Dear Welsh Senedd,

It is an ambitious government indeed that tries to right the wrongs of the past while the country struggles with coronavirus, looming unemployment, arrangements for Brexit, and so on. Becoming the judge of Welsh history is a labour beyond even the Welsh government’s formidable powers. I offer some thoughts on the consultation questions as a History teacher here in Mercia, where many local councils are thinking through similar issues.

In short, existing memorials and statues should be left in peace, with any alleged ‘trauma’ they cause properly evidenced. New ones should be at the discretion of local towns, villages and parishes, and should celebrate excellence, not ‘diversity’. The Welsh government would be best served by focusing on its core functions and not bringing the past into its remit.

Your sincerely,

Mr. N. R. Franklin.

1. **What principles should be followed when public authorities decide who should be remembered in public spaces?** How should they consider issues such as: the historical significance of the person; the continued influence of this person; the national impact of this person; his /her Impact on his/her field; how this person was viewed at the time; whether this person provides a good example to people today; the architectural significance of the monument; the impact on minority groups and views of the act of commemoration.

Most of these criteria are sound reasons for public remembrance, but the Welsh government must absolutely distinguish between existing memorials and new ones. The vast majority of memorials have stood for a long time, decades or centuries even. They have become part of the land or townscape, and, much of the time, we know little for the person remembered by such memorials. The commemorations of our heritage become our heritage.

Who could object to new memorials, provided they are supported by locals and not imposed by pious state planners? There should be a local connection: a particular man, or woman, or battalion, or group, or event, etc. No-one remembers or is stirred by an abstraction. Let the great and the good be remembered.

We should scrutinise the last principle – the impact on minority groups – in particular, as the killing of George Floyd in the Minneapolis has made two dubious assumptions the default across the Western world: first, that the Anglo-American past is racist until proven otherwise (hence the Welsh government’s audit); and second, that the relics of this past psychologically harm minority groups.

The first assumption is outstandingly cynical, as well as false. The second is unproven: where is the hard evidence for it? Does it justify changing familiar names and places? Rather than jumping on a morally satisfying bandwagon, our institutions should investigate the matter properly.

It is true, of course, that the past is alien and offensive. That is why it is interesting. Generations gone by care nothing for our ‘diversity and inclusivity’, and we should not require the impossible of
them. In any case, monuments do not ‘celebrate’ everything about someone. Take Sir Thomas Picton as an example: colonial Trinidad was a brutal place, and he did not go beyond the Spanish laws of the colony in permitting judicial torture there. But he is remembered not for his governorship in the Caribbean, but for his service and valiant death in the Napoleonic Wars.

I strongly advise the Welsh Government not to delve into the complexities of History. It is beyond its remit, and it will not find the untainted saints and heroes, be they white, black, or brown, that it seeks. Instead, leave existing names and monuments alone, and let local people across Wales say if they believe some of their ancestors go without honour.

2. Should the appropriateness of acts of public commemoration be judged against fixed criteria (as, for example, is the case with listed buildings)?

I would shy away from judging ‘appropriateness’ altogether. But fixed criteria can only go so far – you must ultimately consider the particular merits of the act of commemoration in the context of its own time (not ours).

3. What process should public authorities follow when deciding whether to remove or transfer a statue or monument or rename a place? How should local people be engaged in this process?

As I explained in response to the first question, this should not be done. Statues, monuments and names: these are the heritage of us all; for good or ill, they made the world we live in. Wales, to my knowledge, has no equivalent of a Hitler, Stalin, Saddam Hussain, etc. whose contemporary crimes, judged by the standards of their own day, merit being cleansed from the public sphere. The process for raising a complaint should be no different from the normal means available to citizens, so through their local council.

4. The planning system allows for local people to input into a decision made by a local planning authority, which makes a decision based on a common set of rules. How appropriate would a similar system be for dealing with controversial acts of public commemoration?

Given how convoluted and popular the planning system is, perhaps you should not extend it to cover the whole of Welsh history. Controversy can be settled immediately: state it plainly that existing monuments will not be removed, and if you wish to add something, speak to your local elected representative, who can then bring the issue to the wider community ahead of a decision.

5. If statues or monuments are judged to be inappropriate, to what extent is it suitable to re-contextualise them (for example, by providing additional information on a plaque) rather than remove them?

Again: judged ‘inappropriate’ by whom? What body has the right? I doubt that the Welsh government has asked its electorate whether they wanted the new historical inquisition. As I say in reply to the first question, the past is grim as well as glorious. You cannot judge it from the 21st century without a lot of knowledge of the wider context.
I am not opposed to adding context per se, but its recent record is abysmal. Those who wanted to rid Bristol of Colston could not agree a compromise plaque, so took the law into their own hands and got away with it. In Edinburgh, the suggested extra context around Lord Melville is a crude character assassination. The National Trust has cast the net so widely for ‘imperial links’ that any old house could be judged inappropriate.

In principle and practice, changing the past is a can of worms best left unopened.

6. **If historic statues or monuments are taken down, what should be done with them?**

Once more: they are our heritage. They should not be taken down, especially not without a full examination of the evidence of the problems they cause and their historical context.

But if elected representatives do not have the stomach to defend this principle, then they should at least keep them on public display nearby. Perhaps you could move them to a museum, but they would probably quickly disappear from display there as well.

7. **Are there any international examples of governments dealing effectively with controversial historical acts of public commemoration?**

Again, the Senedd must be very cautious when making comparisons between countries, because their histories are so different. This is especially true of Britain and America, whose histories are so often ignorantly mixed together. Statues and all representation of the Confederacy have been purged in recent decades, but that would be a most unwise course in Britain. The ex-Confederate states put up monuments to ease the pain of their loss in Civil War, and to highlight ongoing white dominance in the era of Jim Crow. Britain has never put up a statue to a slaver qua slaver, and did more than any other country to destroy the ancient institution of slavery.

The Confederacy is the most obvious bad comparison. Those with, say, King Leopold’s Congo, or totalitarian Germany or the USSR, are frankly obscene. We must lead with our own judgement here, based on our own unique history.

8. **Are there any individuals or groups of people that are underrepresented in public commemoration in Wales?**

Why should history be representative? It just was not – especially not in ethnic terms. This is an uncomfortable truism in newly diverse Britain, but I again, I would dispute that lack of representation in statues and memorials of all things is a real impediment to minority groups. Where is the evidence?

Are there worthy people who should have a memorial but do not? I suppose it is possible. I do not know of any, but ask for suggestions. Above all, however, judge each person on their individual merits, not as a ‘representative’ of their racial group. The recently honoured bravery of spy Noor Inayat Khan is a good example. But do not do it just to make minority groups feel better about themselves, which is patronising and racist. Let accomplishment speak for itself.