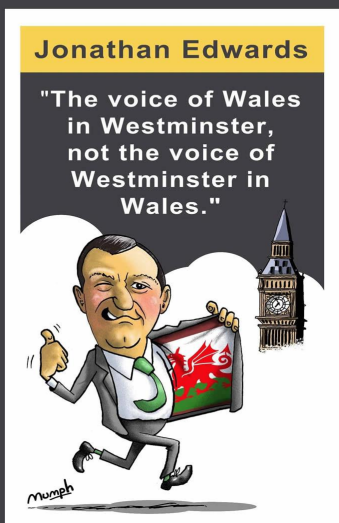




Into the Abyss

Jonathan Edwards

Foreword by Martin Shipton



Ex-MP for Plaid Cymru Jonathan Edwards' memoir, *Into the Abyss*, is an engaging tapestry of life in Wales, woven with humour, hardship, and heartfelt reflections. From his roots in the Amman Valley to the political maelstrom of Westminster, Edwards presents a life rich in experiences that shaped him as a politician and as a proud Welshman.

Foreword by Martin Shipton

Into the Abyss is more than a political memoir—it's a love letter to Wales, a rallying cry for resilience, and a testament to the transformative power of community and culture. Edwards masterfully balances humour, nostalgia, and gravitas, ensuring readers are both informed and entertained. Whether you're a cricket fan, a political junkie, or simply someone who cherishes Wales, this book has something for you.

Prepare to laugh, cry, and cheer as you follow Jonathan Edwards into the abyss and back again.



INTO THE ABYSS

By Jonathan Edwards

*“When you gaze long into the abyss,
the abyss gazes also into you.”*

Friedrich Nietzsche

Dedication and acknowledgements

My eternal gratitude to my publisher Chris Jones and Cambria Publishing for persuading me that writing a memoir was worth considering. Without his persuasive skills this book would never have been written. Many thanks also to Maggie Crimmins for editing a rough collection of thoughts and to Martin Shipton for his guidance and encouragement. Also, to my agent Dai Thomas for helping me recollect events in order and for being by my side from start to finish.

Above all my thanks are to my parents who have supported me without question on my journey, my beautiful children Llew and Lili who give me so much joy and my incredible partner Fflur who has managed to piece me back together. My future belongs to you.

I dedicate this book to all those who I have had the privilege of campaigning with over the years and especially to the members of staff who I worked with. As the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead puts it, ***“No one who achieves success does so without the help of others, the wise and the confident acknowledge this help with gratitude.”***

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Introduction

One of my favourite films is the gangster epic Goodfellas which tells the story of Henry Hill played by Ray Liotta looking back at his rise through the ranks of the Mafia in Brooklyn under a totally new identity under the witness protection system. Writing this memoir feels very similar, though I am not sure that I would describe myself as a wiseguy!

The memoir focuses on my upbringing in a working-class community in the Amman Valley, how I became politicised and found myself working my way up the ranks of Plaid Cymru eventually leading me to Westminster. It is a story of unparalleled electoral success over a period of a quarter of a century. It also catalogues in detail how my political career came to an end in a saga reminiscent of the betrayal at the heart of Goodfellas.

At the core of this book is the relationship between Adam Price and me. We achieved what nobody else has accomplished to this day in Wales, prising Labour from the control of a whole post-industrial community and creating an alternative dynasty. Regrettably, as often happens in political partnerships, it is a story that ends in betrayal and a complete breakdown in the relationship.

Foreword

This memoir exists on two levels.

It is the well-written chronicle of a Welsh MP's life, with valuable insights especially about the tumultuous period when Brexit dominated the parliamentary agenda.

Its other dimension concerns one of the most badly handled and unjust episodes in Plaid Cymru's history.

When Jonathan Edwards was first elected in 2010, he joined a diminishing cadre of authentically working class MPs. Throughout the book the reader is constantly aware of someone deeply rooted in the community where he was born, which he loves, and whose support when times got dark literally helped him stay alive.

In a phrase that has become overused when politicians stand down, it genuinely was the privilege of his life to represent his native home patch. This adds an extra layer to his account of the politics through which he lived. When called upon to make important decisions, it's clear that he had in mind those he represented and the potential implications for them as people. This made him more conscious of the consequences of his parliamentary votes, I suggest, than decisions made by a footloose politician more interested in securing promotion than in genuinely putting constituents first.

Another engaging element of Edwards' approach was his willingness to admit his lack of knowledge in a particular policy area of importance to his seat and then to plug the gap. This enabled him to become a forceful advocate for the farming community in Carmarthen East & Dinefwr.

I first got to know him before he was an MP, when he was the constituency office manager for Adam Price and Rhodri Glyn Thomas. He was the kind of political contact journalists

love to have - able to provide a regular supply of stories, but also helpful commentary on events and initiatives, as well as insight into what was going on at a more strategic level.

This came into its own during the Brexit period, when it was invaluable to have the distinctive voice of a Plaid Cymru MP interpreting events as they unfolded, both of the twists and turns as Theresa May's and then Boris Johnson's minority governments struggled in vain to "get Brexit done", and of the concerns within Plaid's Westminster group about Leanne Wood's rudderless leadership on the issue, as they saw it. All of this is chronicled in the memoir.

Such fallings-out came to have a bearing on the calamitous situation that led to the end of Edwards' political career. He makes it clear - as he did in public statements at the time - that he deeply regrets the incident that led to his accepting a caution for assaulting his wife. He will undoubtedly do so for the rest of his life. But no fair-minded person could analyse the way the matter was dealt with by Plaid Cymru without coming to the conclusion that it was grossly mishandled by the party. Perhaps the most shocking element of what happened is that some in the party were prepared to weaponise the situation to settle scores.

It goes without saying that all political parties need a robust process to deal with disciplinary matters as they arise. But it's equally important that the integrity of such processes are respected. That didn't happen in this case, and the Welsh politician in question nearly became the second to take his own life within a few years. It's that serious.

Martin Shipton

Early Life

The Beginning

My father John was a gentle soul who always avoided confrontation. He wasn't a militant activist; however, he understood that in industrial relations you needed those on the other side of the table to realise you were willing to fight your corner to the end. It was an approach I took to politics. I was never one to walk around walls, I far preferred to run through them-often to my cost.

Politics with a small p was a part of the furniture in the Edwards household. My father was a Trade Union Shop Steward with the Amalgamated Engineering and Electrical Union (AEEU) whilst also working full time as a meter reader initially for the South Wales Electricity Board and later SWALEC-after privatisation. In my early years, he wasn't directly involved in party politics, however, me and my sister Marie fully understood we were working-class people and proud of it. I later learnt-after he'd retired-that my father's bosses had nicknamed him "John Strike". When I tackled him about this, he just said to me with a glint in his eyes *"Yes it's true, but I only ever called one strike."*

We were not an affluent family, but we were a happy home. Both my parents instilled in my sister and me the values of hard work, integrity and honesty. My mother, Audrey, as well as her care responsibilities and running the household worked evenings to help the family make ends meet. She was fiercely loyal to the family. Mam would do anything to help us children and we both knew she would always put us first in everything she did. Her self-motivation was inspiring and taught me to pick myself off the floor whenever down, and not wallow in self-pity. The family didn't receive any state support, we were a working poor household. Both my parents were firm believers in personal responsibility and living within your means. I've pursued a similar frugal approach to money in my own life. I have always believed

that if you want something in life, you need to earn it. I witnessed my parents' struggles and I realise through their sacrifices for us as children, we have been able to live a far more comfortable life.

We were raised in the family home-Bancyddraenen Cottage-in the village of Capel Hendre. Growing up we had the run of the local vicinity. Once we could look after ourselves, we would be out of the door first thing in the morning, only returning at feeding time. I couldn't imagine giving the same freedom to my children today.

I could see the village playground from my bedroom, and it was the epicentre of our young lives. The estate that bordered our house was a tough place; what happened there stayed there - it was self-policing. I was petrified of venturing too far into its bowels in case I ran into gangs of older children. The village was strongly Welsh-speaking in my younger days. It has been sad to see the demise of the language over the years as planning policy has encouraged the building of new housing developments. The village must have doubled in size during my lifetime, as have many of the communities in the Amman Valley. If anyone wants a lesson on how to undermine an indigenous community language, they need travel no further than the mining communities of East Carmarthenshire and scrutinise the planning policies of Administrations of all political persuasions.

My parents had decided that my sister and I would receive our schooling via the medium of the Welsh language, and this meant in the first instance attending Ysgol Gymraeg Rhydaman in Ammanford. Subsequently, we attended Ysgol Gyfun Maes-yr-yrfa (Maes y Gwendraeth today) rather than Amman Valley School. This was highly unusual in the Bancyddraenen ecosystem and for some time the walk from the bus stop on Waterloo Road to home was like running the gauntlet, as I periodically became a target for some of the other local kids. The worst instance I can remember was being battered with my own cricket stumps. The blood stains remained on them for many years after, as well as a general anxiety-battling dark thoughts regrettably has been a lifelong challenge for me. My parents eventually moved to a

different part of the village in my late teens. Thereafter I never had much reason to visit the estate.

