‘There’s a new centralism in London... we’ll have Union Jacks instead of the Brussels stars’

Nineteen months have passed since the UK left the EU and eight months since we left the European single market and customs union. What impact has this had in Wales? Political editor-at-large Martin Shipton spoke to five people in different sectors. In his final article of the series, he speaks to Cardiff University Professor Kevin Morgan

KEVIN Morgan is a professor of governance and development at Cardiff University as well as being the university’s dean of engagement.

He is one of the most prominent academics in Wales, well-known for international research collaborations with colleagues largely based in the EU.
In 1997 he chaired the Yes for Wales campaign which won a narrow victory in that year’s referendum on whether to establish what eventually became the Senedd.

For many, he has helped provide the intellectual bulwark that drives devolution.

Now, however, he’s somewhat uneasy at the direction politics has taken.

After 20 years of international collaboration with academic colleagues who share his enthusiasm for a Europe of the regions, Brexit is threatening to disrupt his professional life.

“I’ve been actively involved in European Union policy making and research networks certainly since the mid-1990s,” he said.

“I was involved in all the Welsh European programmes that we set up for regional policy, working both with the Welsh Office, as it was then, and with the European Commission.

“I’ve always had good relationships with the regional policy directorate in Brussels and I’ve been on their advisory boards pretty much permanently since the mid-1990s.

“Funnily enough they’ve just created what they call a new scientific committee for regional policy, and they’ve asked me to join that for the new period 2021-27.

“So I’m actively involved still, despite Brexit. I’ve managed to retain those networks because I’ve worked with the people for so many years. As you know, so much of life comes down to relationships – personal relationships – and fortunately I’ve managed to retain many of those, despite Brexit.

“Certainly Brexit hasn’t helped because that will minimise the offers that I get from other academics who might think of us in Cardiff as being a collaborator on new research programmes.

“The UK is still involved in the innovation programmes like Horizon Europe, so it’s not impossible that I’ll get invites to join teams – but it makes it less likely because many of my European friends say the UK is less on their radar than it was. And that’s understandable, I guess.”

Asked how important in his academic sphere of social sciences international collaboration was, particularly on a European basis, Prof Morgan said: “It’s becoming more and more important. I would say it looms larger and larger – I’m just thinking of myself as a microcosm of my colleagues.

“I would say international collaboration, even if it’s not on an active research programme, is vital, if you want to publish more than on your own back garden, as it were.

“I publish a lot on poor regions in Europe, in both southern Europe and in eastern Europe. To do that, I have to work with my colleagues.

“Those colleagues I was reflecting on the other day. They’re becoming younger and younger as I get older and older, because maybe I’ve been a supervisor to their PhD and we’ve maintained good links.

“I really value those relationships now. I have good links in Germany, in Romania, in the Scandinavian countries and in Spain and Italy. Those are my main links in Europe, and I’m publishing regularly with colleagues in those areas.

“There was a report out recently from the chief scientist in Wales, showing that Welsh academics’ international publications have been growing stronger with time. My own story, if you will, I think is symptomatic of that wider sectoral trajectory.

“Up until now, EU fees have been UK fees, because EU students attending UK universities have had to be treated exactly the same in terms of fees as UK students. International fees, however, can be double and more than double domestic fees.

“Prof Morgan said: “That’s a big potential barrier.”

In 2019 Wales was scheduled to be part of a small but innovative EU project – the Higher Education for Smart Specialisation (HESS) project – designed to help universities become more engaged in the development of their cities and regions.

“Because of Brexit, Wales was quietly dropped from the team due to deliver it. I was heavily involved in the HESS network,” said Prof Morgan.

“I was working with the officers in charge of that programme in Brussels and I knew that Wales was on the next phase of it.

“We’d been selected as one of the key regions and then they told me privately ‘we’ve had to drop you out of a population of 32,000, the university thinks we can absorb that hit.

“To mitigate it, we’re doing two things. We’re offering scholarships of £5,000 per student, and we’ve also launched the Erasmus substitution scheme called the Nile programme – New International Learning Exchange, where we’ll be promoting outward and inward movement – and not just academic, but FE colleges as well.

“So there has been a hit, but it’s not been anywhere like as bad at the moment as we’d anticipated. We don’t know what’s going to happen in the future, but so far so good, speaking for Cardiff.

“My worry really is twofold – that longer term there will be a discernible hit on the research front, if my own experiences are anything to go by, whereby colleagues in Europe might tend not to think of us first, as they have in the past.

