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Depoliticisation and the 'extra-political': An investigation of the perceptions of opinion leaders on the Williams Report and its implications for citizen engagement and political participation in Wales.

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1. Introduction

A short, direct definition of the term 'depoliticisation' is offered by Phillip Pettit (2004: 58): 'reducing the hands-on power of the people's elected representatives'. The concept is ever-more widely deployed, but contested and in some ways slippery. This is partly because of the sheer variety of ways in which depoliticising processes might unfold. For Matthew Flinders and Matt Wood (2015: 135), the concept 'essentially refers to the denial of political contingency and the transfer of functions away from democratic politicians'. Both aspects have been unpacked across a wide range of contexts. So for example, prominent analyses of depoliticisation have focused on its role in the removal of the political character of decision making (Burnham, 2001), on the deflection of blame from politicians for policy failure (Flinders and Buller, 2006; Kettell, 2008) and on the success of strategies for re-politicisation which seek to reclaim as items of political deliberation and decision-making areas of policy previously placed beyond the boundary of their remit (Kuzemko, 2014). We also find a focus on strategies by which bodies retain and maintain their depoliticised status under conditions of political stress (Wood, 2014).

Yet arguably, for all this diversity of application, the way the term is used has been consistently one-sided in a specific sense. Fawcett and Marsh (2014), reviewing the literatures on depoliticisation and political participation, identify a bias in focus towards the 'input' side of politics. 'Input' refers to decision-making, and how access to this is afforded to conflicting interests and identities – what Bang (2009: 123) calls a 'politics-policy approach'. This assumes that the action lies on the side of political decision-making, and how this is fed into by different groups and interests – and that the administration of policy itself, its putting into practice, is somehow 'extra-political', or a purely technocratic exercise. Yet that latter dimension of politics – the one in which participants seek not to frame policy through formal channels, but to make a difference to the ways in which policies play out, and affect people's everyday lives – can – for reasons we return to below – just as well be seen as *intensely* political. If so, then a focus on the 'input' side seems problematically restrictive.

Confining ourselves to the procedural inclusion of different voices in decision-making processes may miss the ways in which particular causes are taken up in the concrete pursuit of a particular agenda, or solution to a particular problem. It operates with a narrow understanding of politics. On the one hand, focusing solely on the *formation* of decisions risks neglecting, as Fawcett and Marsh put it (2014: 178) ‘the structural context within which these decisions are taken’. On the other hand, it fails to acknowledge what Bang identifies as a transition towards ‘policy-politics’: ‘output’-based modes of political activity, where politics consists in the influencing of how policies are enacted, and the motivation to ‘address problems in the “here and now”’ (Fawcett and Marsh, 2014: 177).

This paper attempts to address the relation between the ‘input’ and ‘output’ sides of politics by investigating the perceptions of opinion leaders in Wales on recent developments which have a direct bearing on the nature and scope of citizen engagement and political participation. Its focal point is a case-study of the 2014 report of the Commission on Public Service Governance and Delivery: the Williams Report. The Commission recommended a major reconfiguration of local authorities in Wales, in ways which have considerable and potentially complex implications for political engagement, both within the local government apparatus and between it and wider civil society. It presents an example of an ostensibly ‘depoliticised’ association between the Welsh Government which has endorsed the ‘expert’ conclusions of the Williams Report, and local authorities in Wales which have typically been hostile to its recommendations – and for whom the Commission itself may seem an exercise in delegation of decisions about a difficult ‘can of worms’, in a way which narrows the scope for political deliberation on the issues at stake. The Williams Report lies on the input side. In gauging the perceptions of opinion leaders on its implications for citizen engagement in Wales, the paper aims to improve our understanding of depoliticisation, and of its complex relationship to the ‘output’ side. In a sequel paper, we will investigate how the implications of the report are viewed by those working at the ground level of the enactment of policy – at the ‘coalface’. Thus, this is effectively part 1 of a two-stage exploration of these issues, from different angles.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Three aspects of depoliticisation

For the purposes of this study, three aspects of depoliticisation are especially salient: the nature, scope and boundaries of the political (and thus of the extra-political); the relation of depoliticisation to rates of citizen participation in decision-making; and the ways in which different levels of governance are implicated in the forms of depoliticisation identified in contemporary Western societies. This section briefly addresses each of these aspects in turn.

As a concept, depoliticisation may appear to suggest the drawing of a clear line between political and other forms of decision-making. Thus it is typically presented as a deliberate strategy to ‘move’ decision-making out of the political arena and place it in the hands of

‘apolitical’, ‘extra-political’, ‘technocratic’ or ‘expert’ agencies – to ‘insulate decision-making processes beyond the direct control of elected politicians’ (Flinders and Wood, 2014: 135). An oft-cited example is the move by the incoming New Labour government in 1997 to place decisions about interest rates in the hands of the Bank of England, rather than (as previously) the Chancellor of the Exchequer. Such a move can be seen as addressing both of the basic aspects of depoliticisation picked out by Flinders and Wood (see above). Thus it is an attempt to deny political contingency, in so far as it shifts an aspect of economic policy previously treated as a ‘political football’ and places it in the hands of a purportedly neutral referee, above the fray. In the process, it transfers the function away from democratic politicians, and towards, so the rationale goes, ‘those best fitted in different ways to deploy it’ (Falconer, 2003). Yet this depiction can be questioned on a number of levels, all of them subject to debate in the depoliticisation literature. The very term suggests a displacement, reduction or removal of politics, in favour of an alternative mode of decision-making. Discussing the work of Madsen (2013), Rand-Henriksen (2013, 58-59) characterises this in two distinct but inter-related ways:

1. A process in which questions of values or ethics are framed as being questions of scientific truth, thereby making them harder to debate.
2. Situations in which decisions that arguably should be subject to public debate are rendered apolitical and delegated to expert groups.