Despite holding some unhappy memories, Bancyddraenen was a proper community. When I returned to canvass many years after leaving I received a tremendous response. A Bancyddraenen boy making it to Westminster is an incredible story in itself.

Those early years ingrained in me a toughness that children perhaps from more comfortable backgrounds would never understand. As an adult, I have far preferred being an outsider taking on the majority than being a part of the in-crowd –perfect training for a Welsh nationalist in Westminster. It also taught me that if you don't fight back, you get trampled on, and life often isn't an even contest. My approach to politics was always to tear into my enemies and not shy away from a debate-in contrast with most Plaid Cymru politicians.

The highlight of the year when I was very small was the week when the local farmer cut the grass of the neighbouring field. It took several days, and Mam would place a chair out in the back and I would be as happy as a clam, watching the tractors at work-I was completely transfixed. Firstly, the cutting of the grass; then the arranging of the cut grass into parallel lines; then the bailing process, before on the last day the bails were collected. Mam would place a chair out in the back and I would be as happy as a clam, watching the tractors at work. I suppose it was the systematic nature of the process that really appealed to me. In later life I approached my academic work in the same way.

In my early years I was much closer to my mother than my father. Dad, worked full-time and would then spend hours upon hours in his magnificent garden. As I became older, I sometimes resented the fact that he was so committed to it. Later in life, I realised he endeavoured to provide for us as a family and not for his own well-being. He grew everything, root vegetables, fruit, herbs you name it. We were never short of fresh food.

Me and Marie would help in the garden, but I never caught the horticultural bug. I far preferred playing in it, kicking and

chasing my rugby ball or throwing a tennis ball against the front wall of the house, and then practising all sorts of cricket shots with my bat. From a very early age, I was completely obsessed with sports. If I wasn't playing it, I was watching whatever sports were on the television.

My first big loves in the early 1980s were Liverpool Football Club, the Welsh national football and rugby sides and the Llanelli rugby side. Ian Rush was my footballing idol. If I could have grown a matching moustache I would have! It probably helped that Liverpool was the best side in the old First Division and Europe at the time.

My greatest obsession however, was Test Cricket. I say obsession, it was more of a manic infatuation. When the test series of the summer was played, my parents could put me in front of the TV and I wouldn't move for hours on end, completely captivated by the unfolding contest. The main BBC cricketer commentator of the day was Tony Lewis- a proud Welshman who had captained England and Glamorgan. When he heard about my campaign for a Welsh national one-day team, he invited me to play a round of golf at the sublime Royal Porthcawl where he was President, and fully supported my efforts thereafter.

My hero was Ian Botham. He could change a match with either bat or ball, and seemed to be the centre of everything happening on the pitch. I have always supported the England cricket team apart from when they played the West Indies. If Botham was the epicentre of English cricket in the 80s, then the West Indies seemed to have a whole team of equally flamboyant mavericks led by the king of cricket himself, Viv Richards.

Once I started playing the game I knew I wanted to be a fast bowler in the mould of Malcolm Marshall or Curtley Ambrose. My parents couldn't afford coaching, so my formative development in the game was supported by my father. He would use chalk on the path outside the front door to tell me where I needed to move my feet when batting to specific balls and develop my bowling skills.

Dad played for his works team and had an equal adoration for the game. As I grew older, he never missed a game of cricket I played in or rugby. However, he loathed football, and would refuse to watch me represent Waterloo Wanderers and Caerbryn football clubs as an adult.

The highlight of a Saturday in the summer, was watching Ammanford Cricket Club in the park. Dad would watch the game, and I would play cricket with the other children-often from the opposing teams- in our own Test Match. Ammanford is a sporting town, football, rugby and above all cricket. There is no finer setting than the Park on a hot summer's day.

One of my fellow players on those summer days was Carl Griffiths. We would later represent the Club together throughout our youth, and nearing our fifties we today coach our sons in their age group. This year for the first time in the history of the South Wales Cricket Association, we coached two teams from the same club to the final of the U10 age group. Seeing our boys run out in the green of Ammanford for me completes the circle of life.

As kids, we were inspired by the exploits of West Indian Linton Lewis. Linton would draw crowds of hundreds of people to the park to watch Ammanford, and specialised in hitting sixes for fun into the neighbouring Bowls Club. It is rumoured that bowls players would wear crash helmets when they knew Linton was batting. He represented the Windward Islands in First Class Cricket, with him on the team Ammanford were all-conquering, securing the Division 1 title on several occasions and winning the Welsh Cup. Before Linton came to Ammanford, nobody had ever scored more than a thousand runs in a season in the League. In 1983, when I was seven, he scored 1,543 runs including seven centuries in just 16 innings. I was mesmerised; like every other kid in the Valley, I wanted to be Linton Lewis.

He would later become President of his home island St Vincent showing that politics and cricket is a natural fit. It sometimes takes someone from outside to describe the impact of a location on their development as an individual. Speaking to

the South Wales Guardian in 2009, Linton, on the verge of the Presidency of his Island, said of his time in Carmarthenshire:

“I know for a fact it has contributed (to where I am today). This may sound surprising, but I felt far more comfortable in Ammanford than I did in my country of birth. Everyone bent over backwards to make my life an enjoyable one.

“The discipline I nurtured and cultivated in Ammanford I apply here – it gave me a sense of confidence that some people believe bordered on arrogance.

“I think 90% of that can be attributed to Ammanford. It moulded me into what I am at this time.”

It is not surprising that a place like the Amman Valley would have such an impact on those of us who were born and raised here and on adopted sons like Linton Lewis. Radical politics and religious nonconformism run in our blood. My father would talk about the great religious revival that swept Ammanford and much of South Wales in the early 20th century. He would say to me that Ammanford at the time had a first-class rugby team, only for the revival and its disapproval of rugby union to lead to the its demise.

Later in the century, the Anthracite strike of 1925 posed a direct challenge to the authority of the British State. The history books tell us that 10,000 miners were on the march, and nearly 200 faced prosecution following the infamous Battle of Pontaman Bridge. Rumour has it that an actual Soviet was declared in the town which, whether true or not, indicates its psychological independence.

Socialism became ingrained in Ammanford and the Amman Valley. A sign above the Political and Economic Theory section of the town's Library until the 1950s read *‘Take What you Need. Pay What you Can. Knowledge is Power’*. The politics of the area- like the whole of South Wales- was Labour. It took the sons of a miner and a trade union shop steward to overturn that tradition because they believed Labour had failed on the national question and on justice for working-class people.

Sunday School

Religious nonconformism and industrial strife were to play a major part in my early years. As children, we were enrolled in the local Sunday School at Capel Hendre Methodist Chapel under the care of Mrs Lilibet Jones and Mrs Hilary Davies. When I reflect on my childhood, I cannot overstate its importance in my personal development. On top of the moral education on the importance of Christian values it gave us the opportunity to perform in services and concerts. I didn't have much of a singing voice, so I would often have roles in reading out stories from the bible and psalms. After conquering my fears, I loved walking up the steps to the pulpit and performing my piece in front of a full Chapel. My mother would drill me relentlessly and be very disappointed if I read my part instead of speaking from memory. It was these experiences that must have given me an understanding of how to captivate via oration. Having said that, I have never considered myself a brilliant public speaker. My political skills were far better suited towards strategic thinking.

My father started attending the Chapel as services ran simultaneously with the Sunday School. Until that point, he hadn't shown much interest in religion but soon became captivated. By the time I left for university in Aberystwyth, he was a Deacon of the Chapel, and he became a teacher in the Sunday School. When it came to finding a new home, it was no surprise that my parents bought a property near the Chapel. Today he lies buried in the Chapel cemetery next door to his great friends Iory Davies, Aneurin Evans, and the Reverend Albert Williams. I know he is at rest.

One of the highlights of the year undoubtedly was the annual Sunday School summer day trip, usually to Tenby or Saundersfoot. It felt as if most of the village would jump on the bus for the trip to Pembrokeshire. The whole tribe would descend on the beach and make base camp. I would make a beeline for the sea whatever the weather (unless it was torrential). As a very skinny kid, I would never last long before losing my

body temperature and having to be rescued. Then-after sandwiches- the real important stuff would start - the annual beach cricket game under the management of Iory, my father, and Carwyn Jones (Lilibet's husband and captain of the village cricket team). This was serious stuff, the annual Lords test in my eyes. I have never asked Carwyn, but I like to think that my performances over the years must have caught his eyes as at the age of eleven I made my debut for Capel Hendre in the adult Carmarthenshire cricket league.

After the game-which was mandatory for kids and parents- we would have fish and chips before the sing-song on the bus trip back home to the village. These really were the days of kings. I have made a point of making sure my own children attend the Hendre Sunday School where Lilibet continues to guide a new generation. Her contribution to the lives of so many people is immense. I certainly would not have achieved a life in politics without the influence of the Sunday School. Some of my fellow pupils were my closest friends growing up and still are today. I am grateful to all of them for the support, understanding, and encouragement they have given me through thick and thin. Friendships like these nurtured in a close upbringing such as we were lucky to enjoy in Capel Hendre, are unique. The actions of Brian Davies are a great example of this and I will be forever grateful to him.

