me to come back into government. They didn't tell me what they wanted me to do, but there was a conversation which took place, prior to dissolution, about how I would return to government.

AP: You were offered the role of minister for lifelong learning and the Welsh language. You would have been working quite closely with Kirsty Williams, minister for education, in that portfolio, who was from a different party [the Liberal Democrats]. What was that like? Were there any particular difficulties or challenges that arose as a result of that party difference?

AD: No, and the reason I was appointed largely to that role was to work with Kirsty. I've always been a proponent of pluralistic politics and working across party boundaries. At that election, the Liberal Democrats were annihilated, essentially. Kirsty was left as the only member. Kirsty's someone I've known for some decades and I contacted the government – not just myself, others as well – and said: "Look, you know, we've got to reach out to Kirsty." We discussed it amongst a group of different people, how we

would do that. There were different options discussed around that time and there was a very clear sense that Kirsty is a very talented individual and somebody who would make a great contribution. And I certainly argued that we should offer her a role and, it's obviously her choice, but offer her the opportunity to play a positive role in the new Senedd, rather than to languish as a single voice on the backbench, where her talents would have been completely unused and she wouldn't have been able to make the contributions she did make.

So, we were very, very clear about that and I think he [Carwyn Jones] knew that we had a good relationship, personally, between us both, and because we'd had these private conversations in the previous weeks, that it was probably a good mix. I think the Welsh language was bolted on, quite honestly, to enable us to create a role which would help the wider machinery of government to function. So, my role was to be Kirsty's deputy. That was the unspoken truth, as I see it. But, as it turned out I enjoyed the job. I felt it worked well. I felt that myself and Kirsty worked well together in government, and I thought that we set in motion some good initiatives.

AP: What were your own personal responsibilities and priorities, the things that you then got on with trying to deliver?

AD: Well, there were two clear priorities, well three if you like. First of all FE [further education]. There were some serious issues to address in FE in terms of structural issues around funding FE. It had been through a really difficult time. If I'm quite honest I don't think we really got to grips with those in my time in office. The second was additional learning needs. We put the legislation through the Senedd and that was one of the things that I spent most of my time doing, legislating for a new framework for additional learning needs. I was moved just before it reached Royal Assent, but we did all the work we needed to do on that. We pushed that legislation through, and that was a key reform. The third was Welsh language policy. We had a manifesto commitment to create a million [Welsh] speakers by 2050, so, we had to make that real, and so we spent a lot of time and invested a lot of time in developing that policy and we launched it, I think it was probably the spring or early summer of the following year. Where we were able to, you know, bring the football team together with the government in order to launch a different approach to Welsh language policy, and I was very proud of doing that. And the million-speaker target still galvanises people. I'm not convinced by the Welsh government's policy approach after I left government – I don't think it's an area where the Welsh government's really delivered. But as a galvanising policy initiative, I think it's something which will stand the test of time.

AP: And in that lifelong learning role did you have to work quite closely with the UK government, for example with the Department for Work and Pensions?

AD: No. I remember the conversations we had at the time. I didn't even know who the UK ministers were. You're reflecting on a time now where relations were beginning to fray between the administrations – it's post Brexit, of course. I had been charged with delivering a Valleys Taskforce as well, which showed the limitations of the Welsh government, the machinery of government. It wasn't quite a disaster, but – I'll be speaking tomorrow in the chamber in a debate on this – it was a disaster in terms of delivering policy. It shows that you can't deliver something unless you've got the machinery available to deliver on it. I spent a huge amount of time of my life trying to rally people together, to spend their money on my projects. And if you've spoken to a minister about trying to persuade colleagues to spend their budgets on your priorities, you'll know what an impossible task that is. And it simply didn't work. I think we've got to be quite honest about that. It didn't work in terms of policy delivery. It didn't really work in terms of policy development either, because I was constantly asking officials from other departments to do something for me, and their minister was saying: "Actually, I'm not really interested in you doing that." So, in terms of reflections on office, unless you've got a delivery mechanism, you haven't got a programme, and you haven't got a policy and you haven't got any means of delivering on whatever ambition you've got.