Rand-Henriksen analyses depoliticisation as, in part, an attempt by politicians ‘to create “firewalls” between themselves and certain unavoidable decisions’. The attempt itself rests on the assumption of clear, unproblematic distinctions between facts and values, evidence and ideology, science and politics. The implication of each contrast is that the world of specialist expertise is one of consensus, plain truth and hard facts – as opposed to the fractious, opinionated and value-laden contestation of politics. Yet it is by no means self-evident either that a clear line can indeed be drawn between the political and the non-political, or that (even if it can) the practices taken to be definitive of depoliticisation can be placed on the non-political side of that line. From different angles, Bang (2004; 2005; 2010; 2011) Hay (2007), Flinders and Wood (2014) and Fawcett and Marsh (2014) put both of these assumptions in question. They are questionable at a social-theoretical level, for example on Foucauldian or Schmittian grounds – from the point of view of which delimiting or circumscribing the political is always an unstable enterprise. But equally, there are quite prosaic senses in which the presumption that ‘expert’ judgements are somehow disentangled from any political content can be seen to be naïve or misplaced. For one thing, the very setting of goals and agendas to which specialists are responding or contributing is itself a political exercise. Thus one ‘paradox’ of the depoliticisation debates is, as Flinders and Wood put it (2014: 136), that ‘few scholars associate depoliticisation with the removal of politics; and many associate it with... the imposition of a specific (and highly politicised) model of statecraft’.

For some of its proponents in government, part of the promise of depoliticisation is cashed out in terms of democratic participation. Lord Falconer, as Secretary of State for Constitutional Affairs, spoke in 2003 of being motivated by ‘a clear desire to place power where it should be increasingly not with politicians, but with those best fitted in different ways to deploy it’ (2003). He continues: ‘The depoliticising of key decision-making is a vital element in bringing power closer to the people’. But the second point does not obviously follow from the first. Shifting decision-making power from politicians to specialist experts does not equate to bringing it closer to the people. In fact, it may place the two at a greater distance. Non-politicians may be less accountable than politicians. And ‘expert’ language may be less accessible to the public than that of politicians used to justifying themselves to a general audience. So the relationship between depoliticisation and expanded or more democratic participation in decision-making is far from a given. For Flinders and Wood (2014: 137), invoking Pharr and Putnam (2000), Hay (2007), Norris (2011) and Matro Paolo (2012), societal depoliticisation is a counterpart to, and a part explanation of, ‘the gradual marginalisation or closing down of democratic governance’, and a ‘hollowing-out of the public sphere’ leading to ‘a sense of diminished interest in public affairs on the part of the public’. From this point of view, as for Marquand (inter alia 2004; 2015), this loss of participation is an effect of the hegemony of neoliberalism and the marketization and individualisation which it has brought in its train. Flinders and Wood regard depoliticisation as a crucial aspect of the explanation of such trends.

For others, however, this diagnosis of a decline in public debate is overstated. Thus Fawcett and Marsh stress the need to ‘highlight the inherently political nature of a great deal of citizen engagement/ political participation that is currently defined as apolitical’ (2014: 173). So while there has been a general decline in voter turnout and in membership of formal, membership-based organisations such as political parties, trade unions, participation on the ‘output’ side of politics has tended to grow. Our focus here is on the relation between these trends, such as they are, and specific recent developments on the ‘input’ side, in the Welsh context.

2.2 Welsh politics and institutions

As a result of a process of devolution instigated during the late 1990s, Wales operates limited self-government. The 1998 Government of Wales Act imparted Wales with executive and legislative powers constitutionally delegated to the National Assembly for Wales, a devolved assembly with limited legislative powers. Since expanded, these powers range from health and education, to agriculture and the Welsh language. Crucially for our focus here, they include arrangements for local government.¹

¹ The full list of powers devolved to the National Assembly for Wales: Agriculture, Forestry, Animals, Plants and Rural Development; Ancient Monuments and Historic Buildings; Culture; Economic Development; Education and Training; Environment; Fire and Rescue Services and Fire Safety; Food; Health and Health Services; Highways and Transport; Housing; Local Government; National Assembly for Wales; Public Administration; Social Welfare; Sport and Recreation; Tourism; Town and Country Planning; Water and Flood Defence; Welsh Language.

Comprised of sixty elected Assembly Members (AMs) elected every five years,² the National Assembly is the Welsh equivalent to the UK parliament in Westminster. In 2006 the Government of Wales Act established a separate Welsh Assembly Government, the executive branch of the devolved government in Wales – its name shortened in 2014 to Welsh Government. Consisting of the First Minister, typically the leader of the largest party in the National Assembly for Wales, up to twelve ministers and deputy ministers and a Counsel General, the Welsh Government is comparable to the UK cabinet. In terms of local government Wales is divided into 22 council areas.³ These unitary authorities are accountable for the provision of all local government services, such as education and social work. Unitary authorities are democratically accountable by way of elections held every 4 years. The lowest tier of local government in Wales is the community council, which is analogous to a civil parish in England.

The Williams Commission, led by former chief executive of NHS Wales Paul Williams, delivered a report in January 2014 recommending that the 22 council areas be ‘quickly and decisively’ reduced to 11 or 12, via a series of mergers. Its deliberations had taken place against a backdrop of cuts in local authority budgets in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash and subsequent austerity measures introduced by the incoming Westminster government from 2010. Since then there has, in Wales as elsewhere, been a consistent awareness of the likely need for a radical downscaling of what councils would in future be able to offer, and a need for them to ‘do more for less’. Debate on this, and on the optimum number of local authorities, is ongoing. In June 2015, Leighton Andrews, Public Services Minister at the Welsh Government, proposed a reduction to eight councils, with a consultation to follow. Such a major reconfiguration of local authorities in Wales will undoubtedly have considerable and potentially complex implications for political engagement, both within the local government apparatus and between it and wider civil society.