My struggles with depression after becoming an MP were well known within my circle in the village. I had a particularly vicious episode following the 2015 General Election. I had become the Westminster Group Leader, but as is often the case after a big campaign I mentally collapsed. All the summer recess had been lost to sleeplessness and anxiety and I returned to Westminster as a shell of myself. My default response to such episodes would be to work through them, rebuild the adrenalin in my body and restart the burnout cycle. For the first time, however, I found I couldn't function. I remember one cross-party meeting-having been sleep-deprived for months and not able to eat properly- I literally couldn't stay awake. I had to make

my apologies and leave early. I knew deep down I was in real trouble.

I had to be honest with my fellow MPs Hywel Williams and newly elected Liz Saville Roberts, and relinquish the Leadership. Hywel as always was a complete gentleman and supportive; he took the reins temporarily, although we both knew I wouldn't be retaking the Leadership.

I should probably have taken some time off, but I didn't miss a day in Westminster believing that some light duties would help my recovery. Brian Davies, an old friend from back home, contacted me out of the blue and asked if I wanted a catch-up. Although we hadn't met for a long time, I knew that every election he drove home to vote for me. He was a formidable sportsman and had played in goal for Bangor City a former club of his uncle the great Welsh goalkeeper Dai Davies.

At the time Brian worked in Border Control at Heathrow. We arranged to meet for a pint in the House. He discussed how he had coped following the end of his football career and in particular how much he'd benefitted from learning mindfulness techniques. I have embraced his words fully, and whilst I have no control over when the black dog decides to return I've developed my own coping mechanisms based on mindfulness techniques. Brian has drawn on his own experiences and set up a business-*'Talk Buddy'* (www.talkbuddy.co.uk)-which concentrates on men's mental health.

Brian didn't have to reach out to me as he did, and it was an honour some years later, to host a tour of Parliament for Brian and his Police Squad.

Miners' Strike

The Amman Valley was founded on heavy industry-coal and tinplate initially. Under the ground of the western valleys of the South Wales Coalfield lies anthracite coal; it is the peak-ranking coal as it has the highest carbon content and fewer impurities. It also has the highest energy density of all coals. Such is the purity of the coal is that it is perfect for water filtration purposes and believe it or not the Olympic pool for the Athens games in 2004 reportedly contained Amman Valley coal technology!!

Ammanford town itself to this day continues to be the home of two working men's clubs, the Miners Welfare and the Pick and Shovel. An old collier once told me that both clubs represented rival socialist traditions which burned in the interwar period. Both philosophies rejected the model of industry being in the hands of capitalist bosses, however, they had very different visions as an alternative. The Miners Welfare club tended to support the philosophy of state socialism centred on gaining power at Westminster and nationalising industry. The Pick, on the other hand, was reportedly the home of those that supported syndicalism. The Syndicalists, influenced by French philosopher Georges Sorel, believed in decentralising power to workers' collectives. Ultimately, they feared that the State, in control of a nationalised industry, would be the biggest capitalist of all and leave working people terribly exposed.

An early Welsh syndicalist was DJ Davies from Carmel. He is my political hero. He entered the mines at only 16 years old before emigrating to the United States. He was a boxer, and joined the US Navy before moving to Denmark where he met his wife Dr Noelle Davies. He returned to Carmarthenshire and set up the Independent Labour Party in the area before becoming a founder member of Plaid Cymru. With Noelle, he wrote the masterpiece *'The Economics of Welsh Self Government'* in 1931 which leaned heavily on decentralised socialism.

Whilst the politics of the Amman Valley for most of the 20th Century was dominated by the Labour Party, Plaid Cymru

had a foothold in working-class politics as a result of the work of DJ. The question about which socialist tradition was right in its interpretation was brutally unveiled with the Miners' strike of 1984.

I was only 8 at the time and much too young to comprehend what was going on and the significance of what was erupting all around me. My sister and I were lucky in that my father was not a miner, but many of our school friends-and the children of Capel Hendre-were. There is a lot of romanticising surrounding the strike; however, I recall a growing gloom as it wore on and community tensions grew. Working-class mining communities challenged the British State in a fight to the death where either Thatcher's Government would fall or the coal industry would be decimated causing economic and social devastation.

Whereas in other European countries the coal industry was phased out gradually, allowing for the natural wastage of workers and interventionist policies to develop alternative employment opportunities, in the UK, a strategy of economic Darwinism was pursued. The Amman Valley like the rest of the South Wales Coalfield has never recovered.

For me however, the most damaging impact of the strike and its aftermath was the destruction of social cohesion. Those men who returned to work and crossed the picket line would never be forgiven. It was an act of treason, and to this day in pubs and clubs in the locality if a blackleg walks into a pub, then former miners will turn their backs.

The same action happened to me when I attended the St David's Day Carmarthen March in 2024. One senior member of the Carmarthen Town Plaid Cymru branch turned his back on me. He probably wouldn't recognise the significance of his actions to someone from a mining community. However, I must be honest, that after my contribution to Plaid Cymru and the cause of Wales, I found their actions both petulant and insulting especially as I had served with him on Carmarthen Town Council when I lived in the town. Deep down it doesn't bother me; there

is nothing that anyone in Plaid Cymru could do to me from now on that I any longer care about

Growing up in the face of the devastating aftermath of the strike on my home communities, the big lesson was that the British State would never protect working-class communities like the Amman Valley. Deep in my soul, it energised the belief that the Labour Party could not protect working people because it had failed to achieve dominance over the political structures of the British State. Until I was 21 years of age there had only ever been Conservative UK Governments and when a Labour Government was eventually elected in 1997- it resembled a Tory Government in all but name. (As I write this book-a few months into a new Labour Government under Keir Starmer-it seems history is repeating itself. I hope I am wrong.) The big question then, was “What’s the alternative?” Was a Welsh State the answer?

The whole idea of the creation of Welsh national political institutions had been buried by the disastrous 1979 Referendum. The response of the British Government to the 84 strike was meant to destroy the will of Welsh working-class communities. Instead, it created the conditions that made a successful Referendum in 1997 possible.

Dad

My father would never speak about his upbringing. As a young boy, he lived on Pemberton Road near the train station in Llanelli. He would only divulge that his mother left the family home when he and his brother Dai were both young boys. His father died early from TB, and after both he and his brother had recovered from the disease, they were moved to Ffos y Ffin Isaf Farm in Capel Dewi near Carmarthen.

My mother says that when they married and moved to Capel Hendre, my father's only belongings were contained in a shoe box. He was extremely humble and never complained about anything. A tough upbringing does that to an individual. As long as he could feed the family, clothe us and keep us warm and sheltered in winter he was happy. Everything else was a luxury.

Dad's brother Dai left for London at the age of 17, met his wife Pat, and never returned. Wncwl Dai would only phone when Wales beat England at rugby, which means in the 1980s we didn't hear from him often! After being elected I had the pleasure of welcoming Dai and Pat to Westminster, the first time either had entered the Parliamentary estate, which is incredible considering that as a London cabbie Dai must have driven passed Parliament on countless occasions. Later, he brought in all his mates from South London for a tour-none of them had visited Parliament before. There is a lot of work to do to remove the disconnect between the ruling political class and the governed.

Returning to that initial visit, we were in the Chamber and I was pointing out where I normally stood to speak, I turned round to see Dai sitting in the Speaker's Chair. This was a shooting offence so you can imagine my horror. It was one of the stories that mourners were to hear at his funeral in Beckenham in 2023. Pat gave me the honour of leading the coffin to the Crematorium. A few years earlier I had attended the funeral of their son Matthew at the same location. Dai was never the same after his death.

Dad loved his cricket and captained his work team; his winter sport was rugby football union. He hated football and although he never opposed my love of it, he didn't approve.

Only begrudgingly he took me and a friend to the Vetch on my 11th birthday- in 1987- to see Wales v the Soviet Union He'd probably conceded by that stage that I was lost to football; I wouldn't miss a game on TV. The match ended as a 0-0 draw. Stood in the middle of a packed North Bank, I couldn't see anything to my right, I was in a state of complete euphoria just knowing that I was in the near vicinity of my hero Ian Rush. When Robbie James hit the crossbar with a driving shot from outside in the closing minutes, I knew I was completely hooked.

Due to his links with Carwyn Jones and Roger Thomas-the father of my closest childhood friend- dad would take me on Saturday afternoons to support Ammanford Rugby Club. Whilst he watched the game, us kids would play our own contest on the side of the pitch-often returning filthy from top to toe. Carwyn had played first-class rugby for both Neath and Llanelli and was still playing for Ammanford. Roger coached the Club for a time and had a huge in-depth knowledge of the game. I enjoyed rugby and possessed a good sidestep, but I was skinny throughout my youth, and whilst I didn't mind at all getting tackled by opponents or physical confrontation, I lacked the size and technique to do any defending myself.

In Primary School, Headmaster Randall Isaac had placed me in the second row but only because the backs contained some incredible players two of them ending up playing first-class rugby as adults. The rest of the pack was made up of boys who have remained my lifelong friends.

