

# Ministers Reflect Leighton Andrews



17 December 2018

# Biographical details

## Welsh Assembly history

2003–16: Labour Party Assembly Member for Rhondda

## Welsh Government career

2014–16: Minister for Public Services

2011–13: Minister for Education and Skills

2009–11: Minister for Children, Education and Lifelong Learning

2007–09: Deputy Minister for Regeneration

2007: Deputy Minister for Social Justice and Public Service Delivery

## **Leighton Andrews was interviewed by Akash Paun and Lucy Valsamidis on 17 December 2018 for the Institute for Government's Ministers Reflect project.**

Leighton Andrews reflects on governing in a coalition and as a single party in Wales, refocusing the education department around his school standards agenda and attempting local government reform.

**Akash Paun (AP):** You first became a minister in [May] 2007. I know you weren't in the role of Deputy Minister for Social Justice and Public Service Delivery for very long after the election, but we'd be interested to hear your recollections of the moment of your appointment and how day one in the job felt to you.

**Leighton Andrews (LA):** Sure. I was on a train, coming back from London, I think. I got a call from the then First Minister's senior private secretary to say that [First Minister] Rhodri [Morgan] wanted to see me at three o'clock that afternoon. I was offered a number of times, I think. And it was in the Welsh Government offices in Cathays Park, which had traditionally been the seat of the Secretary of State for Wales. The First Minister had taken over that office. And he received me with his then senior special adviser, Mark Drakeford, who is now the First Minister. He'd been made First Minister in a minority situation and he was about to form a minority government within a couple of days. He told me he wanted me to be a Deputy Minister for Social Justice with responsibility for housing and to take forward some of the commitments in our manifesto on housing, particularly in relation to proposals we had at that stage about curtailing Right to Buy.

I had a conversation with him [Morgan]. I reminded him that I had worked in a housing charity in the past, and I had been a board member of the former housing quango in Wales, Ty Cymru, before it was abolished when devolution happened. So we had what felt like a long chat, 10 minutes or so, and he explained the process. A fax would have to go to Buckingham Palace, as he put it. I didn't know they were still using faxes in those days. These days I know it's email. And once that came back, the approval could happen.

The next day, I went into the Assembly as normal. Nothing seemed to be happening, so I rang up the First Minister's office to ask if I was meant to get a call to come in and meet my private office or whatever. Rhodri had explained that following the Government of Wales Act 2006, deputy ministers had a proper role. I would be responsible for some of the legislation going through and there would be proper support for deputy ministers in a way there had not been in previous years. So eventually, by about mid-morning, I went to the fifth floor, which is the ministerial floor in Tŷ Hywel [then the National Assembly building], and met some of those who were going to be in my private office.

**AP: What was your initial impression of the civil servants you were introduced to and how you would need to work with them?**

**LA:** I think it was a slow process to get started that morning. I was slightly surprised at how long it had taken, or maybe I was just too eager to get out there. But I met them and requested a lot of briefing material to read, so I could start by thinking about a number of issues. I hadn't at

that stage had a meeting with Andrew Davies [then Minister for Social Justice and Public Service Delivery], the minister I was deputising to, as it were. But I knew him very well. We'd worked together before and he'd been in the Assembly before I'd been in the Assembly.

**AP: Presumably you did have those conversations with Andrew Davies quite soon after that. How was it decided what your role as a Deputy Minister would be?**

**LA:** Yes. I think it's worth saying that I'd worked for 20 years in and around Westminster. I'd been involved in meetings with ministers myself since my student days, as a student politician and in various roles subsequently, including during my time at the BBC [as Head of Public Affairs, 1993–1996]. So I had an understanding of ministerial offices and ministerial meetings and all those kind of things. For my first meeting with Andrew, I think I am right in saying, we were joined by Mark Drakeford, who was there to outline what Rhodri had said to me, in a sense, and to confirm that I was going to be leading on housing. And so we went through those kinds of areas and we agreed that I would be leading on that. And Mark explained that there was a new role for deputy ministers: they would be answering Assembly Questions, that sort of thing. So there was clarity in that relationship, I think, from the beginning really.

**AP: And you had your own specific priorities that you were asked to lead on.**

**LA:** Yes. I had meetings put into my diary with housing-related organisations, construction organisations and so on. There were some forthcoming speeches to be delivered, and as I say, I'd requested a lot of reading material. We were in a strange period, because clearly we didn't know whether we were going to remain in government or whether a rainbow coalition was going to be formed [by the opposition parties]. All of this conversation was going on in the background. So we had to assume government, if you like, and perform government, without knowing whether this was going to last more than a few weeks.

**AP: Right. So did it feel like you weren't really able to press forward until the political situation was resolved?**

**LA:** Well, conversations were clearly starting to happen with Plaid Cymru at that stage, which looked like the only viable place for us to be.