2.3 The internet and changing forms of civic and political participation

The continued expansion of the Internet and associated technological innovations has undoubtedly transformed the conduct of public life (Bimber, 1998), including civic (Smith et al., 2009) and political engagement (Campante et al., 2013; Xenos et al., 2014). In-depth scholarly research regarding the effects of the Internet on civic and political participation can, according to Stanley and Weare (2004), be categorized according to two competing assumptions, namely the reinforcement (or cyber-pessimists) and mobilization (or cyber-optimists) hypotheses (Norris, 2000; Xenos and May, 2007). Whilst both approaches acknowledge the importance of the Internet as a tool for participation they sharply differ in terms of the consequences of Internet participation. A central premise of the reinforcement

² As of 2011; previously, elections to the Assembly took place every four years.

³ A full list: Blaenau Gwent, Bridgend, Caerphilly, Cardiff, Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion, Conwy, Denbighshire, Flintshire, Gwynedd, Merthyr Tydfil, Monmouthshire, Neath Port Talbot, Newport, Pembrokeshire, Powys, Rhondda Cynon Taff, Swansea, Torfaen, Vale of Glamorgan, Wrexham, Ynys Mon.

hypothesis proposes that ICT facilitates existing sources of political power due to the ability of influential individuals and institutions to control the design, diffusion and use of new technologies in order to support their entrenched interests (Abramson et al., 1988; Bimber, 2001). The reinforcement hypothesis accordingly contends that ICT will not alter existing participation patterns and may actually expand the participatory disparity between advantaged and disadvantaged populations (Oser et al., 2013).

Conversely, the mobilization hypothesis maintains that despite the efforts of elites the internet has reduced the costs of information acquisition and communication and created new opportunities for participation, particularly amongst previously disengaged groups (Oser et al., 2013; Schlozman et al., 2010). Despite its apparent failure to revolutionise political governance an extensive number of studies support the mobilisation hypothesis, reporting a positive relationship between ICT use and participation (Bakker and de Vreese, 2011; Boulianffe, 2011). Research by Shah et al. (2001) and Kraut et al. (2002), for example, highlighted the role of the Internet in providing new methods for connecting with friends or family, resulting in the social capital required for participation. Such interactions can, however, involve non-traditional types of participation. As Holtz-Bacha (1998), cited in Pautz (2010), observed the internet has resulted in the proliferation of special interest groups, activists, grass roots movements and non- governmental organisations in a globalising world.

According to Oser et al. (2013) the mobilisation and reinforcement hypotheses are not mutually exclusive. Internet access can accordingly mobilise some individuals to participate civically and politically, including new acts such as protests, while at the same time existing elites may utilise the internet to strategically strengthen and preserve their political positions (Oser et al., 2013).

3. Methodology

3.1 Overview of the case study

In order to investigate depoliticisation and the role played by new forms of citizen engagement / political participation in the output side of politics, this paper takes an exploratory case study approach. In the first of a two-stage process, we focus on the response to the Williams Report by a variety of opinion leaders in Wales. (The second will focus on the views of those working in the administration and enactment of policy.) One case study based on the region of South Wales within the UK was deemed the most effective research design. Baxter and Jack (2008) assert that a key issue involving case study methodology is the danger of endeavouring to investigate a question that is too broad. In order to avoid this, boundaries should be placed on a case (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). Such boundaries can involve place (Creswell, 1998), definition and context (Miles and Huberman, 1994) and time and activity (Stake, 1995). In recognition of this, our focus in this study is restricted to opinion-leading actors and groups based in South Wales, interviewed between July and September 2015.

The methodology adopted for this paper consisted of qualitative research using data obtained via a series of semi-structured in-depth interviews with a variety of actors and groups directed towards the output side of politics. The use of qualitative research embedded in the interpretative paradigm was founded on its ability to provide insight and depth of understanding of a subject (Hanson and Grimmer, 2007; Patton, 2002), notably in terms of human behaviour (Guba and Lincoln, 1994) and relationships (Shah and Corley, 2006). The methodological design accordingly offered the most appropriate means by which to explore the response to the Williams Report by a variety of actors and groups.

In order to deepen the research findings a process of triangulation was adopted, which “entails using more than one method or source of data” (Bryman, 2001:274). Each in-depth interview was accordingly analysed and subsequently triangulated with other interviews, thereby enriching the research findings and avoiding data errors (Davies, 2001; Lilleker, 2003).

3.2 Data collection

Interviewees were selected based on a convenience / snowball sample obtained via personal networks and relationships with actors and groups directed towards the output side of politics in South Wales. Individuals who agreed to participate in the study were asked to refer the researcher to others who might be interested in participating. Data was subsequently gathered from 5 semi-structured in-depth interviews with the following individuals:

1. Steve Brooks (Director, Electoral Reform Society Cymru)
2. Owen Donovan (Author of the political blog *Oggy Bloggy Ogwr*)
3. Nerys Evans (Director of Deryn Consulting, Vice-Chair of Plaid Cymru, former Assembly Member, and member of the Williams Commission)
4. Ellen ap Gwynn (Leader, Ceredigion County Council)
5. Dominic MacAskill (Regional Manager and Head of Local Government in Wales, UNISON)

The objective of each semi structured interview, lasting approximately 1 hour, was to explore the participants’ responses to the Williams Commission and their assessment of its implications for citizen engagement and political participation. The interview questions were in part informed by prior research regarding depoliticisation. All interviews accordingly began by asking participants about their knowledge of the Williams Commission, followed by a series of open ended questions related to their reactions to this report. Additional questions were subsequently based on the responses of interviewees in order to encapsulate the perspective of the interviewee and to prevent the interviewer from leading the interview (Marshall and Rossman, 1995). Devising questions in this manner encouraged informants to respond on their own terms and in their own words, thereby reflecting the qualitative, inductive nature of the research. In accordance with the triangulation process (Davies, 2001) data relating to each respondent was also triangulated with other interview data.