At Secondary School I moved to the backs, playing in every single position though primarily at 15 or 10. I was good under the high ball and could kick which was good enough for the coach, the late John Beynon. Whilst I always played for the Bs or Second team and rarely made appearances for the Firsts, I often found myself captaining the side. Mr Beynon also made me captain of the cricket and football teams in my age groups. I was

never sure why he would trust me with the responsibility of being captain, I was never a good talker during games. Apart from cricket, I certainly wasn't the best player in any of the teams I played in.

I never played rugby for a club, by the time I had reached my late teens I had decided that my winter game would be football. However, when Ammanford RFC asked me to become their Honorary Vice President it was the proudest moment of my political career. The act by Carwyn, who by then had finished playing and was serving as Club Chair meant more to me than anything else that happened during my time as a Member of Parliament. I had been going through another tough period in the immediate aftermath of the 2017 snap election, completely burnt out and struggling through the summer recess. Carwyn, and the rest of the Committee must have known I could do with a boost, and it was their way of letting me know that the local community valued my contribution.

Dad, in a counter move in an attempt to stop losing his only son to football decided he would purchase season tickets to support the Scarlets of Llanelli. As a family, we had always followed the team due to dad's links to the town. And to be fair to him, his strategy worked until my late teens.

Dad, Marie and I would attend games both home and away with his fellow meter reader Lincoln Parry and his son. Lincoln and Dad worked in pairs and would use the same van. At 7 o'clock each working morning, the house phone would ring three times, which was code for Lincoln being on his way from Llandybïe to pick up Dad for the day's work. As no charges were incurred if the receiver wasn't picked up, it was their way of beating the system.

Mike Jones from Betws and his daughters would also join us. They were great days. Llanelli were the best team in Wales- if not the British Isles. The derby games against Neath and Swansea in particular were gladiatorial. At half-time, us kids would rush onto the field to hear the team talk, which happened those days in a semi-circle on the field. Allan Lewis-who we knew-was a part

of the coaching team under Gareth Jenkins and they developed a hugely exciting brand of rugby based on agile and rampaging forwards and electrifying backs. My heroes were Jonathan Davies (I remember being completely devastated when he left for rugby league) back rower Emyr Lewis, nicknamed the Tarw because he played his rugby like a raging bull; Simon Davies in the centre who just seemed like a giant to me; and Ieuan Evans on the wing. It was a huge honour for me in later life to visit Simon on his farm just outside Llandeilo to discuss the challenges faced by milk farmers.

The Llanelli Scarlets in those great days of the late 80s and early 90s hardly ever lost a home game, and we could nearly always look forward to an annual trip to the national stadium in the capital to watch a cup final at the end of the season. Our most famous victory of that period must surely be the defeat of the then world champions Australia, in 1992. I'll never forget running on the pitch after the game to celebrate, and seeing the players carried off on the shoulders of ecstatic supporters. I loved the club, and I continue to support the team although I'm probably not as much of a one-eyed Turk as I used to be.

Mike, who worked for Swansea Council, had managed to get tickets for the FA Cup tie between Swansea and Liverpool in 1990. The Swans at that stage plied their trade in the old third division. Liverpool –on the other hand– had only narrowly missed out on the double in 1989, thanks to a late Michael Thomas goal for Arsenal at Anfield in the last minutes of the season, securing the title for the Gunners.

Mike knew that I was a massive Liverpool fan and to dad's relief agreed to take me to the game. This was a David v Goliath contest in every sense of the word. I couldn't wait to see Ian Rush in action, and though I bought a Swansea scarf outside the ground I secretly wanted Liverpool to win. We sat opposite the North Bank and the noise was incredible with the Swansea fans taunting the Liverpool supporters by singing Arsenal songs. The Swans managed to hold on for a draw. It was a transformative moment in my life as I ended the game as a true Swan, the heroics

of the team had inspired me to change allegiances. Once I was able to travel independently, I would be drawn towards the Vetch as opposed to Stradey Park. A few weeks later, the harsh realities of being a Swansea football supporter were to be experienced vividly, as we were thumped in the replay at Anfield by eight goals to nil. By then it was already too late-I was a Jack for life.

Mam

My mother was born and raised in the village of Llanarthne in the Tywi Valley. Her father Hayden Claypitt, had fought in the Second World War and was on the beaches of Normandy on D-Day.

After returning home, he never spoke of the horrors he had witnessed. My Grandmother, Mair, would tell me that whenever there was a war movie on the T.V. he would leave the house and go for a long walk. He saw no glory in the human destruction of battle. He died when I was very young, but from the brief time I knew him I am sure that we would have been great partners. Hayden and Mair had three children-my mother being the eldest-Susan and Nigel. The family lived on the Ger y Llan housing estate in the village and were Labour voters.

In later life when I was organising election campaigns for Plaid Cymru in the constituency, my Mamgu would sit on the booth for hours collecting voter data for Plaid and then at the end of her shift walk into the booth and vote Labour. She was a strong character and some of my fondest memories as a child were having a sleepover where I was spoiled rotten.

My uncle Nigel has lived in the same house all his life and has a huge passion for rally motorsports. As a child, he would take me to see rally cars roaring through the forests of Wales and beyond. At that time rallying had a massive following. Thousands of spectators would descend on rally stages and line the sides of single-track roads as immensely powerful Group B cars drove at incredible speeds. These events would quite rightly never pass the health and safety requirements of today, but the sense of danger is what made the whole experience so exhilarating.

In those days, the British round of the World Rally Championship travelled across the whole of mainland Britain, and we followed it to many stately homes such as Chatsworth. Mamgu would make a bag full of sandwiches and we would be away for days on end sleeping in the back of Nigel's van. I loved

the adventure even when we would find ourselves up before light in freezing conditions in the middle of a forest like Clocaenog in north Wales.

The sport tended to be dominated by Scandinavian drivers in those days, Juha Kankkunen in particular, with home honours promoted by Tony Pond in his MG Metro 6R4 and Jimmy McCrae. Welsh rally fans of course would go berserk in support of David Llewellyn and Gwyndaf Evans. Gwyndaf's son Elfyn is of course one of the world's best rally drivers today and will hopefully soon capture the World Rally Championship. Why his face isn't plastered on every advertising board in Wales is beyond me, he is a massive sporting star. Regrettably however, as with much in Wales our betters based in the capital of another country decide on these matters for us.

As I grew up, British fans would have a global superstar of their own in Jimmy's son Colin, arguably the most famous rally driver of all time because of his flat-out safety last driving style. He could have won far more rallies and championships with a more conservative driving style, but fans were drawn to him because he embodied the true nature of the sport. The more cars he wrote off, the more we loved him. In university, a group of us would follow the Network Q Rally- as it was then- as it roared through stages such as Sweet Lamb and Pantperthog-easily accessible from Aberystwyth. To this day Nigel continues to follow rallying, often working in service areas-the rallying version of F1 pit areas. He once asked me to join him on a service crew on Rally Wales. Let's just say that my most notable contribution was getting mugs of tea for the driver and co-driver whilst they waited for their cars to be repaired and ready for the next stages.

I loved spending time in Llanarthne, especially when it came to football training on the local green. All the kids of the village and from surrounding farms would take part. They were great occasions, during long summer evenings.

I would always want to be on the team of coach Mr Spencer Davies who lived adjoining the field. Spencer was a childhood hero of mine; he also happened to be a staunch Plaid Cymru

supporter. Over the years it has been great returning there and discussing the old times with him.

When my mother was seriously ill following major surgery, Marie and I moved to Llanarthne for a few months. We attended the local village school for a term, it provided a completely different educational experience. The headmaster understood me because we would get football club stickers if we did our work correctly. Those were different days; the kids were split into two camps headed by two different boys, and they absolutely hated each other. The rivalry caused a bit of disruption. One Friday afternoon the headmaster had clearly had enough and ordered the whole class out to the schoolyard and to form a circle, where he told both boys to get in the middle and settle matters once and for all. It is difficult to imagine anything like that happening today, but it certainly resolved matters as neither fancied a full-on scrap when they had the chance.

Cwmfelin Mynach

One of my fondest memories as a child was visiting one of my father's best friends, David Wood in Cwmfelin Mynach. David and his wife Mary farmed Waunryddod, a large dairy farm. Dad and David had known each other since their days in the Young Farmers. We would normally make the drive west in the morning, ready for dinner and dessert before we went to the farm for the afternoon. As children, we had the run of the place, and we had some brilliant adventures. A favourite game was hide and seek and collecting the eggs from the chicken coup. The milking process was eye-opening. Anyone who has no connection to farming should go and see what the work entails. Waunryddod at that time would have had a state-of-the-art parlour, but it still took hours to milk the herd. David would have finished one run-through in the early hours before we had even woken up.

As a small boy, I would sit on David or Dad's lap as they drove a tractor to clean up the sheds after the milking process was finished. Once I was tall enough and able to reach the pedals David would trust me to do the driving myself. I was in my element. After finishing the day's work with the cows safely out to pasture or locked up in their sheds, we would return for tomato and cheese sandwiches before travelling home to the Amman Valley.

I have great respect for the farming community and their endeavours, despite not coming from an agricultural background myself. It's a genuine 24-hour-a-day occupation, seven days a week, 365 days a year. It can also be a lonely occupation, and a reason why mental health difficulties can be a risk.