**AP: After the rainbow coalition had fallen apart?**

**LA:** I believe now that conversations were happening at the margins before that, but I didn't know at the time that that was the case. And there were conversations going on as to what would be the preferred partner if we were able to engineer a coalition. A number of us were sceptical about our ability to do a deal with Plaid Cymru, with a nationalist party, at that stage. And so all of that was the backdrop, if you like. So it was a period of political uncertainty.

**AP: And then did you have any involvement in the formation of the [Labour-Plaid Cymru] Coalition?**

**LA:** Only to the extent that I was involved in some conversations around the housing policy area in the One Wales Agreement [the Labour-Plaid Cymru coalition agreement]. There were two or three of us on the Labour side meeting two or three on the Plaid Cymru side on each policy area. I was discussing some of the things that were in our manifesto and some of the things we

wanted to do, and they came back with some of the proposals that they had. That was a discussion lasting a couple of hours, I guess. And then eventually the agreement came back for discussion in the Labour group. And subsequently it was ratified by a special Labour conference, in early July.

**AP: Did the civil service support those talks that you were involved in?**

LA: I don't recall civil servants being present. I had material from my department that I had asked for, which informed my contribution. But I don't recall a formal civil service presence. I might be wrong, but I don't recall it.

**AP: Okay. So you weren't involved in the wider coalition negotiations, but did you draw any lessons from the parts of the process that you did see about what works well in forming a coalition?**

LA: I think that there needs to be trust at the senior levels. Rhodri has now written a bit about this in his posthumous autobiography [*Rhodri: A Political Life in Wales and Westminster* (2017)]. There needs to be people who can maintain that trust and move forward on it. Jane Hutt on the Labour side and Jocelyn Davies on the Plaid Cymru side were acting in their business manager roles to take discussions forward and to clarify areas of difficulty and areas of agreement.

And there needs to be willingness. Labour's position was to see if we could get all of our manifesto into the One Wales Agreement. Broadly speaking, we did. And we had to consider how far we were prepared to go on some of the constitutional questions, in particular, which Plaid Cymru wanted to advance. So we were thinking about [reform of] the Barnett Formula [which the UK Treasury uses to calculate changes to the budgets of the devolved governments] and thinking about further powers, and possibly moving forward to a further powers referendum under the provisions of the 2006 Government of Wales Act, which of course we subsequently did [in 2011].

**AP: After the Coalition was formed [in July 2007], you became Deputy Minister for Regeneration. Was that a completely different role?**

LA: Yes. After the Coalition was formed, just to explain how it came about, I was in my constituency office. I got a phone call from Rhodri. He'd had his heart issues at that time, if you remember, when he formed the Coalition. We had a conversation. I asked about his health, and he explained to me about his health. He offered me the post of Deputy Minister for Regeneration. That was intended to be a shared responsibility across economic and community regeneration, deputising to two ministers, the Labour minister Brian Gibbons, who had the social justice portfolio, and the Plaid Cymru Deputy First Minister, Ieuan Wyn Jones, who had the economic portfolio. So he explained that. It was a shift, with a new team to work with, a new private office and so on.

**AP: How did that work, deputising to two ministers from two parties? Were there particular challenges?**

LA: I think there are always challenges in being a deputy minister, in the sense that you've got to establish relationships with the lead minister and you've got to know what are the areas for

which you have direct responsibility and can make decisions on. With Brian Gibbons, I think matters were relatively straightforward. There was one major area of reform, our anti-poverty programme Communities First. Brian wanted to be involved in that. I didn't have a problem with that and it was fine, we worked out together how we would take that forward.

In the case of the economy portfolio, there were some conversations sometimes. I was looking after a regeneration scheme that went into Ieuan's own constituency, Ynys Môn. Rhodri had had to explain to Ieuan why there were Ministerial Code-related issues about confusions in ministerial and constituency roles and why he needed a different minister to lead on that. So that was part of my responsibility. We tried to put in place regular meetings between myself and Ieuan. I don't think they happened that regularly in the end, and I think that made life slightly trickier than it needed to. I also felt that the economy department, which Ieuan headed, was not structured or geared to supporting ministers as well as it could have been. You had a situation where quite a lot of the officials had come in from the Welsh Development Agency [WDA], because of Rhodri's 'bonfire of the quangos' in 2006. And I think some of the accountability issues that affect officials in government had not really been worked through with those people who had come in [from the WDA into the civil service proper]. So I think there was, in some quarters, a kind of assumption of a degree of autonomy from the political process that they couldn't really have.

**AP: Did that lead to specific policies not being advanced as far as you would have liked as a government?**

**LA:** From my perspective, there are areas in the digital space, in particular, where I think we were slower as a result. We were also trying to formulate new initiatives based on European funding at the time, a new support programme for small businesses, a new investment programme for regeneration and other initiatives. These were quite complex and involved new kinds of vehicles, and I am not sure that we necessarily had the collective framework to discuss those things in the detail that they required.