3.3 Data analysis

Each interview was recorded and transcribed, highlighting any new points that needed to be followed up in ensuing interviews (Harrison, 2001). Each author separately content-analysed (Bryman, 2008; Dawson, 2009) the transcriptions, picking out themes, detailed below, based on the literature review (Burnham et al. 2008). Each of the author's independently derived codes were then compared and analysed to complete the triangulation process (Davies, 2001). What emerged from this were four core themes, and **ten** cross-cutting subthemes, as follows.

Coding themes:

- a) Challenges and limitations of participation (both formal and informal).
- b) Opportunities for participation (both formal and informal).
- c) The Williams Report and its implications for participation (both formal and informal).
- d) The role of local government.

4. Findings / Discussion

Theme 1: Challenges and limitations of participation (both formal and informal)

Various impediments to participation and engagement were identified in responses. Several of the respondents noted complex relations between different forms of political engagement – and in particular, the decline in active membership of political parties compared to other forms of participation.

So for Owen Donovan, the shrinking of political parties poses a democratic deficit:

Political participation – meaning active involvement in politics – is in decline, though not terminally. Parties now noticeably struggle to find candidates to run for office, party memberships have been in free fall and voter turnouts in Welsh elections (such as those to the National Assembly) ought to be considered embarrassing for any democracy.

While for Dominic MacAskill, there is a shift from party politics to more specific, issue-based engagement:

Political parties have become more centralised ... you've seen the growths of direct action, issue politics, where you see Trade Unions engaging in an organisations, engaging with their members, where you see organisations like Citizens UK reaching out and working with those community groups that still have contact with people since UK model is very positively trade union but also links in with faith communities.

Brooks comments directly on the public's familiarity with the priorities and values of political parties:

I think speaking personally again this goes back down to political education and people just feeling just not getting that knowledge and understanding through their social networks about political process. I think now a lot of people do not understand the mission, vision or values of the different political parties.

Evans identifies a kind of distance between those who see the political party as a vehicle for the realisation of achieving valuable social goals, and those who do not:

You've got to be really dedicated and quite politically geeky if you want to join a political party and I think we all appreciate we're a special bunch of people that not many people understand us. ...[T]ake it with my friends and family... most are active in community work or wanting change on different levels in terms of education provision or community issues but they wouldn't necessarily see a political party as a way to do that.

Another recurring subtheme is the degree and scope of public knowledge. This applies both to the missions of political parties (see Brooks' comment above), and the purposes and remit of different levels of government. Steve Brooks:

I don't think the public's understanding of how Councils work, what the role of the Council is and how they can influence that is as strong as it perhaps was 20 years ago. ... [J]ust seeing how things like school reorganisation consultations work for example you know I think communities are at a loss and particularly communities in deprived areas seem to be less able to influence those decisions than citizens in affluent areas.

Here and across the responses, we find a recognition that rather than being uniform, patterns of knowledge and engagement are differentiated between demographic groups. Class and age are prominent subthemes in this respect. Both have an impact on the knowledge and confidence of citizens to influence political decisions. This is a point to which Brooks returns, in identifying changes in the way in which the public gains its knowledge of public affairs:

I think ... it's partly down to economic class as well. ... [L]ove them or hate them, I think people had political education inside of the old social structures – whether that was within your family unit, within the miners club, golf club – you have some element of political education handed down and so you were told I think what way you should think whether left or right based on your social class and people obviously didn't go that way for different reasons. That social network I think is breaking down so you get in some ways we talk about inherited poverty and you get some people will say they are in families that are third generation jobless and I think you get second and third generation non-voters now so parents aren't teaching their children about politics – that's not happening. I think that is based on class.

And age is also crucial, with distinct features in the way that younger people engage with political issues. Brooks observes that the mind-set of young people who join political parties may not be typical of their generation.

Young people are still interested in politics, still interested in political issues, still understand that politics matters to their daily lives and will feel passionate about certain subjects but just don't feel like the political system and political parties are equipped to address that. ... What about the kids who are 5-13 now – will they still have that commitment to democracy? Will it wain over time?

For Nerys Evans, though healthy in some respects, public knowledge is sometimes distorted by a lack of clarity on the relative roles of the Westminster and Cardiff governments:

People are more informed now but ironically if they do, if people want to know something they can find it out where that's a positive, but the negative is sometimes they think they know but it's based on the system of the country next door [England] so in terms of that's a massive issue democratic deficit. People not understanding that it's Huw Lewis who is the Education Minister and it's not Jeremy Hunt in charge of Health and that's a big issue generally.

Evans also observes that Wales has missed out on the quality of public discourse found in Scotland, before and since the independence referendum in September 2014:

We haven't had that big discussion about Wales, our governance, public services – most people have probably been turned off by it unless there is something meaningful for them they want to talk to them. Obviously as a member of Plaid Cymru I would love to have that discussion or have that question posed, not independence now but have a question posed to people about and get that information across. I'm sure that if people understood it and knew it we'd wake people up about the dire state in some of these issues.