During my political career, I experienced several milk crises where the price dropped significantly. These were always major issues for Carmarthenshire due to the density of milk farms. Dairy farmers have to make huge capital investments to keep their businesses up to date, and the fluctuating nature of milk prices can have catastrophic consequences due to the fine margins they operate within.

As it happens, my final speech in the House of Commons was given in a debate I led on agriculture in Wales. The farming community were up in arms about the Welsh government's new proposed support scheme for the industry, with mass sporadic protests mushrooming around the country. Deep in my heart, I knew my political career was coming to an end so I was pleased to be able to finish matters discussing an industry which had played an important part in my life.

One of the bravest political acts I can remember happened soon after I was elected when Welsh Government Agriculture Minister Alun Davies, accepted an invitation from my colleague Rhodri Glyn Thomas AM, to attend a public meeting in Llandeilo. Milk farmers in their desperation were in a state of heightened emotions, and whilst things were difficult enough for Rhodri and I, they were much worse for Alun.

I never really got the hang of public meetings; they certainly weren't my favourite arena. Invariably a public meeting is only needed when there is a problem, so those attending are likely to be passionate. There is a certain skill to being able to absorb hostility and turn an audience. I wasn't particularly good at it, being too blunt for my own good.

Llwyngwair

South Pembrokeshire and Ceredigion were the favourite family holiday destinations when Marie and I were small. I was hyperactive as a child and accident-prone. One of my earliest memories is running into the static caravan we were staying in, at Caeau Bach near Newquay, when I was around three years old and before my parents could react, pulling down a fold-up double bed on my head. I was out for the count, and it was the start of my impressive resume of head and other injuries. Mam tells me to this day that I was lucky to still be alive after that little escapade.

We had many magnificent family holidays in Saundersfoot and Tenby. During my last years in primary school my parents bought a touring caravan to explore Wales. Their first destination was Llwyngwair Manor near Newport in north Pembrokeshire. The family was to holiday there for the rest of my father's life.

We also had the most amazing holidays at Llwyngwair, which is managed to this day by the Ennis family. It's the perfect location for young families and we would roam in bike gangs spending all day out in the fresh air. The River Nevern meanders through the campsite, and I took up fishing. I never caught anything apart from a few flat fish and eels, but I loved being so close to nature. It was also at Llwyngwair that I developed my golf swing. I had acquired a six-iron golf club and a few balls and would spend afternoons trying to hit the ball from one end of the front field to the other. I probably hit a few cars in my time, so I apologise for any damage I may have caused.

Overlooking Llwyngwair is Carn Igli Mountain -the location of an Iron Age fort- resembling a towering volcano. Climbing it offers panoramic views of the rest of the Preseli Mountains; northwards a view of the Ceredigion expanse can be seen, whilst southwards Dinas Head and the depths of southern Pembrokeshire are visible.

Mam loved taking us to Cwm yr Eglwys, a beautiful bay which rivals any beach in the world on a hot summer day. My parents would eventually graduate to a static caravan. August would start with National Eisteddfod week before we would all descend on Llwyngwair for the rest of the month.

The highlight of the Llwyngwair summer in those days was the annual match between the campsite and Dinas Cross who played in the Pembrokeshire League. When the games were played at Llwyngwair, the wicket was a rope mat laid over a concrete base. It resembled the old Western Australia Cricket Association pitch in Perth; in other words, it was blissful for an aspiring fast bowler like me. I felt like one of my West Indian heroes.

My first visit abroad was a school exchange visit to Hungary when I was in the Sixth Form. I was homesick for the duration, and I couldn't cope with the heat in Budapest. I was glad to get to Lake Balaton to be able to cool down in the crystal blue waters.

Mam has never been abroad or has any wish to leave Wales, whilst Dad only ventured abroad on a handful of occasions-to Dublin and Paris-to see Wales play rugby in the 70s. For them, to cross the Carmarthenshire-Pembrokeshire border near Llanfyrnach was like entering a different land. I still get that feeling today when the Preselis appear in front of me. If you find your piece of heaven on earth, there is no need to keep looking.

One of my best friends in university was Peredur John from Crymych. When my parents were in Llwyngwair I would enjoy the hospitality of the John family and spend some incredible evenings in the London House. I had some of the best nights imaginable sharing the company of great characters and drinking until the early hours. The landlady Dilys, had a soft spot for Peredur; encouraged by the other locals, he always managed to get us one for the road -"un bach to"-whenever it appeared she was about to close the bar.

If Wales has a wild west it's Crymych. I love the area and the people. Peredur's uncle, Huw John, was a senior Plaid Councillor

in Carmarthenshire when I became politically active and fully supported me throughout my career. The Johns run a very successful family business -Cware ac Olew Trefigin- started by Peredur's grandfather and continued by his parents Granville and Sheila; their generosity is recognised by everyone. Today the business is run by the three brothers, Rhodri, Llyr and Peredur. Rhodri, an actor by trade, recently portrayed Gwynfor Evans in the S4C epic 'Y Sŵn'. If I had stood in the 2024 election, I might well have asked Rhodri to revisit his role for a promotional video 'Gwynfor backs Joni'. That would have certainly livened matters up.

Education

After attending the Cylch Meithrin in Saron I was enrolled in Ysgol Gymraeg Rhydaman to start my formal education. My first teacher was Enid Davies, whose daughter Betsan was to capture the Betws seat at County Council level from Labour. Betsan supported me to the very end and resisted the endeavours of the party to ostracise me. We were lucky to have some brilliant teachers for a relatively small school. In addition to Mrs Davies, we had Mrs Jones and Mrs Edwards and of course Mr Randall Isaacs the Headmaster.

I wasn't an exceptional student. I think mathematics was my favourite in Primary, but in reality, I didn't excel in anything. Being a Welsh language school there was a big emphasis on the annual Urdd Eisteddfod competitions, and for me in particular, folk dancing. I enjoyed learning the dance for that particular year and we were very successful. Lisa Thomas would be my dance partner from primary through to secondary. I remember winning the Urdd competition at Sophia Gardens in Cardiff when we were very small, and being asked by Mr Isaac to go on the stage with Lisa to accept the prize. It was like walking up the steps at Wembley to lift the FA Cup.

After advancing through local Eisteddfodau competitions, we would go on to compete at the National Urdd Eisteddfod... The Urdd and Genedlaethol over the years have provided the opportunity to travel to all parts of our country, they are vital nation-building events. Seeing the rugged beauty of the Eryri mountain range for the time is an experience that will never leave me.

We took the dawnio gwerin extremely seriously as a school, perhaps because Mr Isaacs was associated with the successful Welsh folk band, Jac y Do. Eira Davies and Jennifer Maloney were our teachers, and their expertise meant we always had a head start on our opponents.

With Eifion Price on the fiddle, we had a formidable operation when it came to competition time. Backstage waiting to perform was always a nerve-wracking experience, and Eifion would often take our minds off matters by teasing us or throwing questions at us as a form of distraction. There was valley pride at stake and a chance to get a photo in the South Wales Guardian if we won. The Urdd is an incredible movement which we are lucky to have in Wales. I loved the adrenaline of competing in front of hundreds of people. Speaking in the House of Commons was no problem in comparison.

I had a huge love of Westerns when I was a kid, especially John Wayne movies. In our early school years, me and a friend would often find a quiet corner and create our own Western adventures with the both of us as swashbuckling cowboys. An educational drama group visited the school once on a theme of the frontier wars in the wild west between white settlers and Native Americans. It had a profound and quite upsetting impact on me in that for the first time, I realised that the bad guys were the cowboys as opposed to the Indians, and that Hollywood glossed over the ethnic cleansing central to the expansion of the United States across the entire North American continent. I lost my appetite for being the next John Wayne.

My realisation that the movies I idolised were an act of propaganda masking a far darker reality was to shape my politics. My default approach was to look through the smoke and mirrors used by the oppressors, and support the oppressed. It also inspired me to consistently challenge orthodox beliefs and fight for justice. I wasn't in politics to line my pockets; my aim was to advance the cause of the vulnerable and those left behind.

My crowning glory in the Ysgol Gymraeg came near the end of Year 6 when we travelled up to Aberystwyth to compete in the regional cricket knockouts. The event was sponsored by Wrigley chewing gum. I bowled extremely well, helping the team reach the final, and my ability in the game was a surprise to all

concerned. As losing finalists we had been promised a cricket bag each filled with chewing gum. We are still waiting!

The most famous student to emerge from Ysgol Gymraeg must be BBC Presenter Alex Jones; we are all extremely proud of what she has achieved. It was lovely to be interviewed by her at my home in Penygroes soon after I was elected.

In those days there wasn't the plethora of sporting and after-school activities that are available to children now. However, in Ammanford, we had an active Scout group led by the Labour County Councillor, Hugh Evans. He was a great influence on my life, as was the scouting movement. We had many great adventures, and although my practical skills have never been much to write home about, I did manage to secure many badges for my uniform. On one autumn stay up in Abercrave, we survived a weekend of torrential rain tackling many outdoor tasks. For the finale, we were put in a minibus and driven to an aqueduct on the Swansea canal to abseil down. It was cold and pouring down. I completely lost my nerve and chickened out. I probably realised at this point that I was probably more suited to an academic life.

