

Norman Hudson

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2 October 15

William Powell AM
Petitions Committee Chairman

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Dear Mr Powell

Petition "Welsh Medium Education – Garland or Albatross?"

Agenda item 2.3 (P-04-649) of the Committee's September meeting and the Senedd.TV broadcast of your discussion both refer.

I had thought, from the Ministerial handwringing that accompanies each dismal new batch of PISA and GCSE results, that DfES failure to reverse the deteriorating standards of Education in Wales was a matter of *universal concern*: contrary to this impression, your Committee's rapid move to close my Petition, without any discussion of the issues, suggests an absolute indifference to the continuing damage being done to our children.

Enclosed is a commentary on your proceedings.

Yours sincerely

[REDACTED]

cc

Russell George AM

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Bethan Jenkins AM

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Joyce Watson AM

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Jeff Cuthbert AM

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Alun Ffred Jones

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[27] **William Powell:** Agenda item 2.3 is P-04-649, "Welsh-Medium Education - Garland or Albatross". This petition was submitted by Norman Hudson, and he has the support of 117 signatures. I'll give a flavour of the text of this petition:

[28] **William Powell:** "The Welsh Government is rightly committed to achieving best value for money in all Public Services: sadly, the Department for Education and Skills spends £2billion each year only to provide the lowest standard of education in the UK. The Minister has said that "Education today is the Economy tomorrow"; if he is right, the outlook for Wales is truly bleak.

When set against International PISA standards, the quality of Education in our Schools has been in catastrophic decline since Devolution. The Government says, in its defence, that delivering Public Services in Wales is hampered by poverty and by a dispersed population: but, GDP is lower in Northern Ireland and there are fewer people per square mile both in Northern Ireland and in Scotland.

The Environment seems to be in safer hands. A derelict site cannot be developed without a prior Environmental Impact Assessment; no stone may be turned if there's the faintest chance of a newt hiding under it or a migratory bird fossicking over it..."

[29] **William Powell:** I think that gives colleagues a flavour of Mr Hudson and his concerns. A first consideration letter was sent to Huw Lewis, the Minister for Education and Skills, on 16 July. We've got a response from the Minister, and the petitioner has also been informed of that response and has sent a detailed commentary upon it, as well as additional data that he believes support his case. All of these colleagues have got in the public papers. I'd very much appreciate any perspectives from colleagues. Alun Ffred.

Commentary:

1 Reliance on "*a flavour*" instead of the complete text gave immediate notice that the Chairman had pre-judged the issue and did not intend the Petition to receive serious consideration.

2 Mr Powell's "*flavour*" was not a worthwhile precis – it was merely an incomplete reading of the introduction.

(The template, provided by the Committee's web-page, allows 2000 characters for the Petition Text. If time constraints are really a limiting factor and if just half a page of A4 cannot be read-out in full, to properly present a petition, then the Petition Text should be limited to, say, 1000 characters).

3 There is more than a whiff of condescension in Mr Powell's "*I think that gives colleagues a flavour of Mr Hudson and his concerns*".

[30] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Well, the Minister's response is very comprehensive...

... and it appears from the further response of the petitioner that he has a number of points that are irrelevant in relation to the original allegation that the teaching of Welsh is responsible for, for example, the poor economic performance of Wales...

... So, I don't see how we can take this forward because the Minister's response is so clear. I don't think that there is evidence in the petition itself or in the petitioner's response that justifies our continuation of this matter.

4 The Minister's letter of 31 July 15 may well have been long but it was certainly not "*comprehensive*". As catalogued in the response attached to my eMail of 9 September 15, much of the Petition was simply ignored by the Minister and what he did have to say was largely empty rhetoric.

5 If Mr Jones would say which of the points in my response he considers to be irrelevant, I will do my best to address his concerns.

The idea that what is bad for Education is bad for the Economy was spelt-out by Huw Lewis in his Statement of 18 February 14. Education today is in crisis - suggesting that there will be a corresponding crisis in the Economy tomorrow.

If it can be shown that the added pressure on pupils to be bi-lingual, associated with teaching in Welsh, has no detrimental effect on our PISA and GCSE scores – then by all means continue the practice.

But, if not Welsh-medium teaching, what IS the cause of our poor GCSE and PISA performance?

6 Mr Jones has things backwards. It is the Minister who has failed to produce evidence that the Welsh-medium experiment is doing no harm: all the Petition says is that there is no such evidence.

The Petition can only properly be set aside if the Committee is truly indifferent to the causes of falling standards in our schools.

[31] William Powell: Diolch yn fawr. Jeff Cuthbert.

[32] Jeff Cuthbert: Yes, thank you. From the initial text of the petition, the first two paragraphs are opinion...