AP: So, that limited your ability to get stuff done in that particular role?

AD: Well it stopped it, it stopped it. It wasn't just limiting, you know. I didn't have a budget to buy tea and coffee at meetings. And again, that is a real issue when you've got a deputy minister and a minister. Kirsty wasn't the minister who held that budget, as it happens. It was held by Labour ministers, but they weren't Labour ministers who had an interest in my agenda.

AN: You then became cabinet secretary for local government and public services. It's obviously a very broad portfolio. In practice, what were the issues that took up most of your time and what were your main priorities?

AD: I decided to ignore all the advice that I was given, and to tell the truth, and you can argue whether that's a good thing in politics or not. The unspoken truth in Wales is that local government simply doesn't function effectively. And, I see that in my constituency workload every week of my life. If you bring a couple of politicians together in Wales, the talk will eventually come back to [the fact that] local government doesn't work.

When I was appointed to the local government brief, nobody congratulated me, nobody. Everybody sympathised with me. They said: "Oh God, you've got that" or "What are you going to do?". And so I decided... My experience of government in Wales is that – and it goes back to our previous conversations around delivery – you can't deliver policy unless you've got a means of delivery, and we don't have a means of

delivery in local government. The traditional Labour approach to this had been to set up as many committees as possible in the shortest period of time, in order to deliver policy. You don't have to have a PhD in government to know that committees don't deliver policy and don't deliver services. And Wales is at the moment proving that to be true yet again.

So, I embarked on an issue around the merger of local authorities, to halve the number of local authorities in Wales. Everybody I met agreed with me in private; nobody agreed with me in public. I'm not going to, but when I finally retire, I will repeat the conversation I had with a senior member of the Conservative Party, who agreed with me, and who said we will support you, as long as Monmouthshire, or the Vale of Glamorgan or the Vale of Clwyd, or whatever it is [is] carved out of these proposals. Plaid Cymru, who said we absolutely agree with you, and we will vote for you as long as Gwynedd is carved out, or Ceredigion is carved out, or Anglesey is carved out. And the Labour members who said yes, we completely agree with you, as long as my area is left alone. So, what you've got is a political class essentially failing people and failing citizens. And a political class working together to do that. It's not as if it's [just the] Labour Party or the Conservatives or Plaid Cymru – they're all to blame. Labour's got the biggest element of blame, of course, because Labour's in government [in Wales] and Labour should know better. But, there are very few people you'll meet who in private will disagree with the proposition that I made public.

AN: What impact did the EU referendum result have on your work and the operation of the Welsh government? How well prepared did you feel that the civil service was for the outcome of the referendum?

AD: Woefully prepared. Nobody was prepared and nobody considered it possible, and so we certainly weren't prepared. We established a European Transition Sub-Committee in cabinet, as it was called, which I was brought on to, as a deputy minister as well as a minister. But nobody had an idea what to do. I can't emphasise to you greatly enough that after that vote nobody knew what to do. Nobody knew what to do. Nobody knew how you would go about this Article 50 process. Nobody knew how you would disengage. Nobody had an idea what to do.

I knew we needed a political response. I campaigned hard to remain [in the EU], and I knew that people in my constituency who voted by the greatest margin to leave the European Union in Wales were voting not on the European Union but on what they felt was a Welsh government, a local authority, a UK government who had neglected them and their communities. It was a cry of pain, if you like, as much as it was about the European Union. Which is why we set up a Valleys Taskforce within a month of that vote, because I felt we needed a political response to that.

But, in terms of policy and in terms of government, the UK government, as far as I can see – because, I didn't have any interface with the UK government at this time – turned

in on itself. My view of the current United Kingdom government elected in '19, but to some extent '17 as well, [is that] it's a very right-wing, English nationalist government; and in some ways an English supremacist government at the moment, where, you know, if something is done in England, that is the norm. And therefore we all have to respond to what is done in England. And they're very, very clear. Even things like the rebadging of the Highways Agency, it's very: "This is England, England is the norm. Anything you do to deviate from this norm is a mistake and is unacceptable."