**AP: What lessons did you learn from that about how to overcome structural issues in the civil service?**

**LA:** Well, that was part of what I needed to do when I became Education Minister, so we will come on to that.

**AP: Let's move straight onto that, then. That was your move up to a Cabinet position in 2009. Before we get into the substance of it, what did it feel like to make that step up to Cabinet? Was that a big moment, and did it change a lot for you?**

**LA:** I was expecting to move into Cabinet. I had been running Carwyn Jones' leadership campaign, and Carwyn knew that I wanted to take on the education portfolio. I'd served on the Education Committee in my first term in the Assembly, before I became a minister. And I'd lectured at Cardiff University, in the year or so before coming into the Assembly.

Did it feel like a step up? Yes, it was clearly a step up. As a Deputy Minister, you don't get to see Cabinet papers, you only go to Cabinet when you have an item on the agenda. So I'd attended once or twice, when we were doing our major reform programme with Communities First, for

example. So yes, there is a change in that. I had a deputy minister appointed to me, Huw Lewis as Deputy Minister for Children. And so I had to work out relations with him.

I was also clear, in my own mind, that the education department wasn't geared up or attuned to ministerial priorities. Carwyn had placed quite a bit of emphasis in his own manifesto on becoming a leader on education. I had some initial briefing from the person who was due to be my special adviser before I went in for my first meeting with the head of department about some of the challenges within the department. My own sense of it had been formed when I was a deputy minister, when we had been in discussion on subjects like welfare reform. The education department, because of its responsibility for training, had had the lead responsibility in the Welsh Government for liaising with the UK Government. And some of the papers I had seen coming forward had not convinced me about the intellectual rigour of the department. So I had my own views.

There was also a structural issue, which goes back to a similar issue in the economy department. The education department had seen five quangos, I think it was, folded into it after 2006. So you couldn't really say there was a harmonious culture in the department, either institutionally or indeed geographically, because some of those organisations had been based in different parts of Wales. And so it was quite important that there was strong leadership of the department and clarity on objectives, and to align the budgets with ministerial priorities and so on.

**AP: Okay. So you felt the department still needed some work so it could work together as an entity?**

**LA:** It seemed to me that it was quite a large department. It had a fair amount of budget. It wasn't clear to me that there was a direct line of sight from the minister to what was happening on the front line or that there were good systems for feeding back to the minister. It wasn't clear, either, that there was a unified sense of purpose or clarity on the department's objectives.

**AP: So what did you do to try and inject that purpose and clarity into the department?**

**LA:** In the first three months, we started to lay down some goals. For schools, we placed a higher emphasis on standards and came up with three specific priorities, on literacy, numeracy and narrowing the gap between those on free school meals and those not. For higher education, we made it clear right at the outset that there was an unfinished agenda around the merger of universities. That agenda predated devolution, and in fact went back to the Welsh Office. That needed to be completed. We would use the tools we had in a more dirigiste manner to achieve that agenda. Then there were some issues around the curriculum, but I was fairly determined not to introduce curriculum reform, which I thought would be quite destabilising.

**AP: And from your perspective, was the civil service able to create the necessary infrastructure to make that work and to monitor performance against the objectives that you set?**

**LA:** I suppose there were two real processes which enabled us to do this. The first one was that I created a monthly policy board, which would involve the senior officials in the department

coming together and discussing topics that were of importance to our ministerial agenda. And sometimes that meant people having to give advice on areas that they were not leading on. So we were trying to create a more collective culture of discussion within the department.

The second area was the budget round. We were coming up to a budget round in the summer. I wanted the department to look carefully at the budgets it had and see if it could identify savings that I could plough back into school standards, particularly literacy and numeracy. And I put quite a lot of pressure on them to deliver savings across the department. In the budgetary process, we went through the budgets line by line and tried to identify where money was sitting. It was quite clear, for example, that money for literacy and numeracy was sitting in a number of different places within the department, and it was not always clear how that spending related back to the priorities that were being set. So the budget process became a way of refocusing the department on key objectives. And the wider discussion platform of the policy board became very useful for looking for future challenges, assessing where we were on existing policy issues and so on.

**AP: This was a time when we were just starting to enter into austerity, and the regular increases in the Welsh block grant from the Barnett Formula were starting to flatten off. How did you negotiate spending priorities with the finance minister and the finance department?**

**LA:** There were two factors that preceded the austerity discussion. When we came in in 2009, the first thing Carwyn had committed to was additional money for education, 1% above what we got from Barnett. However, that couldn't come in for another 15 months, because we had just approved the budget for the following year. We knew that was going to happen. But that didn't exempt the department from taking its share of cuts overall, because that additional money was meant to be focused on schools. I got an external review of spending within the education system, to look at where money was being wasted away from the front line. That was tendered and carried out by a management consultancy, and it looked at the cost of administering the education system across the piece. That then became a driver for some of our thinking on accountability within the education system.