Moving from primary to secondary school was a leap into the unknown. Most of the other pupils at Maes-yr-yrfaf came from the Gwendraeth Valley, whereas my life up until then had centred on the Amman. There was no free school travel for us, as technically we lived outside the catchment area. This was a tactic employed by the Local Education Authority to undermine Welsh language education; if parents wanted their children to be taught in their first language they would have to pay for it.

History, geography, drama, biology, chemistry and physical education were my favourite subjects. I was lucky to be taught by some brilliant teachers such as Miss Margaret Davies and Mair Evans who would go on to campaign for me earnestly in every election. The Headmaster, Mr Arwyn Thomas, was cricket-mad.

He played for Bronwydd and would give me a call-up during school lunch times to bowl at him if he had a big game coming up. I remember bowling him out once but quickly curtailed my normal celebration.

The biggest influence on me educationally was my history teacher Mr Eirin Madoc Jones who taught me during my later years in the school. He had a strong accent from the north; however, once I could understand him, I was blown away by his teaching style. He taught me how to think for myself and from then on, I started becoming far more political in my approach. Eirin was a nationalist, but he didn't try to drive us down that road; he wanted us to develop our own minds. My mind was developing along two paths; Welsh nationalism interested me as did socialism.

It was near the end of my time in Maes that I was to start attending Welsh language gigs, usually in Carmarthen. I had always loved rock music from an early age, with Guns N' Roses, Nirvana and Radiohead early favourites. Watching bands such as Gorky's Zygotic Monkey opened my eyes to Welsh as a living language and culture and a general national awakening in my mind and heart. All of a sudden in my mind Welsh music was hip, long before the age of Cool Cymru.

Cricket

Cricket was my biggest love growing up and probably the only sport I had an element of talent in. I played my first adult game when still in primary school. Dad's work team was one short, and he allowed me to field for the them -I felt like a giant. At the age of eleven, captain Carwyn Jones asked me to play a mid-week game for the village side, Capel Hendre. I don't remember much of it apart from batting with Anthony Rees our opening bat. Anthony had played professional football and captained Tony Adams whilst at Arsenal Youth. He hit a shot and called me through for a run. By the time I had reached the other end, Anthony had run back for a second. I had to send him back. He ended up running three-wicket lengths for only one run and wasn't best pleased. I quickly realised that this was now serious business.

It was a team of great characters-most of them related to one another. Whilst other teams would wind up the opposition, in the Capel Hendre team we wound each other up relentlessly. It would be complete carnage and so much fun. After the game, we would retire to the Kings Head for a few drinks-shandies in my case.

It wasn't long before I was playing in the Saturday team. Whilst I could hold a bat and was very proud of my forward defence, I wasn't a big scorer. However, whatever the match situation I was never put under any pressure to change my conservative game, although I am some of the team ran me out a few times on purpose.

I quickly became part of the bowling attack. Carwyn and Colin would bowl the first twenty overs before Eirwyn and I would wrap the innings. This meant that older, better bowlers than me would miss out, especially Peter Davies who was an exceptional sportsman before he was tragically struck down with MS. There was never any complaint about my elevated role in the team. At the end of season awards, I would invariably win an award of some sort, simply because the informal Committee

knew how much it meant to me. On match day I would walk down from home some two hours before the start of the game, to Colin's home in the middle of the village. On the way I would pass the Capel Hendre sign and touch it for good luck in the same vein as Liverpool players did with the 'This is Anfield' sign in the tunnel. For me, representing the village was the equivalent of playing an international.

The rest of the team always stuck up for me against our opponents. I remember one game against Johnston who had a rapid fast bowler. The normal rule when a youngster was batting was that the adults would slow down their bowling, however, on this occasion I was bowled a bouncer. I ducked under it and was quite proud of myself, but I had no time to gloat. The rest of the Capel Hendre team had piled onto the pitch to have a go against our opponents. Think JPR Williams and the South Africa Lions rugby tour of 1974 and you'll get the picture. I naturally walked back to the pavilion to avoid the drama.

My years playing cricket for Capel Hendre were pivotal in my development as a player. I would later represent the Ammanford Under 16s team that won the South Wales Cricket Association cup. In the run-up to the final, I had bowled exceptionally well, especially in the game against Dafen in the semi-final, which was umpired by Jeff Jones the former England bowler because his son Simon (who would also play for England as a part of the fabulous 2005 Ashes winning side) was Dafen's star player. At the end of the game, Jeff congratulated me on my performance. I could have flown back home to Capel Hendre. In the final against Ynysygerwen played at Ynystawe I managed to pick up one wicket. We had quite a celebration.

That would be the last time I would play for Ammanford. I continued to play for Capel Hendre until I left for Aber. I played for the university against the MCC before a serious head injury had a considerable impact on my abilities. I recovered to play for for Llandysul for a few seasons before returning home to join Penygroes into my early thirties. We enjoyed great success in the Swansea Central League, winning several cup competitions.

Penygroes had been Capel Hendre's great rivals, and it was a bit surreal to be in the same team as players such as Clive Jones and Omri Davies. I had some great seasons with brilliant players such as Marc Evans, Jonathan Davies, Eifion 'Beefy' Hughes and the Ace clan.

The team disbanded soon after I was elected, and my only cricket games were for the Parliamentary team when I could find the time. I was lucky to play in the inaugural Parliamentary Cricket World Cup where I represented the House of Commons against Afghanistan. Let's put it like this their team were not politicians, I was put in to bat at number three in the order because the other MPs didn't fancy the look of some of the Afghan bowlers. I survived two balls before my off stump flew past over the heads of the slips. In the second match, we played Australia who were a genuine Parliamentary team; it was like a mini-Ashes game for all concerned. We managed to secure victory; I am probably one of a select few Welshmen to defeat an Australian national side in cricket!

I was sometimes be asked to play in charity games. Llandysul invited me to play a twenty-twenty game against Glamorgan. I nearly got Matthew Maynard, the former England player, stumped as he tried to smash me to Newcastle Emlyn but the wicketkeeper missed the ball. In the after-match dinner, I told him that had I got him out it would have been the proudest moment of my life. He later showed some interest in plans I had been working about creating a Welsh national cricket team. Unfortunately, without Welsh Government intervention that dream appears dead in the water.

I also played in the annual David Parry Jones XI v Llanwrda match held on the Llandovery College playing fields. They would always be great days with Mr Parry Jones- who had been a very successful London businessman-providing a marvellous tea. It was also great networking for me as the local MP with the community in the upper Tywi Valley.

I had retired until the Covid pandemic restrictions of 2020 meant that contact sport was banned. Ammanford RFC started

a cricket team to give the boys an excuse for a social gathering. I was facing the most difficult period of my life as both my personal and professional life crumbled, and Carwyn Jones – probably sensing that it would be good for me - asked if I wanted to join the team. After a summer and autumn of friendlies we joined the South Wales Cricket Association. Led by Jason Rosser we have won three promotions in four seasons. The team is made up of several players who have been lost to the game for whatever reason and a group of younger players. I get to open the batting; my days as a fast bowler have long gone and my spinning isn't particularly good, so I can't thank the Wildboar Centurions enough. The club has become a very important part of my life.

I have been fortunate to play on some wonderful cricket fields. Llandysul on the banks of the Teifi is one of the most beautiful locations imaginable and a fine wicket. Ammanford Park -with all the memories of Linton Lewis in his pomp- is another; I even managed to hit a few sixes of my own into the bowls club during a Carmarthenshire Midweek League final for Penygroes. Vincent Square, the home of Westminster school is a little piece of paradise in Pimlico in the heart of London. And lastly St Helens, Swansea, the venue of the first ever six sixes in first-class history, when Gary Sobers took a liking to the bowling of Malcolm Nash. I was to play a match-winning innings of over 40 not out for Penygroes against Penlan at St Helens in the final of the Swansea Central League Cup. Cricket lovers across South Wales will miss the venue if it is redeveloped as the new home of the Ospreys rugby team.

Representing all these local teams has meant so much to me over the years. I have felt huge pride in the hundreds of games I have played. It is the same feeling I experienced representing my home communities in the Commons as their MP

I seriously dislocated a finger this year near the end of the season at a pre-match warm-up at Dyffryn. I hope I can continue playing as I have two wishes left in the game. I am desperate to hit my first century after numerous near misses. I would also love

to play a competitive game with my son Llywelyn. He is a player of early promise, and I would retire happy if I could run onto a cricket field with him before I put my pads away for good.

Aberystwyth

I was feeling homesick before we'd even finished packing the car for the journey to Aber, and felt a deep sadness when my parents drove away. However, it would be the start of the most all-encompassing experience of my life. I was to live my best years there and make lasting friendships that have supported me through some testing times. In terms of personal development, nothing was to shape my views on life more than my time at Aber. It was the best place possible to study. The sea, mountains, pubs, libraries- it had it all. It had a cosmopolitan feel as some who came from far away to study there never left. It was a small town with a real community feel; students outnumbered the local residents.