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“If we’d participated, there would have been resources – I don’t know how much would have come to us – that Welsh universities could have drawn on to improve their engagement in their regional economy and their local society. “It’s an attempt to promote closer ties, greater alignment between universities and their regions, whether that’s citizens in civil society or indeed local businesses like SMEs in the region.”

Nothing has yet been done to create a comparable scheme on a UK-wide basis.

Prof Morgan said: “The new programmes, as you know, are being rolled out extremely slowly from London and many of these programmes that were in Brussels will now be managed from London.

“We always hoped that London would be a temporary postal box for them to divert the money back to Wales, as Brussels did.

“That’s been a big shock to the Welsh Government, I think, because a lot of the strategy was predicated on those funds being devolved. They won’t be devolved now. Instead the British government is building up its Welsh presence in Wales, particularly in Cardiff.

“There’s a new centralism abroad in London and increasingly they’re framing these projects in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland as ‘Union-building’ projects, where we’ll have to have Union Jacks instead of the Brussels stars.”

Asked how that put Welsh academics at a disadvantage in terms of the freedom that academics can have, Prof Morgan said: “The EU is obviously so much bigger than the UK. The scope for engagement and collaboration is many times greater in the EU than it is in the UK.

“And say what you like about Brussels, it had regional policy in its DNA. It was totally committed to what it called cohesion policy. And it involved the devolved communities directly in shaping the design of the programmes that they were meant to administer.

“The new programmes are nothing like that. They are designed and delivered in London, and in a sense they are programmes that will be done to Wales rather than designed with Wales.

“Those are the biggest differences – even if the amount of money remains the same, and that’s by no means clear to me despite promises to the effect that ‘you won’t be a penny worse off’. That remains to be seen.

“The biggest difference I would say, to my mind, in the field that I work in, regional policy, is that Wales was directly involved in designing the programmes that were meant to renew the Welsh economy. That’s no longer the case with the new transferred programmes in London.”

Prof Morgan said there was no way to by-pass the new centralism of the UK Government:

“Quite frankly that’s where the pots of money are,” he said.

“In the discussions I’ve had with local government leaders and with Welsh Government officials, I’ve said we’ve got to be pragmatic in Wales. We can’t deny ourselves access to the new pots of money, otherwise we’d be shooting ourselves in the foot.

“Therefore out of enlightened self-interest we are obliged to engage with London.

“The other big difference politically is that London has been quite smart in saying ‘we will be dealing directly with local government’.

“In effect they are bypassing the Welsh Government and having a bilateral relationship with local government.

“To some extent local government leaders are somewhat flattered by that attention, because they haven’t had it in the past.

“On the other hand, the way in which the new programmes have been rolled out from London has left a lot to be desired.

“The timelines have been so short that most local government people would say they haven’t had the time to be able to design projects of a sufficient quality.

“So all these things have got to come out in the wash before we see the launch of the big programme, the Shared Prosperity Fund.

“Of all the shortcomings, two stand out by a mile.

“One is the issue of transparency – or indeed the lack of it. The paradox is that Brussels was always portrayed by Brexiteers as a kind of bureaucratic glob, where nobody knew what was happening.

“Yet the rules of the game for discharging European regional policy funds were as clear as the day. Everybody knew what the rules were.

“No one really knows what the rules are now. It’s hard to explain the idiosyncrasies in the new eligibility map.

“So as we’ve ‘taken back control’, the system has become less rather than more transparent. That’s a really rich irony, it seems to me.

“The second big shortcoming is the new mandate that it’s given to MPs to be involved – or what many local people would say, to meddle in the choice of projects.

“Many local authorities have felt obliged – and one can understand this – to engage with the MPs and to accommodate their pet projects.

“This is almost introducing pork barrel politics into the criteria of the new rules of engagement.

“Lack of transparency and the scope for political interference are both really worrying features that we didn’t have in the old EU rules of the game.’

Asked whether he thought this was sustainable, Prof Morgan said: “No I don’t. Say what you like about Mark Drakeford, and I’ve always been a strong supporter of him, but to see a man so judicious, so prudent in his language talking about the fact that the Union is over, talking about Westminster and Whitehall stealing powers from Wales – this is not the...
language of a man who's committed to the Union.
"I think he's the only politician who's committed to the integrity of the UK, and when you see a man like that being alienated by the current UK Government, that's when I think maybe the time is up for the Union as it is currently constituted."

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Aske how

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