In October 2010, we had the Comprehensive Spending Review under George Osborne [then Chancellor of the Exchequer]. That pushed our own budgetary processes back, in fact, so with the approval of the Assembly we ended up having to deliver our budget slightly later than we would normally have done. That meant our settlements for local government, which included education spending, of course, were later than we would have expected. So there was a very direct knock-on, in that respect.

On the financial side, yes, there were very significant savings to be found in a number of budgets. I didn't want to salami slice. I set in train a series of budget cuts, over three years, in higher education and in careers in particular, where I felt I could identify organisations that could absorb some of the problems. And I tried to keep money for the front line, particularly further education and schools.

**AP: Did that involve difficult conversations with parts of the education sector?**

**LA:** Because we had the commitment from Carwyn for the additional money and as a result of our review of the cost of administration of the education system, we pushed local authorities to



ensure that more of the money they received from us went directly to schools rather than being retained within local authorities. At that level, we were freeing up some money for some of the organisations at the front line. And so they were happy with what we were trying to do. The conversations were tougher with careers organisations – and eventually we went through radical reform of Careers Wales – and with higher education. And in the context of higher education, in late 2010, we started to have conversations about the Browne Review on tuition fees [which the UK Government commissioned and which led to a rise in tuition fees in England]. But before that, we were saying very explicitly: “Look, we will use the money we’re putting into the system strategically, to drive our priorities.”

**AP: You were having to take some important decisions about spending priorities and so on, at the same time as trying to reform the department and increase the effectiveness of performance management. That’s quite a lot of activity. How much of what you set out to do at the outset do you feel you managed to achieve?**

**LA:** Well, I have obviously written a book about this [*Ministering to Education: A Reformer Reports* (2014)], so there’s a lot of material on that there! I think what we did was we refocused the agenda around standards. We put in place a greater emphasis on literacy and numeracy standards, a greater emphasis on local authorities understanding what was really going on in their schools. We were making sure they had the proper mechanisms to judge where they needed to challenge headteachers, support headteachers more and so on. And that’s an agenda that’s outlasted me. It’s been carried on by [my successors] Huw Lewis and Kirsty Williams in broad terms. So I think that refocusing has happened. I think we also managed to get local authorities to look more carefully at the money they were giving schools and how they were organised internally to support schools. Again, I think that agenda has continued, but it’s become more and more difficult every year as austerity has bitten deeper and deeper.

On higher education, we achieved the university mergers we set out to achieve, not all of them, but broadly. And we put in place a system for funding higher education, which meant Welsh students didn’t have to pay the full £9,000 tuition fees wherever they studied. And that has led to Welsh students, on the whole, being less indebted than students in England for example. So those things I think have made a difference. The tuition fee one is under review, as it will be year on year, because Wales is so bound up with what happens across the border. It’s not like Scotland, where a relatively small proportion of Welsh and English students go north and relatively small numbers come south. We have a significant cross-border flow between Wales and England, so our higher education system is always going to have a relationship with what happens in the English system. So that will depend on the adjustments that have to be made in respect of any changes made in England to tuition fees for English universities.

**AP: In 2011, Labour went from being in coalition to governing alone. Did that change much for your job and how you operated?**

**LA:** I had laid down our school standards agenda in February 2011, which became the basis for our education manifesto for the 2011 election. I managed to get my education agenda written down then, so it was a question of delivering against the manifesto. The difference was that there were certain things that we did as Labour governing alone that we could not have done in education had we still been in coalition with Plaid Cymru. For example, we went to a system of

grading schools: we called it school banding. This was quite a shock to the system. It was particularly focused on secondary education. Those schools that had been coasting suddenly were shown not to be achieving the GCSE and A level results we had expected them to achieve. I don't think we'd have been able to do that if we'd stayed in coalition with Plaid Cymru: they'd have seen that as too close to a league table system.

**AP: In that respect, were you moving closer to the UK Labour approach, or was it not quite like that? Rhodri Morgan famously talked about putting “clear red water” between UK Labour and Welsh Labour. This sounds like a move in the other direction.**

**LA:** I thought there were quite a number of things that Labour had done on the education front in government [at Westminster] that we had not followed in Wales, and we had not really challenged our education system in the way we needed to. So I brought Sir Michael Barber [the head of the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit under Tony Blair] in as an adviser quite early on, in my first month or so, to talk with the senior people in my department. We wanted to learn from the experience in England, particularly around literacy and numeracy.