Austerity measures in the wake of the 2008 financial crash and subsequent recession hovers consistently over the discussion of citizen engagement. Ellen ap Gwynn comments on how the scope for local authorities to engage with the public is constrained by resources:

I'm obliged now to consult a lot more and in fact engage with our communities in order to find out what they feel are their priorities. It's difficult in this time and this age now when we are facing absolutely horrendous stuff in our finances. We are having to do things that we would not possibly want to do in another time when funds were more regularly available. ... You also always go out and consult as far as we possibly can. That doesn't mean to say that we are able to listen all the time and take on board everything.

For Dominic MacAskill, austerity and its accompanying ideological messages are having a major impact on the social fabric, in ways directly affecting citizen engagement:

I think the whole drive of austerity is to undermine communities' collective wealth, collective value whilst persuading people of a narrative individually that they can survive and are better off. That type of narrative does not assist in engaging collectively ... People are so engaged with... everyday struggle, engaged with eking out and working all the hours that God gives them just to keep a roof over their heads. How can they engage in that political process, how can they engage in that 'big society'?

Meanwhile, though, there are various factors on the 'input' side which directly affect the forms which citizen engagement takes, and its extent. For Owen Donovan this reflects a particular version of depoliticisation:

If anything, decision-making in Wales has shifted away from elected representatives sitting in committees towards appointed "experts", as the importance of "evidence-based policy" now takes precedence over the views of local communities – controversies surrounding local development plans, and recent bin protests in Cardiff being a case in point. Despite lengthy public consultation exercises, many of the outcomes suggest a decision had already been made and the consultation was just for show. At local level it seems decisions aren't made by elected members, but by unelected local government officers.

Steve Brooks voices related concerns about the limits of formal accountability and representation at local government level, when expertise is identified from within the 'bubble', limited by the perspective of politicians themselves:

The danger is – not to be all Marxist about it – but the elite tend to cite their own. It's the same voices that are heard, the same wisdom that's reinforced the issue. So if you ask a group of politicians who the experts are, their list might well be different than if you'd asked 100 people who do you think the experts are in that field. So that's the danger and then ... ultimately what accountability does a trade union council have to the workforce of Cardiff? What accountability does the commerce have to the businesses in Cardiff and all of those issues?

All of these are examples of factors constraining the effectiveness of 'bottom-up' engagement and participation. Overall, the prospects seem mixed. Sometimes this is because ultimately, the power lies on the input side, and with the formal, professionalised channels of decision-making. Dominic MacAskill cites the example of a campaign to save nursery provision in a particular local authority, which flourished, gained a good deal of media coverage, but was ultimately unsuccessful in achieving its aims:

That energy and spontaneity is actually quite useful but in the end it cannot create the solutions unless you... join up community campaigns to link them to get them to see that the wider picture. So the outcome of the campaign nursery reductions was the council got the [initial] decision [to save the provision] overturned... The council spent more time consulting and ticked all the boxes and then they implemented exactly the same [as they had originally proposed]. [By now the campaigners had] exhausted their initial spontaneous energy and so all that very positive involvement in the community and defending their services had now

dissipated because it didn't succeed and I think what we see is that needs to be harnessed, needs to be able to allow those groups to connect with other groups, we need be able to sign post them into ways of influencing the wider political and regional and national agenda.

Owen Donovan sounds a similar note of caution about the idea that there might be increased scope for effective citizen engagement:

I'm sceptical of the impact citizen-led campaigning has at a local level. That's not because of cynicism, but a sense that the current system doesn't really allow for it. There have been numerous such campaigns and they rarely, if ever, achieve their stated aims unless they have the backing and organisational support of professional politicians – particularly Assembly Members – and celebrities. In the end, however, the outcomes of public policy issues are still determined by lengthy formal decision-making processes – whether that's local council scrutiny committees, the National Assembly or the UK Parliament. Goal-based initiatives just tell decision-makers what the public might like to see happen, but rarely have any real bearing on final decisions it seems.

In the end, for Donovan, 'it remains important for concerned citizens to keep in touch with formal politics even if less formal means (like social media campaigns) attract more publicity'.

Theme 2: Opportunities for participation (both formal and informal)

In terms of formal and informal participation within the context of the Williams Report a diverse range of viewpoints were expressed by the respondents. Dominic MacAskill, for example, noted:

Well I think in terms of, there is more scope for people to intervene in their own lives outside of the formal structures and the growth of co-operatives, community mutuals which there has been some organic growth of that of those but there is also some policy driven growth of those.

The above statement reflects a perception of the trend towards informal participation whilst simultaneously recognising the recognition by some political bodies of the importance of citizen engagement. Within the context of the Williams Report Owen Donovan highlighted the importance and challenges associated with such engagement in relation to the output side of politics:

The new authorities – based on the most recent map published by Leighton Andrews – will almost certainly be covering much larger footprints. The new councils will have to make citizen and community engagement a high priority to stem fears that the distance between themselves and the communities they represent will widen – particularly in sparsely-populated areas. How they would actually do that is, at present, unclear.

In comparison to the above focus on the output side of politics Dominic MacAskill also commented on the potential for re-politicisation:

I think there is a shift and it's like for example when Rhondda Cynon Taf⁴ decided to reduce nursery provision, now you would've thought the Trade Unions would've been the ones that organised the march through Pontypridd where hundreds of people turned up. It wasn't, it was a spontaneous organisation of parents who were irate and wanted to effect change.

Furthermore, Steve Brooks asserted that citizens, notably the youth, are increasingly active in what Bang (2013) terms 'goal based engagement'.

I don't think young people are necessarily flocking to organisations like Friends of the Earth because they feel like Friends of the Earth isn't political and they want to find a political clone to do stuff. I think they've gone to hell with politics but I know I want to stop the M4 relief road so I'm going to get involved in Friends of the Earth and therefore they do not see that as a political action.

