

Wales Focus Group September 2019

Brexit and the gyrations of the current Westminster Government continue to over-shadow all other considerations; however the Welsh Government continues its legislative programme, while Cytûn continues to monitor it from the point of view of Welsh Churches. Where Quaker views coincide with the other churches, it is best to support the Cytûn action. However, where there is a Quaker view which deviates from the general church view we make our own representations.

We made our representations with regard to the Local Government (Wales) Bill, and the Public Transport (Wales) bill, which particularly look at the transport situation. Friends will be aware that Arriva no longer run rail provision which is now managed by Transport for Wales. Friends will also be aware that the change has not yet made much obvious difference. I counsel patience. Plans are being developed, facilitated by the above legislation, for steady improvements in rail and, very importantly, bus services. TfW are being encouraged by the Welsh Government to build a network of interlinking rail and bus services, which, later on is also intended to synchronise with taxis as well. At the moment investment is going into rail and bus stations, but rolling stock will also be improved.

Cytûn is “keeping an eye” on the Social Partnership (Wales) Bill which aims to strengthen partnership between businesses, trade unions and government, in case it might affect community organisations such as churches.

The new Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Bill introduces the new curriculum from September 2022. The changes to be introduced look very exciting and may even, potentially, show other parts of the UK “how it’s done”. The Welsh Government are also introducing a bill to establish a Tertiary Education and Research Commission which will be responsible for higher and further education in Wales.

The Children (|Abolition of Defence of Reasonable Punishment (Wales) Bill is progressing but Scotland seem to have got there first, as they have with the minimum price for Alcohol, which appears to be showing reduction in the use of strong alcohol already.

It could be that the Senedd and Elections (Wales) Bill will allow the voting age to be reduced to 16. What a shame that such a thing was not in place for the Brexit Referendum!

The Future Generations Commissioner has prepared a “tool kit” and resources to allow us to think about what differences this legislation has brought and what sort of Wales we would like to see in the future. The Commissioner wants to hear people's “big ideas” for Wales. What might we want to see being developed in Wales so that we continue to be a pace setter? I shall obtain this and discuss with the MFW Clerks when we might explore it.

Peter Hussey
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Addendum to MFW Focus Group report for MFW Newtown, Oct 2019

David Harris has reported on a joint meeting of the Laser Group and the Wales & Europe Working party to which Lord Lisvane and Sir Paul Silk had been invited. They were reporting on the Constitutional Reform Group of which they are members along with Carwyn Jones and Peter Hain. They made a presentation regarding the Act of Union Bill. The Bill had had a first reading in the House of Lords (October 2018) but the proroguing of Parliament has brought its progress to a halt; it will make no further progress.

The Bill was to provide a renewed constitutional form for the peoples of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, to continue to join together to form the United Kingdom, to continue to pool their sovereignty for specified purposes, and to protect social and economic rights for citizens.

It had been hoped that a structure might be created for the UK based on the voluntary commitment of the constituent nations, rather than through the "imperial condescension" of Whitehall. The Group believes that the centralised direction at present in the realigning of the constitutional arrangements after Brexit will only strengthen centrifugal tendencies. This would be worsened by any further growth in populism and the possibility of a 'People vs Parliament' general election.

It is hoped to bring back an improved Bill which will include provision for some devolution of regions of England (85% of the UK population) and the sharing of financial resources. The Bill also includes provision for a High Court for Wales. Wales is the only territory in the world with a legislature which has no corresponding legal jurisdiction. (Lord Thomas will be reporting on the justice system of Wales shortly). The Welsh Government have also published a report "Reforming our Union" which suggests a similar constitutional path.

Such a constitutional arrangement will, probably, receive little media attention. Most media will be absorbed with the posturing of the UK Government through headline grabbing images that have very little relationship to reality; however, this is the bedrock upon which will be built the relationships of the various parts of the (currently dis-) United Kingdom.

In any organisation the word "Constitution" is almost certain to be greeted with yawns of disinterest, but this structure will facilitate the success or failure of the United Kingdom. The Welsh Government understands its importance. Scotland might see Independence as a way of achieving an appropriate future relationship. Northern Ireland are too involved with competing for leadership. In my opinion it is the English regions that hold the key.