**AP: In the four years or so you had in that job, what crises did you face?**

**LA:** I think the first crisis was the PISA [Programme for International Student Assessment] test results from 2009 that were announced in December 2010. That was where I said: “Look, these are not good enough. We are failing systemically, and we need to think carefully about what we are going to do about this.” And then six weeks later, I came out with what was called the 20-point plan to set in train a programme of school improvement.

**AP: In dealing with that crisis, did you feel you had sufficient support from officials in the department?**

**LA:** Yes. I think so. The most important thing, at that stage, was having the support of the First Minister. When I saw the results, I talked with the First Minister and I made it clear I was going to be fairly tough in my response. You know, there are a number of things you can do when you are faced with a crisis. You can say: “Well, these results are reporting on things that happened last year, and we've got all the steps in place to ensure the system succeeds in the future”. Well, I wasn't convinced we had. I thought we had to go through a much more rigorous internal assessment of what needed to be done within the system. But the work we'd set in train to look at structures of accountability in the education system was already starting to produce material that was valuable for us.

So as a result of that, we set up a school standards board in the department: that was one of the proposals in my twenty-point plan. And that became a way of making sure that local authorities really did get to grips with the performance of every school that they were responsible for, because our specialists had the statistical evidence to talk on a granular level with local authority education departments about what was really going on in their schools. And that was key to achieving some movement from them in the way they approached this.

**AP:** And all of this was part of the big culture change you were trying to bring about. So the other thing that changed in 2011 was that the Welsh Assembly gained the power to make primary legislation. Did that feel like a big step change in what you were able to achieve, and did it change the way you operated?

**LA:** Yes. Carwyn and Ieuan asked me in the autumn of 2010 to convene the steering group for the campaign for the further powers referendum. And we worked our way through how we were going to achieve that change on a cross-party basis. What it signified once it was achieved, I think, was that Welsh devolution was growing up. The [2011 Welsh devolution] referendum was a significant endorsement. It meant that we didn't have to use the legislative competence order system, which nobody liked, and to spend departmental energy, government energy as a whole, going to Westminster to ask permission to make primary legislation in a number of different areas which were theoretically already devolved. It allowed us to get on with the job of introducing legislation. And it did feel like the Assembly was growing up and government in Wales was growing up.

**Lucy Valsamidis (LV):** You left the education role in 2011 and came back as Minister for Public Services in 2014. What were your priorities for public services, and how did you decide what they were going to be?

**LA:** Carwyn asked me to take over the public services brief. The big issue there was the report of the Williams Commission into public services in Wales. It had been a report that Carwyn had essentially commissioned in government, and people from a number of different parties were involved. The most controversial aspects of it, although they only take up a small part of the report, were about local government reforms, including the recommendation that the number of local authorities be reduced from 22 down to a number between 10 and 14. There were also a lot of things said in the report about the culture of public services: how public services needed to work better across silos, and also to change the culture so people across public services felt they were part of one Welsh public service. So there were quite a few culture changes in it as well.

The other issue I had, I guess, was that I inherited the gender-based violence legislation from Lesley Griffiths, who'd been my predecessor. There was quite a lot of pressure to change the title of that bill to make it about violence against women and girls, which we did. That became the subject of some internal tussles within the Government, but we got there in the end. But the big story, I guess, was local government reform.

**LV:** What processes did you put in place to move local government reform forward?

**LA:** Carwyn had made it very clear that he was bringing me into that role. I had known I was coming back into government. I didn't anticipate coming back into this portfolio; I thought I would be coming back into a different portfolio. But anyway, he wanted it to be seen as a signal that he was serious about local government reform. So my job was to take no prisoners, bluntly, and to be very clear about the direction of travel. In terms of legislation, we put through some enabling legislation which would allow us to start the process of local authority mergers. But the big merger bill was put off until after the 2016 election. To get the initial paving bill through, we ultimately had to get cooperation with Plaid Cymru.

For me – although we had the Williams Commission report with its ambition for a smaller number of local authorities, and we then suggested an even smaller number – there were two problems, really. One was that the Williams Commission report had bundled public services together, giving less attention than I thought was needed to the fact that local government is democratically elected and enjoys its own mandate, compared to other public services, which are perhaps more centrally directed.

The second one was that not enough attention had been given to thinking: “Well, okay, this is quite a constitutional change in Wales. We’ve had 22 local authorities since before devolution. What are the practical steps and legislation that you need to deliver this policy?” And I came to the view, quite early on, that you could only deliver a structural reform of local government if you had the support of the two political parties which represented most of local government, and that meant Labour and Plaid Cymru. So, in a sense, local government reform might have been easier to carry forward under the One Wales Government, where there was a clearer [coalition] majority in the Assembly, and where there was a possibility of a structure for brokering agreement and disagreement, as it were.

And there’s a third element too, which is that we were in the latter part of an Assembly session and this is obviously a big task: timing mattered in this context as well. It was a bigger task than could have been delivered, really, in the last couple of years of an Assembly. It’s one of those projects where you need to start at the beginning, because there’s a lot of political goodwill that’s needed to deliver it.