In terms of age it would therefore appear that mainstream political parties have become disengaged from younger people. As Steve Brooks observed:

Political parties have become disengaged from young people. Speaking personally non-attributable a lot of young activists and political parties are not representative let's say of their generation. You are getting and again non-attributed but I think if you look out at the field and saw the people that we come across or some of the people who may be involved in the British Youth Parliament or Funky Dragon ... who are young people they are all slightly strange in respect of you know their twitter profiles. Their twitter profiles will look like politicians, they will talk like politicians.

The above examples highlight the ability of citizens to "re-make" politics on their own terms, particularly in terms of efforts to influence the outputs generated by the political system as members of a broader political community' (Fawcett and Marsh 2014: 184). The examples provided by Dominic MacAskill and Steve Brooks thus failed to emphasise a decline in the willingness of citizens to engage on the output side politics but rather illustrates the selective nature of such engagement.

This trend may be facilitated by impact of political parties, unions and other organisations on participation. Whilst it would appear that citizen groups are perceived by the above opinion leaders as lobbyists or engaging partners in local

⁴ A local authority in the south Wales valleys.

authorities Steve Brooks made a number of interesting observations regarding the topic of political parties, unions and other organisations in relation to participation:

I'm not surprised at the long term trend is that people find it difficult to distinguish between political parties and therefore join them so when people say labour and the Tories are the same that could be a common truth that they are two centrists and their policies overlap it might also be a little bit of I just don't understand the difference with both of them...

I say it's very very clear what friends of the earth stand for, what RSPB stands for, what the taxpayers alliance stand for... and I see the political parties that are thriving are the SNP, UKIP and the Green Party who are all essentially single issue parties at their birth and the still communicate that to some degree in how they can reach out to people so it's easier to...engage with them.

Within the context of trade unions Dominic MacAskill observed that;

You've seen the growths of direct actions of issue politics, where you see Trade Unions engaging in an organisations, engaging with their members, where you see organisations like citizens UK reaching out and working with those community groups that still have contact with people since UK model is very positively trade union but also links in with faith communities. They see those two as organisations that actually still have a connection and they can tap into that and reenergise and refocus.

Furthermore the question of education and levels of public knowledge are intrinsically linked to engagement. As Steve Brooks commented:

Speaking personally...I think again it's partly down to economic class as well. So I think the old social structures love them or hate them I think people had political education inside of the old social structures whether that was within your family unit, within the miners club, golf club you have some element of political education handed down and so you were told I think what way you should think whether left or right based on your social class and people obviously didn't go that way for different reasons. That social network I think is breaking down so you get in some ways we talk about inherited poverty and you get some people will say they are in families that are third generation jobless and I think you get second and third generation non-voters now so parents aren't teaching their children about politics that's not happening. I think that is based on class.

The following comment by Steve Brooks nevertheless drew attention to the role played by individuals who could be perceived as Expert Citizens (Bang 2005) in cooperative approaches towards local authorities:

Though my sense is that you see some interesting innovations in things like the PACT meetings that are going on like placing communities together which sets local policing priorities but also some sets some priorities for the Council.

A similar comment was made by Ellen ap Gwynn when discussing citizen groups who attempt to influence local government:

We have learning disability groups who come and lobby and work with us according to their needs, we have there are examples we've been working with disabled people as well, they come for their needs to redesign their roads or pathways whatever.

The aforementioned observations were supported by Owen Donovan who discussed the impact of social media on citizen engagement:

Citizen engagement has been enhanced by the internet. There are many more avenues to make your views known (i.e. social media, blogs and sites like change.org), while the National Assembly's petitions system seems very popular indeed and has set an example for the rest of the UK to follow. Also, most politicians now have an online presence and are contactable 24/7.

Owen Donovan's observation of use of social media by the Welsh National Assembly could be cynically regarded as an example of the practical application of the reinforcement hypothesis (Abramson et al., 1988; Bimber, 2001), whereby the political institution utilises social media to support entrenched political interests. Nevertheless the impact of social media on participation was positively perceived by Nerys Evans:

Social media brings a different perspective on people wanting to focalise their opinion and find out things or challenge decision makers.

The role played by social media on informal participation as similarly noted by Owen Donovan:

Petitions websites and social media have enabled the speedy (some might say lazy) promotion of specific causes and campaigns to large numbers of people in a very short space of time. Whether this actually has any effect or has led to "compassion fatigue" is another matter.

The above statement therefore supports Holtz-Bacha's (1998), cited in Pautz (2010), notion that the internet has resulted in the proliferation of special interest groups, activists, grass roots movements and non- governmental organisations.

Theme 3: The Williams Report and its implications for participation (both formal and informal)

Views about the adequacy of existing political structures are a crucial element in the different 'takes' among respondents on the value and remit of the Williams Commission. For some, the need for a review of local services is spelled out clearly by the lack of public knowledge about current arrangements – sometimes, indeed, mirrored in the perspective of acting politicians themselves. Commission member Nerys Evans, for example, recalls:

I remember getting this evidence quite clearly from some councillor saying, 'I get stopped on the street and people ask me about schools and I say it's not my job anymore that's down to the education consortium. People ask me about social services that is increasingly being shared a budget with health, people ask me about roads that's, we've got responsibility for some roads and not for others. I don't really know what I do with the council now'. And that was from councillors from political parties who should you know, who 'get' the political nature of local government. All of those need to happen in order for local government to be more effective, more responsive, respond to the needs of the citizens better and be more effective so just redesigning the map is not going to cut it. Everything else needs to follow and all those things need to follow in order for redesigning the map to work.