I had a place at the famous-some say infamous-Pantycelyn Halls of Residence. It took me a few months to settle in. Matters weren't helped as my roommate Owain Evans, BBC journalist, had left his key in the lock whilst loading his stuff to our room, only for our next-door neighbour and fellow freshman Huw Oliver, to lend the key to a group of 3rd years. We were to suffer weeks of 'room jobs'- essentially the trashing of our property- as a part of our initiation. Huw was later to save my life, so all is forgiven.

I wasn't a big drinker and therefore I struggled with the first few months of freedom. Gradually, I started embracing my new weekly routine which consisted of a visit to the snooker club on the pier on Monday evening, a big night on Wednesday, followed by a warmup on Friday night at the Student Union before hitting the town on Saturday. I suffered from anxiety at the beginning of the night, so I made a start on spirits before graduating to bitter. I also took up smoking in a big way to help me relax. Looking back, I dread to think how much money as a collective group of friends we spent on drinks during our time in Aber.

I was studying for a joint degree in history and politics, and between all the socialising I worked hard. Both departments were

highly regarded; International Politics was the first of its kind in the world and is a national treasure.

I loved the more relaxed teaching of university and enjoyed being able to set my own working patterns, balancing everything with an incredible group of friends.

We had settled into a gang of around 20 boys, and we did absolutely everything together. I suppose there is no point me trying to make the case that we were choir boys. It was complete carnage, there was always someone from the group in the middle of the latest prank. It was the height of lad culture – we were living the days of days. Some have described the period as one of rampant misogyny. I wouldn't describe us or myself as misogynistic. Some of my most ardent supporters, when Plaid Cymru turned their guns on me, were the women I had been at university with and who have written letters to the Party leadership on my behalf. That meant a lot because they were the people who knew me best.

All of us loved sport and we threw ourselves into the opportunities available. For Pantycelyn students, representing the Geltaidd Society in intra-University competitions was more important than representing the University. As we were mostly playing fellow Aber students from England, we approached every game as if it was an international match. We had incredible success with football in particular. We were so bonded as a team that we would happily die for each other on the pitch in our comradely zest.

In one football final in my third year, the joint captain Aled 'Penrhiw' Davies read out the famous Phil Bennet Grand Slam speech of 1977 in the dressing room before the game. I was on the bench that day and didn't get called into action until the 80th minute. We were winning comfortably, but I still charged at my nearest opponent and performed a terrible foul earning the fastest yellow card in history.

If we weren't socialising, studying, sleeping or playing sports, we would spend the rest of the time in each other's

company. Video games were a favourite pastime, in particular the game 'Worms' on the PC. Essentially the game was varying maps where each player had 4 worms each. The aim of the game was to be the last worm standing. Each player took it in turn and could use a varied supply of weapons and objects to destroy their opponents. It was a great strategic game, where each player would build temporary alliances and then betray each other at the next move. It was very similar to professional politics in that regard. My four worms were named after the West Indian fast bowlers, Ambrose, Marshall, Garner and Holding. Holding had been nicknamed 'whispering death' during his cricket career and was therefore well suited to this sort of game. We had a league going and everybody took it seriously, some more than others. I'm not naming names here, but those individuals would find the rest of the players ganging up on them first just to wind them up.

I enjoyed lectures but far preferred seminars where, once I had got over being shy, I started enjoying the debates we had. I specifically engaged when we were given a position to defend that I didn't necessarily agree with and would have to hold a line against competing views. It was excellent political training.

We had some great lecturers; however, the biggest influence on me was Richard Wyn Jones. He came from the left politically but was an uncompromising Welsh nationalist. He was incredibly intelligent and also cool. He challenged students to think for themselves and establish reasoning. He was in the business of developing the future leaders of the country.

I began to see how I could fuse the two political influences which were firing my imagination-the red of socialism and the green of Welsh nationalism. I was introduced to some incredible pieces of radical Welsh political history; those which appealed to me the most were always the ones where the writer had an aspiration for developing Wales as a political nation. I didn't engage in student politics however.

Pantycelyn was a Welsh nationalist hotbed. Welsh-speaking youth from across the country converged in one furnace living

our lives entirely through the language. It was like a yearlong Eisteddfod Maes B. Amongst us, there were a few Labour supporters including former First Minister Vaughan Gething. Lee Waters, another Labour Minister, was at Aber at the same time but chose alternative accommodation. I remember having a few discussions with Vaughan in the Lolfa after nights out. It was clear at that stage he was committed to the Labour Party. He would later get elected as Student Union President where he controversially supported the policy of the Labour UK to introduce tuition fees, going against the policy of the Aber Guild. It led to a vote of no confidence and a political crisis in the Student Union. The next President was Rhuanedd Richards, the current Head of BBC Wales. I would later work closely with her when she was Special Adviser to Ieuan Wyn Jones and later Chief Executive of the party. I respected Rhuanedd greatly; I could have an honest conversation with her without repercussions. It was a very bad day for Plaid Cymru when she left.

The Geltaidd, as well as being a sporting society, was responsible for social events and the annual international rugby trip to Edinburgh, Dublin or Paris. International days would begin in the early hours of the morning with the scramble for the best seats to watch the game in the Lolfa. Then the Star Wars trilogy would be played on video whilst crates of beer were consumed. Let's just say the 90s were not a golden age for Welsh rugby, we were fortunate we had beer as an anaesthetic.

During the academic year, the Geltaidd would organise a series of pub crawls around town, the most notorious being the '*Crawl Haneru*'. I often equated Aberystwyth to Las Vegas, not because of the gambling casinos or the desert, but because the town was surrounded by mountains and sea in the middle of nowhere. It's a difficult journey to get to the next major conurbation so you must make the best of what Aber has to offer. As it was, it had more pubs per square mile than any other place in the UK, so we were able to keep ourselves entertained. The Crawl Haneru began with a pint in the Cwps before

proceeding through another 30 drinking establishments for a half before a pint at the nightclub where the race finished.

Some of the participants took it extremely seriously working in a team of four or five in tandem with one sprinting forward to order the round in advance with each member taking turns. Others would come ready prepared with a spoon tied around their necks to help with '*tacticals*'. I'll leave it to your imagination, but you can imagine that the streets of the town were not a pretty sight the following morning. In my four attempts, I never got close to finishing the race. The furthest I got was around pub 20 before giving up and heading to the nightclub. In my fourth year during my Masters, the University's top brass banned the Geltaidd from holding the event. The organisers quickly constituted a new society called the Saxons and the race went ahead as planned!

We had some memorable evenings going to the cinema in town. I recall the whole of the male contingent of Pantycelyn descending for the opening night of the Aberystwyth Film Festival to watch the Quentin Tarantino cult film '*Reservoir Dogs*'. Another film night which ensured a good turnout was '*Braveheart*'. I was completely enthralled by Mel Gibson's rendition of William Wallace's speech before the Battle of Stirling. Many years later, in 2005 I had been given responsibility for managing the double Blaenau Gwent by-elections. Our Westminster candidate was my great friend and political genius Steffan Lewis, who had lit the campaign up despite his tender age. When he was making his concession speech, I could feel the goosebumps on my skin due to its emotional power and then started to suspect that his words sounded familiar. He had paraphrased the most famous scene in Braveheart. I just shouted 'Yes' when he finished as if the Swans had scored a last-minute goal. I would have followed Steffan through a piranha infested river; his premature death set Plaid Cymru back decades.

I was to use a part of the speech myself in a debate in 2016. I had just returned from the Euros in Paris after watching the

Wales boys in their game at the last 16 stage of the tournament-I told the Leader of the House:

“I thank the Leader of the House for his warm tribute to the achievements of the Welsh national football team. I tweeted last night that I will die a happy man, hopefully many years from now, having had the privilege of supporting this great Welsh national side.”

Whist I wasn't very involved in party political life at Aber, I did attend a few Plaid Cymru University branch meetings in The Cwps. I recall one meeting where-not that I recognised him-the polymath Professor Phil Williams was sat next to me. It was surreal because in my formal seminars we were studying the rift in Plaid Cymru that had followed after the disappointments of the 1979 Referendum, and discussing his paper advocating the party adopt a Labour Party pressure group strategy. It was hugely influential on my thinking when later, I led on strategic matters for the party after the 2007 National Assembly elections, leading to what I would term the 'delivery device' model.

I was enjoying university life into my second year. I had fallen in love seriously for the first time, and I was heart-broken when it ended within months-it was living proof of the Cat Stevens anthem *'The First Cut is the Deepest'*. I then probably went off the rails a bit; I was still working hard, and my grades were ok, but my relationship with alcohol went way beyond health and safety standards.

It all came to a head in my second year after most students had returned home for the Easter holidays. Our group had been given a special disposition to remain in Aber for an extra night because it was one of the boys' birthday. We went on an 'all-dayer'. Our last but one destination was the Llew Du-our drinking HQ-before we were going to move on to one of the Clubs on the seafront.

In those days there were no mobile phones, so how we organised our evenings I have no idea. In such a large group we would split into smaller drinking groups to make the ordering of

beer more efficient. My group for the evening was the first to leave for the front. There were several routes to take but the one we usually took was via Eastgate Street. Halfway down the street, there was a garage, the roof of which was easily accessible from the rear via the Cynfryn Buildings.