... As far as I can see, the only specific request that we had, at least the first time around, was to ask for the Welsh-medium education experiment to be abandoned unless it can be clearly shown that its continuance is 'doing no harm'. That is a rather strange phrase. You presumably have things in there so that they're improving matters and not just spending money to do no harm...

... I agree with Alun Ffred, I have to say, in terms of his general points. I just get the sense that it's a sort of anti-Welsh-language approach, but I might be wrong on that. But, that's how it came across to me.

7 Mr Cuthbert dismisses the two introductory paragraphs as mere "opinion"; but, the only opinion expressed is the Minister's!

"The Welsh Government is rightly committed to achieving best value for money in all Public Services" [FACT]; *"sadly, the Department for Education and Skills spends £2billion each year only to provide the lowest standard of education in the UK"* [FACT]. *"The Minister has said that 'Education today is the Economy tomorrow'"* [FACT]; *"if he is right, the outlook for Wales is truly bleak"* [by extension, FACT].

"When set against International PISA standards, the quality of Education in our Schools has been in catastrophic decline since Devolution" [FACT]. *"The Government says, in its defence, that delivering Public Services in Wales is hampered by poverty and by a dispersed population"* [FACT]: *"but, GDP is lower in Northern Ireland and there are fewer people per square mile both in Northern Ireland and in Scotland"* [FACT].

8 Mr Cuthbert is correct, in that the Petition's only specific request is that *"the Welsh Medium Education experiment be abandoned – unless it can be clearly shown that its continuance is doing no harm"*.

Mr Cuthbert dislikes the principle *"first, do no harm"* – even though it is said to underpin the entire medical profession – and seeks to dismiss the Petition because its only request is too mild.

9 There is nothing *"anti-Welsh-language"* in the Petition". The point is a simple one: if the People of Wales want to encourage the Welsh language – fine, but not at the expense of our children's education.

[33] **William Powell:** I think we've got absolute clarity from the Minister and then the subsequent feedback from the petitioner makes it clear that we're not going to find a meeting of minds here...

... But I think in this case—and I'll ask Russell if he has a perspective on this as well—I'm minded also at this early stage to close the petition. I don't see that there is a route forward really.

[34] **Russell George:** I think, Chair, in a way, when we look at petitions, we put our views aside, and I think that we obviously have to treat every petition the same. I think, by the letters, I can see that it looks like it's ending its process at committee stage. I perhaps would at least respond to the Minister with the petitioner's further comments. That's what we'd normally do, but bearing in mind that the petition looks like it's coming to an end because there is not a meeting of agreement here. I'm not strong either way.

[35] **William Powell:** For consistency, we should—

[36] **Russell George:** For consistency, we should—. Yes, that's what we normally do.

- 10 The Minister stated unequivocally, in his letter, that (regardless of the Petitions Committee's consideration of the matter) "*the Welsh Government has no intention of 'abandoning' the 'Welsh-medium experiment'*": is not, however, the Committee's role to find consensus – rather, it is to hold the Minister to account and to ensure that the DfES is doing its job properly.
- 11 The way forward is NOT to meekly grant the Minister a veto but, instead, to seek further information from the Research Service; to conduct an inquiry into the matters raised; and, to ask other committees to consider the issue (extract: Petitions Committee leaflet "*Discover, Debate, Decide*").
- 12 The way forward is to seek informed opinion. The question central to the Petition is "*do pupils with below average language skills have the capacity to be bi-lingual?*". Who better to ask than the ex "*Head of German at Hereford Sixth Form College*"?
- 13 **Mr Powell: from your experience, do pupils with below average language skills have the capacity to be bi-lingual?**
- 14 Seemingly content to ignore his supposed commitment to "*Discover, Debate, Decide*", Mr George balks at the prospect of departing from "*what we'd normally do*".

[37] **William Powell:** Okay, we've done that previously and we should do that now and in moving to close, we should share the views. Is that your suggestion?

[38] **Russell George:** I would normally just say that we should share the views with the Minister and then wait for the Minister to respond and then make a decision. But I'm conscious that it looks like-

[39] **William Powell:** It would depart from our previous practice to close at this first stage.

[40] **Russell George:** It would do, yes.

[41] **William Powell:** I understand.

[42] **Alun Ffred Jones:** If that's the case, I suggest that we-. Are we sending these further comments on to the Minister regardless, or not? If not, I agree that we should close the petition.

[43] **William Powell:** That is Russell George's proposal and that is what we, as a committee, have previously done, fairly consistently, with petitions, certainly at this first stage.

[44] **Alun Ffred Jones:** Right. I'm content to do whatever the committee usually does.

[45] **William Powell:** Okay. I think we have an understanding there, but I agree with all other colleagues that this is close to the point of closure.

15 With absolutely no discussion of the issues, the Petition is sliding towards oblivion simply because the Minister says "NO". Whatever happened to our adversarial system of Politics: when did Opposition Assembly Members become Government lickspittles?