For the Electoral Reform Society, an important part of the Williams Commission's role was as a contribution to a wider conversation about reform:

We had for quite a while been talking about the importance of issues around governance being part of the wider debate of public service reform and felt that the previous attempts to deliver public service reform in various guises had left out the matter of governance and decision making ... [W]e welcomed the fact for the first time it felt like Ministers were giving proper attention and weight to find out it's not just what an organisation does but it's how it's going to constitute it.

And the need for better public awareness of these issues is often explicitly linked to the need for improved transparency and accountability. Nerys Evans again:

It's just a minefield out there so not only they don't read papers that are based in papers so they don't understand the structure but how, if you've got a problem to do with your local authority where do you go for answers. At the moment it's not clear because so many things are done on partnerships or regionally or regional footprints that are different according to different services and that's why one of the

clearer recommendations from our report was ... in terms of boundaries so people are clear who is accountable for what and that, if that was implemented I hope that people would understand it better and be able to participate in it easier.

The need for greater efficiency in the organisation of local government and its provision of services is singled out by Dominic MacAskill, who highlights the costs of having 22 authorities often operating in quite different ways:

We were always critical of the 22 authority structure... There was a big project I was involved in which was trying to pull together 10 authorities around support services. HR and payroll and IT and stuff like that and I was involved in negotiations around for probably about 18 months. There were 10s of millions of pounds spent and it all collapsed. I think there was a recognition that this wasn't going to work out.

For some, the remit of the Commission was too narrow to be fully effective. Owen Donovan observes that:

The final report included a thorough analysis of the challenges facing local government and the inherent weaknesses of current arrangements. However, I don't believe the Commission were given the broad remit they required to fully overhaul local government. They instead tweaked current arrangements by merging authorities instead of asking, and trying to answer, searching questions about what local government should do.

Yet for Nerys Evans, its remit was in fact too broad:

The challenge we had as a commission was the remit was so broad. Looking at all public service governance and delivery. The first challenge we faced ourselves was how we defined public service, was it public bodies or public service and then looking at 900 odd organisations. We couldn't possibly do justice to that massive agenda in all areas.

The key questions it faced, for Evans, were geared around public knowledge, and the scope for effective service provision:

We all went in there to really to make an independent assessment of public service governance and delivery to the best of our ability and it became obvious in the first couple of days that the structures that we have hinder, in some instances, better performance of public service delivery, governance, participation. ... We genuinely looked at the performance of public service. What the public expect. What the government expects. How public servants in whatever organisation can do their job. How do they know what their job is? How do they engage with the citizens that they're trying to serve? How do they deal with expectations in terms of services?

Various positive contributions of the Report were highlighted by respondents. Owen Donovan singles out as ‘welcome and overdue.’ Dominic MacAskill, noting the value of a more strategic approach to the sharing of service and the overcoming of ‘unnecessary silos’, stresses the potential value in terms of accountability of a transition to a smaller number of local authorities:

Bringing them together gives them, you’ve got some additional capacity, you’ve got potential to streamline accountability and democracy.

For the Electoral Reform Society, the value is not so much in the transition to a particular number of authorities, but in the very opportunity to start afresh:

We don’t take a view as to whether 8 or 9 is good, whether 22 is good, whether 400 is good, we just want to say whatever structure emerges that specific things need to happen to make sure local people are involved in decision making.

More specifically:

Potentially Williams could open up a new way of doing things so we’ve moved beyond your local community council filled with 50 dedicated long standing members of the community who perhaps don’t get contested at elections and maybe look after the village green and the local cemetery and pop on the local annual carnival. We could move beyond that to think what services in new county councils could be done at a community level... to actually devolve stuff down from the county hall down to the community council level.

This view that a restructure might open up greater space for community-level engagement is directly contradicted by Ellen ap Gwynn, who assumes that ‘bigger’ authorities will simply mean ‘more remote’:

Well if you’re telling me that taking local government further away from people will improve it then I’m sorry you’re living in the fool’s paradise. Look at Europe, look at members that they represent all over Europe their local government is much closer. I’m sorry bigger is not better.

Owen Donovan was more equivocal, but sees the report as ultimately compromised:

The report's recommendations seem to be a compromise between a radical overhaul (which could've included measures like co-production and regional tiers of government/Greater Manchester-style combined authorities) and a "do minimum" option of retaining as many of the 22 current local authorities as possible.

In terms of opening up access to local government and improving accountability, sees it as a missed opportunity:

Welsh local government is stuck in a time warp. The number of behind closed doors meetings and exempt items on meeting agendas is frustrating, while some local

authorities stubbornly refuse to webcast meetings. I don't think any local council has a petitions system and there have been high-profile examples (even court cases) where public scrutiny of local government by (so-called) citizen journalists has not just been discouraged but actively punished. These are issues that the Williams Commission should've focused on, but instead it's mainly been about the map.

For Ellen ap Gwynn, a major potential loss in the restructuring of local government comes in terms of the removal of autonomy, at local level, to find partners flexibly, as and when this suits the priorities of service provision. She refers to the proposal that her own authority Ceredigion be merged with Pembrokeshire:

We're working as and when necessary with which ever partner we feel the better partner or whatever service we are dealing with at the time. We don't close doors to anybody. We talk to anybody and everybody. This locking us into Pembroke we don't think would work for us at all.

Several participants identify challenges of implementing the report, chiefly consisting in what must accompany any redrawing of the map (an issue which as Evans and Donovan both observe, has dominated media coverage with rather distorting effects), in order for the new system to represent a genuine improvement.

So for Nerys Evans,

The lines on the map and change on the boundaries ... won't work on their own. All the other recommendations in terms of capacity, in terms of leadership, in terms of governance, in terms of dealing or communicating with citizens all need to be taken together.