Some of the things that Simon Hart has said as secretary of state [for Wales], who is a lovely guy, but seems to have turned into some sort of monster in this current role. I hope we see him back before long, as the decent man he fundamentally is. [He] says some ludicrous things about the Welsh government. Not just attacking our decisions, or the Welsh government's decisions, but attacking the fact that we exist and attacking the fact that we have democracy in our country. Things which really shouldn't be questioned, you know? I disagree, fundamentally, with what the UK government says and does, as you can imagine, but I don't question their right to exist. And they seem to question our right to exist and our right to take decisions.

When I've had conversations with UK ministers, and going back to somebody like Jim Paice [UK minister for agriculture and food, 2010–12], we always [have] a very good example of this. His view was always: "What you do in Wales is a matter for you." Owen Paterson [UK secretary of state for environment, food and rural affairs, 2012–14] took the same view: "It's up to you what you do in Wales. I'm not interested. What I'm interested in is how we work together." And that was always a very good and fruitful way of working, because, it meant that we worked together; we didn't argue about what we were doing. I don't disagree that the UK government has a mandate in England, to deliver its programme. I've got no issue with that. But they don't recognise our mandate to govern in Wales, and I think that's a fundamental problem, and a fundamental break in UK democracy.

AN: I'll finish by asking two questions we put to all our interviewees. The first is, what are you proudest of having achieved during your time as a minister?

AD: I'm proud of my record in Wales, of setting a clear target of a million people speaking our language within, hopefully, my lifetime. I think that's a very clear sign of what we want to change. I'm very proud of my record in agriculture, in talking to people about how we change the focus of support and how we change the focus on the future of rural communities in Wales. Very proud of that. Very proud of setting very clear directions about how we invest in some of the poorest communities in Wales. I'm very proud of being a voice for a radical, transformative, transparent government as well, and deepening our democracy in Wales. So, I think there's a number of things which I look back to and I talk to people in my constituency about. [For example] the additional learning needs legislation stuff, which probably doesn't receive the airtime that it requires, in terms of political debate, but is having a fundamental impact on thousands

of people's lives every day of the week and changing the futures for young people with profound difficulties in some cases. So, from the wide big political issues to the very personal issues facing people, I'm very proud of that record in government.

AN: And finally, what advice would you give to a future minister on how to be effective in office?

AD: Oh [laughs], am I a person to give advice? I would say to be true to yourself and to do what you believe is the right thing to do. And, don't listen to the loudest voices. Turn Twitter off, at different periods of time, because politics today is not the world that I was elected into, 14 or 15 years ago. It's a very strident world, and it's a world where everybody has a fundamentalist view of everything, where we hide our agreements in order to emphasise our disagreements. I couldn't advise my children to get involved in politics today, because I wouldn't want them to go through some of the things I go through. And so if somebody was appointed to office today, I would say to them, in some years' time, somebody's going to ask you the same question as Alex has just asked me, and what you've got to be able to do is to answer that question honestly, and that means that you do what you believe is the right thing to do. And if the political consequences are that you lose office, then that is better than staying in office and making excuses for a policy and a government you no longer believe in.

If you wanted me to say, which was a question I expected you to ask, "What was the thing you're most disappointed with after your time in office?" then it would be relations between the UK administrations, which I think is a disaster, and it's something where I wish I'd spent more time now looking back.

AP: Trying to do what, precisely? To work on ways to improve intergovernmental relations?

AD: Formalising things. I mentioned the work myself [and] Fiona Hyslop agreed with William Hague back at the beginning of this conversation. We worked well together to deliver that. But we worked on the basis of goodwill, and that was a mistake. We'd assumed that [UK] ministers would always want to work together. What we should have done was to put in place structures for when ministers don't want to work together. To compel ministers to work together. But it's very difficult. And Akash, we've had this conversation in committee: when one government sees itself as the judge and jury, and as a consequence, no matter what we try to do, you can't get them to work [together]. And that's a real, real failing for us, I think.

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