**AP: Local government reform is a messy one, isn’t it?**

**LA:** It is, wherever it happens. One day I will write some journal article that nobody will read on how not to do local government reform! But I think that we had too many factors going against us then, and it became a very, very difficult programme to put through.

**LV: Looking now across your whole time in government, you worked with two first ministers, Rhodri Morgan and Carwyn Jones. How effectively were you able to work with each of them, and what did you see as the differences in their styles?**

**LA:** I need to enter a caveat at the beginning, which is that of course I never worked as a Cabinet minister to Rhodri. So I was a degree removed. I think there are some commonalities. I think Rhodri – he says it in his autobiography and I think it was probably true – wanted to put people in to get on with the job. I think Carwyn, broadly speaking, had a similar kind of approach, which was that once people were in post, he expected them to get on and deliver. I think there were one or two areas where Carwyn kept a watchful eye. Local government reform was certainly one of those, and that was true for my predecessor and myself. So I think they had those things in common. Differences... Well, Rhodri had a background in Westminster, had achieved a reputation before, if you like, and had then come back to Wales, to a Welsh institution that was a creation of devolution. Carwyn was the first home-grown First Minister, if you like. He’d been a councillor, but he’d not been a politician at Westminster. So I think that was a significant development in itself. I think Rhodri had a reputation beyond Wales; I don’t think Carwyn did have a reputation beyond Wales, certainly at the beginning.

**LV: You mentioned that you did some work with Mark Drakeford when he was an adviser – what would your advice be to him coming in as the new First Minister?**

**LA:** I actually agree with a lot of what he's said in his first few days. I think under Carwyn you'd had a situation where you had a First Minister who ran Cabinet more like a barristers' chambers, in the sense that he was the lead. He'd let people get on with it, but there was less collective discussion on some of the big challenges than I think there should have been. So I think if you take local government reform as an example, if there had been more collective discussion prior to creating the Williams Commission, and on the receipt of it, then I think we might have got a different outcome, or got closer to a desired outcome. Mark has said, in his first few days, that he wants to run a collegiate Cabinet and he wants to see more Cabinet discussion. I think we'll see less of the sort of West Wing approach to being First Minister that did develop a bit under Carwyn in the last few years.

**LV: You talked earlier about how you addressed problems with the civil service in the education role. Looking across your whole time in government, what was your impression of the effectiveness of the civil service and how much were you able to change where you needed to?**

**LA:** I think the civil service in Wales is variable, by department to a degree. I don't think enough work has been done on what you might call machinery of government issues within Wales. I didn't feel education was unified by the time I left. I thought the person who became the Director General, Emyr Roberts, had a very good grip of what was needed and had long experience of the Welsh system and how to make it work. And I think he'd started to develop a culture that was more sensitive to achieving ministerial goals. His successor, Owen Evans, certainly carried that on. The permanent secretary before last, Derek Jones, had had a long career in the civil service, but had been outside and come back. One of the key things he did, I think, which was important, was to try and instil a sense that civil servants were delivering for ministers, even to the extent that that phrase appeared on the computers in front of everybody. There was a sense that delivering for ministers was the watchword. That was in the early days, but I think that was important, I think that signalled something. And I think there are areas of Welsh government where delivery is not as sharp as it needs to be, and there are areas that have been immune to some of the changes that have taken place in, say, education and public services and so on.

**LV: That's an interesting point about variation across the different areas of the civil service. How straightforward did you find it to work across departments and policy areas?**

**LA:** Well, there's one thing that is obviously different about Welsh government from government in Whitehall, which is that all ministers are located in the same building, on the same floor, for most of the week. Whereas obviously, you know, the notion of barons in their separate kingdom is very common in Whitehall... Theoretically, that should make for closer working relationships. In practice, there are large areas of the public service which have their own cultures and their own space. So the health service has its own culture, I think. And whether that culture is effectively imbued with the notion of our Welsh public service in the way that other parts have become, I'm not sure. I think there are still challenges in that. I think there are challenges in the economic area as well. So you can have collective, ministerial leadership, and I think that can be developed. But there are still changes that probably need to

work their way through the system. There's a concept I started to play around with a little bit as an academic, which is that there are certain areas where ministers are leaders of systems. Education is one, health is another. And there's lots of writing about the notion of system leadership in certain sectors. I think we need to think about ministers in that role and ask about what they can do to get a sense of a system running throughout the areas that they are working on.