[Just changing the map] is not going to change anything, we've got to change all the other things and changing the map wasn't in order to implement those of good leaders, good governance structures, clear accountability.

Size is again an issue, for example for Owen Donovan:

The new authorities – based on the most recent map published by Leighton Andrews – will almost certainly be covering much larger footprints. The new councils will have to make citizen and community engagement a high priority to stem fears that the distance between themselves and the communities they represent will widen – particularly in sparsely-populated areas. How they would actually do that is, at present, unclear.

Resources is another, as highlighted by Dominic MacAskill, who identifies responding to austerity as 'a real push' behind the perceived need for reform:

The Welsh Government ... have a pot of money which they provide for initiatives which they think will save money in the long term but at the moment we have to persuade ... to put the money where their mouth is in terms of local government

structure. So I think restructuring is inevitable for the protection and the survival of local government – in the interim local government is being dismantled.

And like Evans, Steve Brooks sees a change in culture as a vital corollary to changing the map, from the point of view of promoting improved citizen engagement:

Without concerted effort it won't [have a positive effect] so I think if you move to 8 or 9 authorities the danger is people will feel even more remote from what they already do from the 22 ... I think unless a particular action is taken ... I don't think new forms of assisting engagement and political participation will be helped by reorganisation.

Theme 4: The role of local government

The role of local government, notably in terms of citizen engagement, within the context of the Williams Report was the subject of this theme. A number of respondents commented on the apparent desire of local authorities to foster citizen engagement. As Steve Brooks observed: *Councils are doing more to engage people through formal consultation processes.*

Within the context of the Williams Report Nerys Evans made an interesting observation regarding links between local government and engagement:

Local government is significant and that's why the Williams Commission Report is a massive endorsement of local government despite what the government leaders might say. It is a ringing endorsement of the value of local government in terms of the services it's provides, in terms of engagement with communities, in terms of delivery public services. It is changing because of the budgetary pressures and to some extent I think the professionalism in terms of the politics of local government level.

Such a positive perception of local government was countered by Owen Donovan in the following comments:

I don't believe the role of local government has significantly changed as it has consistently provided the same services since the 1970s... Since devolution, there's been a sense that the Welsh Government are attempting to centralise decision-making in Cardiff Bay and undermine the role of local authorities.

In terms of the Williams Report Owen Donovan contended that tensions existed between the Welsh Government and local authorities within the context of citizen engagement:

Wales can be parochial due to the historic lack of a united civil society, so anecdotal reasons for Welsh Government centralisation include punishment

for local council antipathy towards devolution and Welsh Ministers' blaming local government for long-standing public service failures, like PISA results in education. You could say there's a "turf war" over who the most important organ of government is or who's most in touch with communities.

Such tensions are inexorably linked to the concept of depoliticisation. Owen Donovan extensively commented on the role played by the Williams Report in terms of depoliticisation:

If anything, decision-making in Wales has shifted away from elected representatives sitting in committees towards appointed "experts", as the importance of "evidence-based policy" now takes precedence over the views of local communities – controversies surrounding local development plans, and recent bin protests in Cardiff being a case in point. Despite lengthy public consultation exercises, many of the outcomes suggest a decision had already been made and the consultation was just for show.

This viewpoint therefore resonates with the notion that depoliticisation entails displacement and a reduction or removal of politics in favour of a different mode of decision-making (Madsen 2013; Rand-Henriksen 2013). As a result of this contentious characteristic the publication of the Williams Report has resulted in disparity between its intended aim and ground level reality. As Owen Donovan stated:

The report's recommendations seem to be a compromise between a radical overhaul (which could've included measures like co-production and regional tiers of government/Greater Manchester-style combined authorities) and a "do minimum" option of retaining as many of the 22 current local authorities as possible...discussion in the media and amongst politicians has been dominated by the new map and little else.

5. Conclusion / Limitations / Future Research

This paper has provided a diverse range of insights regarding the perceptions of opinion leaders in Wales on the nature and scope of citizen engagement and political participation within the context of the Williams Report. In terms of theme 1 – challenges and limitations of participation (both formal and informal) – various impediments to participation and engagement were identified in responses. A number of respondents acknowledged the importance of demographic groups in terms of political knowledge and engagement. Class and age were likewise prominent subthemes in this respect. The inverse correlation between depoliticization and participation was acknowledged by several respondents, emphasising the discernment that power continues to reside on the input side, and with the formal channels of decision-making.

Respondent perceptions concerning opportunities for formal and informal participation – theme 2 – were similarly disparate. A number of generic observations were, however, made by the respondents, notably in terms of perception of the trend towards informal participation whilst simultaneously recognising the recognition by some political bodies of the importance of citizen engagement. In particular, respondent data highlighted the role played by the youth within the context of ‘goal based engagement’, highlighting the ability of citizens to participate in output politics.

Elite perceptions regarding the implications of the Williams Report on formal and informal participation – theme 3 – were similarly sundry. Whilst some respondents noted the possibilities for engaged engagement as a result of the proposed restructure of Welsh local government other respondents perceived the Williams Report as a missed opportunity to revitalise citizen engagement in Wales, evident in an apparent lack of public knowledge regarding the report. The disparity amongst the respondents regarding the role of local government in enhancing participation – theme 4 – highlighted the tensions that apparently exist between local and regional government, influenced by depoliticisation.

Whilst this exploratory paper has evidently highlighted a diverse range of ‘elite’ perceptions regarding the impact of the Williams Report on participation, further research is needed to examine the output side of politics. Such an investigation, focusing on output politics, will potentially provide invaluable insights regarding the ground level of the enactment of policy.

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