I have no idea what possessed me, but for some reason, I thought it would be a great prank to climb up the roof of the garage and wait in ambush for the rest of the boys as they made their way to join us. Some ten minutes later I could hear them coming down the street and duly scared the living daylights out of them, which prompted Aled Rees, who had been waiting for me, to also join in the fun. He went flying through the roof and fell 20ft hitting a wall on the way down and puncturing his lung.

As I made my way to the scene of the accident, I fell through the roof myself headfirst. I was to land only a few feet from the pointed hitch of a pickup truck. I was however, unconscious, lying in a pool of blood pouring out from my left ear.

Everybody sobered up quickly; the emergency services were called but wouldn't enter the building without the permission of the owner. My friends were furious; Huw Oliver being the eldest took responsibility as he always did when somebody needed to take charge, lowered himself down through the broken roof and opened the door to the waiting paramedics and police.

If Huw hadn't risked his life, I would have died that evening. He'd put himself in incredible danger for his pals and could easily have been killed himself. Both Aled and myself were rushed to Bronglais Hospital. The festivities for the rest of the boys ended abruptly. They returned to Pantycelyn Hall where Huw phoned my parents.

My mother took the call and asked Huw if I was still alive, he could only say I was breathing when I was taken to hospital. My mother, father and sister then jumped in a car and made the journey up to Aber. My father was in shock, he aged years that evening. He didn't speak until they were midway between Llandeilo and Lampeter when he just said to my mother "*ti yn*

gwybod mae wedi marw wyt ti?”(you realise he has died, don’t you?) Our relationship had been fractious when I was growing up, but everything changed from that day onwards. We became very close, aided by our work in politics.

I have no idea when I regained consciousness. I just remember that my vision was blurred, and my hearing had changed. I remember looking across the ward and seeing Aled on his feet with a bucket in his hand and a tube running from inside his ribs. I burst out laughing.

The bond shared between Huw, Aled and myself is unspoken, but deeper than the Mariana Trench. Huw has made a career as a police marksman and been in close protection to some of the most important people in the world when they visit the UK. How he’s achieved this I have no idea, as I beat him in a clay pigeon shooting competition once and I’d needed the instructor to load my gun. I was compering proceedings at his wedding, and between two of the speeches I cracked a joke about the time he was responsible for the security of the future King who was on one of his visits to Llandoverly, mentioning the words “Sarajevo 1914”-I think half the wedding gathering got it!

Being present at that visit, I’d better state that I wasn’t planning an assassination of any sort. I always got on well with the future Monarch when I met him. Given that he’d bought a home in Myddfai and loved Carmarthenshire I considered myself his de facto MP.

I was to spend three weeks in hospital. By that stage, I was desperate to return home. I probably wasn’t ready when I discharged myself, but I didn’t want to miss the next university term. I was in a very weak state and my balance was shot to pieces - it has never fully recovered. Whilst everything is stable when I’m looking straight forward, if I look up my vision swirls. This normally isn’t a problem unless I have to catch a skyer in cricket. In those circumstances, it’s pure luck whether I end up catching the ball or not.

My brain was swollen and I probably should have taken some time out to recover. However, I wanted to be back with the guys. I was strictly forbidden from drinking, so I had to settle on non-alcoholic beverages. It didn't last long. I was determined to prove that the injuries I had sustained wouldn't slow me down. I had fractured my skull in four places, with one of the fissures severing my inner ear. I had lost the hearing in my left ear permanently.

Within a few months I was playing competitive sport again which in itself was not particularly bright. One strike on my head at that stage would have been enough to finish me off and I was in a weakened state. If somebody started a fight, I wouldn't have a hope of defending myself. Considering my style in whatever sport I played was all about getting under the skin of my opponents, there was a high degree of probability that matters could get out of hand.

Whilst most people would have calmed down, I developed a chip on my shoulder. It was the rage within me that was to drive my politics after I finished university. I was angry at the world for my misfortune, and radical politics was the perfect outlet. For many years thereafter I probably wasn't the nicest person I could be. A former girlfriend, perhaps out of sympathy for a fallen warrior, rekindled our relationship. She was extremely kind to me, and I deeply cared for her. I was to end up breaking her heart; it was one of the biggest regrets of my life-she deserved far better than me at that stage in my life.

Soon after my accident as we approached the summer holiday the Queen was to visit Aberystwyth to open an extension of the National Library and the University. It was exam season and the University Library and the National Library had been closed to accommodate the visit. The route to the National Library meant taking a road under Pantycelyn. It was inevitable that there was going to be a protest. It could have all been avoided if it had been planned when there were no students in Aber during the summer holidays.

I had no idea that events were going to unfold as they did. I was with some of the boys on the main Pantycelyn lawn as the Monarch's car approached. The next thing I saw was that a few individuals had jumped the security fence, including one of the boys. Matters quickly got very serious.

The Queen's next stop was in the University so the protest moved up to the campus. The most often-used video footage of the event shows a crowd of protestors barging into the Police cordon. What it doesn't show is a small group of individuals taunting the protestors by waving their Union Jacks. I think the term for them is "agent provocateurs". What did the authorities think was going to happen?

It was a surreal experience sitting in the Pantycelyn Lofa later watching the 6 pm news. It was the first time in history that a Royal visit in the UK had been halted. The Western Mail labelled the occasion the '*Shaming of Wales*'. I was to recommend that line myself to my then partner, the National Assembly Member Bethan Jenkins, when the Western Mail asked for a comment in response to the decision of the National Assembly to commission a piece of art to commemorate Margaret Thatcher. History does have a habit of repeating itself.

By the end of that academic year, the Geltaidd choir was preparing to compete in the National Urdd Eisteddfod in Maelor, in the northeast. My singing was so bad that choir leader Ffion Clwyd wouldn't even leave me mime in the back row. I was given the job of turning the pages for pianist Ows Gruff, even though I couldn't read music. He would just nod and I would do my duty. The Eisteddfod was being held the day after I had finished my exams, so I had gone to celebrate in the Student Union. I fell off the dancing stage and fractured my arm above the elbow. To make matters worse it was my page-turning arm. The president of the day welcomed us onto the stage by asking the audience to give us a "***croseo brenhinol***"-a Royal welcome. I somehow managed to turn the pages by manoeuvring my good arm across my damaged arm in a sling. Competing at an Eisteddfod was always great, but for me, the best bit was seeing

my dad whilst he was volunteering behind the stage and having a chat-I could have hugged him for hours. I think by this stage he had concluded that broken limbs were nothing to worry about.

I finished my degree a year later with a 2:1. Without much of an idea about what to do with my life I decided to enrol onto a Master's Degree which meant another year at Aber.

I was fortunate to win the Pantyfedwen Scholarship which covered the tuition fees. My parents had funded my whole undergraduate career-as they did for my sister. We were so lucky to have parents who sacrificed everything for us. I moved into Caerbryn, a house situated in the shadows of the National Library sharing with a group of friends and it was here that we were to watch the most seismic political event in our nation's history-the Referendum on the establishment of our own National Assembly. We had all previously sat around the TV to welcome the election of the Labour Government in 1997 despite all voting Plaid. The disappointment at Plaid not winning Carmarthen East-after the incredible efforts of the local campaign team-being softened by the fact the Conservative Party was being forced out of office.

One of the first announcements of the new UK Government was that there would be referenda on a Scottish Parliament and an Assembly for Wales. We were gathered around the TV when the results came in. The evening had started badly but matters improved as the last counties published their results. The strong "Yes" vote from Neath Port Talbot meant that if Carmarthenshire was won by a certain margin, we would cross the winning post. Brad Roynon-Chief Executive-couldn't speak Welsh, and there was some confusion after his first effort, before he started in English; a couple of us were already celebrating as we were convinced that he'd said the "Yes" majority in the county was sufficient. When the result was confirmed in English we danced in the streets.

I found the academic year far more challenging than the undergraduate degree; it was a considerable step up. I specialised

in American foreign policy and the end of the Cold War in particular. My favourite lecturer was Professor Michael Cox, one of the world's foremost experts on the subject, and who held the Woodrow Wilson Chair at the Department-the first International Relations Professorship in the world, instituted in 1919 after the Great War. In our first seminar, he told us to watch the Simpsons religiously if we wanted to understand US society; it was music to my ears. In a further seminar, discussing the crisis in the Balkans and ethnic cleansing, he asked us why it was such a difficult issue for the US to take the moral high ground. Afterwards, I recalled that drama in primary school with cowboys and Indians. The creation of the US State had of course entailed the ethnic cleansing of the North American continent from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

Another favourite course was war propaganda with Dr Susan Carruthers. I was obsessed with the Vietnam War-and the film *Platoon* in particular. It was fascinating to explore how Western democracies had learned to manage and control the media in subsequent wars, and how those tactics were deployed in normal circumstances by governments that were supposed to encourage free speech. I quickly realised that reality isn't important in politics and war - perception is what matters.

By the time I had finished the degree, I couldn't face another exam or dissertation. I was done with academia.