**AP: What specific, practical things would you recommend ministers do to achieve that?**

**LA:** To start with, I think, that sense that there is a system. It's not always a command system: in education you don't command down to the schools. But you have to have a sense in which you can see, from your office to the school, how policy changes you make are having an impact on the ground. Sometimes, hopefully, positively, but sometimes detrimentally. Peter Hyman, of course, who's gone to be a headteacher having worked in Tony Blair's Number 10, has written quite well about this. Now he sees things on the ground, he wonders about some of what they were trying to achieve. So I do think that kind of rounded approach is useful. You've got your department, but in education there are universities, there are schools, there are further education colleges, there are teachers, there are teaching unions. There are a whole number of stakeholders in the system, and you have to have that concept of it. And I think the same is probably true in the health service as well. So your starting point is to think about it in that way. Then I think you need to think: okay, if you're undertaking a programme of change, programmes of change are dislocating. And if you are going through a programme of change you really do need to have a sense of whether it is adding value to the objectives you have, or just going to get people mired in years of internal wrangling. And sometimes people reach to reorganise a system rather than to work through whether you can find other levers to deliver the goals you need, whether they be policy levers or legislative levers.

**LV: You also talked earlier about your role in the referendum on further powers. Looking through your time in office, do you feel as though you had the powers that you needed?**

**LA:** In education, broadly, although I think one factor that's often not given enough consideration when you talk about the work of ministers is your time and policy cycles. So, for example, there were proposals about how local authorities organised schools in their area. I announced some suggestions in January 2010, but it was only with the final passage of the Schools Standards Act in 2013, that the effective framework had been implemented. Similarly, on tuition fees we announced reform in 2010 which came in in 2012. There's a number of reasons why you have that two-year delay. Partly it was to do with the Student Loans Company needing to get its systems in gear. You can announce the reforms. Sometimes it's not about powers, sometimes it is about powers. But in practice, it's also about the administrative mechanisms needed to deliver all the way through to the front line.

**AP: Tuition fees are probably a good segue to a question about your relationship with Westminster. To what extent did you have to personally interact with ministers and departments here during your time in office?**

**LA:** Well, it's worth saying, of course, and this is another factor in the differences between Carwyn and Rhodri, that Rhodri was the First Minister entirely under a UK Labour government. Carwyn became First Minister in December 2009, so most of his time has been spent under



Conservative governments in Westminster. I had relationships with a number of ministers at Whitehall, obviously Michael Gove [as Secretary of State for Education] and David Willetts [Minister for Universities]. And then I had relationships with ministers in the Department for Work and Pensions [DWP], because as Education Minister I led on all our issues regarding welfare reform.

I'd known Michael Gove back in the 90s, maybe the early 90s even, when I was at the BBC. So in the initial conversation, I kind of knew what to expect, I think. Our relationship clearly became quite strained. It wasn't just mine, it was with the Northern Ireland Education Minister [John O'Dowd] as well, because GCSEs and A levels are a shared system across the three jurisdictions. So when Gove was proposing reforms, they would be announced in *The Telegraph* or the *[Daily] Mail* and the readers of the *The Telegraph* and the *[Daily] Mail* in Wales would think they were applying to Wales. Of course they weren't, and we had to explain that repeatedly, and we had a number of run-ins. Sometimes it got rather vociferous about our refusal to go along with what was being done in London. But Gove – you know, let me say on the record – he is one of the most polite people in politics. When I left as Education Minister in 2013, he wrote me a handwritten letter, which was very generous of him. And when I lost my seat in 2016, he wrote to me after that as well. With David Willetts, you could always have a really good intellectual debate. He kept me in the loop on what was being planned on tuition fees and I kept him in the loop, and we had interesting discussions about university accountability and matters like that. And it was good: you could have a proper, intellectual dialogue across the conference table with him.

In the area of welfare reform, I had some very difficult conversations with Chris Grayling [as Minister for Employment] and with Maria Miller [as Minister for Disabled People], and one or two other ministers that we had discussions with. I'll give you a classic example of some of the problems. The DWP, I think, is a ministry which operates on an England model as a default. To give you a very simple example, when they were designing Universal Credit, we had kept the education maintenance allowance in Wales, but it had been abolished in England. But they couldn't tell us whether the education maintenance allowance would be considered in that basket of factors looking at family income for Universal Credit. There were also issues about what passporting benefits like free school meals meant in England as distinct from Wales. And then there were big issues, and we had a big battle with Chris Grayling on this, on conditionality and mandating benefit claimants onto training programmes. We pay for training in Wales, and they had designed the system on the basis that DWP could mandate people onto training courses being run in further education colleges. Well, they couldn't mandate people onto our courses, so they had to back down subsequently on that.

There was a big discussion in the Joint Ministerial Committee (Domestic) chaired by Nick Clegg, I think in May 2012, around all of these issues, specifically on welfare reform. I think it had been asked for by the Scots in fact, and I went there with a long list of questions that we had. The First Minister was there as well. Lord Freud was there for the department [as Under Secretary of State for Welfare Reform]. And I listed my set of questions. And after I'd spoken, Nick Clegg said: "That's interesting, I've asked Lord Freud these questions myself." And you thought okay... I think we were starting to pick up some of the problems with Universal Credit at a very early stage in Wales. And they endure, obviously, now.

**AP: Speaking generally, how much do you think these sort of problems that you faced in working with Whitehall were about ignorance, or forgetting to think about or consult with Wales in time? And how much were they a bit more like an attitude that Wales should follow what the UK Government was doing?**

**LA:** I think you need to distinguish between what we called the ‘War on Wales’, for example when David Cameron spoke about differences between the Welsh and English NHS, when we saw an explicit ideologically-driven attack on Wales, from rather more practical day-to-day operational issues, which amounted to Whitehall still not having taken on board what devolution meant. In the areas of social security, work and pensions and welfare reform, it was pretty clear that they were working on the basis of a default England system. And I think that just reflected a lack of imagination and sensitivity. But I don’t think there was a deliberate plot to say we should follow what they were doing.

**AP: You didn’t face pressure to follow suit on any of these policy areas?**

**LA:** I mean, we did: Chris Grayling was resistant over a nine-month period certainly, might have been a 12-month period, to what we were saying to them on sanctioning and mandating or conditionality. And he came down for a meeting with me in Cardiff and said: “This is what we are going to do.” We resisted, and in the end we got a letter from them confirming that well, they couldn’t mandate people onto our programmes because we paid for them, broadly speaking. So that became quite an issue. On the closure of the Remploy factories [that provided employment for disabled people], which Maria Miller announced, I got a phone call just before the announcement. She got hauled back to Parliament to give a proper oral statement as a result of our briefing to colleagues in Westminster that this was happening. And we had our own proposals. We couldn’t save the factories, but we could support employers who took on redundant Remploy workers, which is what we did. So those things were quite difficult. I would say in the welfare reform area particularly we had difficulties. And we did have an ideological difference on the issues as well. But some of the difficulties we had were down to poor design at the Whitehall level.

**AP: What did you learn from that about what worked well in mitigating these problems? Was the Joint Ministerial Committee process actually useful for you, or were there other bilateral approaches that you found more constructive?**

**LA:** Well, you need to maintain bilateral discussion where you can. The Joint Ministerial Committee is, you know, it’s there, it’s important to have it, if you’re going to air genuine issues I think that it’s valuable. I don’t think we’d evolved a structure – certainly not in my time – that demonstrated to us in Wales, that Whitehall had taken devolution on board. Now, subsequent to that, there have been more steps taken within the civil service to develop an internal programme of understanding devolution. Whether that will work its way through, I don’t know. At the end of the day, you can’t have a programme for understanding devolution, switch it off, and start again. You’ve got to make sure that it is continual, and you’ve got to make sure there are regular operational meetings between the people who are having to implement things on the front line.



**AP: Sure. And you were out of government by the time of the EU referendum and the aftermath of that, but nonetheless we'd be interested in your perceptions of how the intergovernmental relationship has worked on Brexit.**

**LA:** Well, I have no insight into that, to be frank. I mean, we are where we are. You know, I am an unrepentant People's Vote-er, so my observations are that we are in chaos and we will not get out of this chaos without returning to the people. Having said all of that, and I don't have any insights in the relationship between the Welsh Government and the UK Government, I am not convinced that the Welsh Government was prepared for the outcome in 2016. The bulk of people in the National Assembly were Remainers, and that certainly goes for the largest two parties – well, sorry, the parties that have been largest in the past, Labour and Plaid [Cymru] – and I think the outcome was quite a shock to the political establishment in Wales, although many of us thought it was going to happen. And I don't think they were prepared, immediately afterwards, for what would happen next or what should happen next or had a definitive view of how to take things forward.

**AP: Yes. I don't think many people were particularly well prepared for it, in any part of the country.**

**LA:** No. I think Carwyn made a call for the early implementation of Article 50 and I am not sure that was where Wales needed to be, at that point.

**AP: Sure, as did Jeremy Corbyn. I think he said trigger it the day after the vote.**

**LA:** I think it was on 28 June when Carwyn said that.

**LV: One last question. What would your advice be to a minister in the Welsh Government on how to be effective?**

**LA:** When they come in, they need to decide for themselves what their priorities are going to be, how they want to be seen at the end of their role and what it is that they are looking to achieve. But I also think they shouldn't rush to make serious policy announcements. If you've come in with a set of manifesto commitments, one thing you need to be working through is how to implement those. But many of the challenges you will face will not be dependent on the manifesto, and if you are appointed halfway through an Assembly term, you will be inheriting work from other people. So it's important to find a way of taking time and space for yourself to define how you are going to approach the challenges. And that may mean that you don't make a series of announcements to begin with. It may mean you take time to think through the issues that are coming at you and decide what your priorities are going to be.

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