

Lost Leaders?

Edwina

As one of the Assembly's stalwarts - and most divisive figures – retires from office, **Rhys David** runs the rule over Mrs Hart's record as minister for economy, science and transport

Wales is not the hand most economy ministers would want to be dealt from a selection of West European countries. Our near neighbours, Scotland and Ireland, both have their problems but also aces – the enduring appeal worldwide of whiskey and, even in its devalued form, oil, in the one case; in the other a world class pharmaceutical sector and the European bases for many US technology companies. Wales' top cards have been – the universities apart – mainly in engineering, notably Tata Steel, Airbus and Ford, and two of these three are facing tough times. Ah, but it's all about services now, it might be said. Wales has, indeed, developed a burgeoning service sector over recent years. Nevertheless, the highest level services in finance, business and the law are under-represented. The bars, restaurants, hotels and other elements of the consumer service sector that have sprung up in our city centres act in large measure to ensure money brought into Wales by students, sports fans and other visitors, together with the money spent by local people, is channelled back to corporate headquarters elsewhere. So, how to judge the impact of retiring economy, science and transport minister Edwina Hart? The most pugnacious holder of the office to date, she has been an ever-present in various posts since the first Assembly back in 1999, holding the economic portfolio since the last election in 2011.

To say Gower AM Mrs Hart divided opinion would be an understatement. Those who like Mrs Hart, first woman president of BIFU, the banking union for which she worked, are very complimentary. Those who feel she has treated them roughly can be vitriolic. Nor does her aversion to interviews – including in this case – make it easy for the outsider to come to conclusions. Her supporters talk of a private and cultured person. She was born and brought up in Gowerton in her own constituency, attending the town's Grammar School, and still lives there. She played cello in the National Youth Orchestra of Wales while at school (the composer Karl Jenkins attended the boys' school in the town and played oboe in the same orchestra several years ahead of her). She lists as interests her local countryside, music and literature and she is acknowledged as having been a consistent supporter of the arts. Indeed, she is given considerable credit, as finance minister in the first Assembly Government, for ensuring the funds were made available for the Wales Millennium Centre, despite the rather lukewarm support of some of her most senior Cabinet colleagues. The good relations she enjoyed with the then Sir (now Lord) David Rowe-Beddoe, whom she helped to appoint as WMC chair in 2001, were a big factor in creating the platform on which has emerged one of the great post devolution successes.

Her admirers also recognise what some might describe as that rare quality in Welsh politicians - the ability to be decisive, quoting examples of proposals that had lain unanswered for years in the in-trays of her predecessors. These received her attention and endorsement very soon after she took over the portfolio. One leading business figure puts it this way. 'Business seeks many things from Government but the ingredient it wants most is the minimisation of uncertainty. The initial reaction to her appointment had been largely one of suspicion but her willingness to make decisions where others had prevaricated quickly secured her the approval and confidence of business.' Others, too, mention the good relations she developed with business and her willingness to look outside the usual Welsh Labour tent and bring forward leading figures from within business, academia and elsewhere – such as Sir Terry Matthews at the would-be Swansea Bay City Region - to head up the various reviews and task forces charged with coming up with ideas for pushing forward Wales' economic growth. She is credited, too, with repairing much of the damage caused to Wales' inward investment performance with the disappearance of the Welsh Development Agency brand. New structures now in place – though not a revived WDA - have seen an improvement in recent years in the number of businesses choosing to invest in Wales.

Some, however, question what, fundamentally, has been achieved during her tenure of this latest portfolio. Unemployment is indeed down, and activity rates are up, inward investment has been encouraging but we are not talking here about a Leicester City miracle – from bottom to top in one year. To continue the football analogy, Wales is still bobbing along at the foot of the tables. Our economy has still to solve its chronic Gross Value Added problem, and incomes are barely half those of the richest region, London. Scotland, by contrast, is much closer to UK averages. Crucially, her opponents argue, economic ministers of successive Governments in Cardiff Bay, including Mrs Hart, have failed to develop an overarching economic strategy that will work, linking all the various initiatives and proposals that have spilled out over recent years. Firefighting has often been good but too much activity has been reactive. There have been reviews aplenty but the bricks and mortar have seldom followed. The great issues that have occupied so much airtime and print space over the past decade will - despite Mrs. Hart's famous decisiveness - be passed on to her successors. The Swansea Bay Barrage is still on the drawing board and fighting to make it further; the first stanchions carrying electric power to the new Cardiff and Valleys Metro have not left the steelworks and the Brynglas tunnels remain a more formidable obstruction to entering Wales than high winds on the Severn Bridges.

And so it goes on. How much of this mixed picture can be attributed to Mrs Hart is, of course, moot. The steel crisis at Port Talbot make it clear that pricing decisions taken in the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council in Beijing or the Tata board in India can have far more influence on the lives of Port Talbot and other Welsh workers than anything that could happen in the Senedd. The same is evidently true of the powers of Westminster and Whitehall in a globalised economy. In this respect, this famous survivor of Welsh Cabinets is no different from any of her predecessors or successors. It is only fair to say, too, that the UK Government controls the purse strings for the big infrastructure projects that its Welsh counterpart has been trying to get built, with Welsh ministers less able even than their local government colleagues to raise finance through the sale of

bonds. 'The Welsh Government does not hold the levers,' one observer notes, 'It's not as if they can say, here's the money, let's go and build it.'

Yet others say Mrs Hart's uncompromising, take-no-prisoners style has not helped and that although she has been prepared to listen, she has not been a team player. She is reputed to have been the least collegiate among her Cabinet colleagues and prepared to take decisions or change policies with the minimum consultation or reference. She has also kept a very tight rein on her civil servants and on their cross-departmental dealings. She has also been notoriously frosty with Whitehall and Westminster, jealous of her territory and determined to evict intruders. Famously, in 2011, she responded to an invitation to appear before the Parliamentary select committee on Welsh Affairs looking at inward investment with the reply: 'I will not be attending.' A second sentence went on to say the economy was her responsibility and she was quite capable of doing her job.

For all this there would be few who would argue that it has not been a distinguished career of public service across several portfolios, requiring high levels of stamina, determination and commitment. Her legacy is undetermined at present but if Wales can look back in a few decades to a higher-skilled labour force working in biotechnology and other advanced sectors; Cardiff and Swansea City Regions being talked about in the same breath as the great exemplar, Stuttgart; a 70 mph journey skirting Newport by road (for those wanting to travel further!); views back at Swansea from the barrage; a north Wales link to high speed rail; and a four times an hour 30 minute service from Merthyr Tydfil to Cardiff on attractive, modern trains, it may well be said she played a big part in laying the foundations.

Rhys David is an Honorary Fellow of the IWA and a former Financial Times journalist. He is the author of *Tell Mum Not to Worry: A Welsh Soldier's War in the Near East 1915-1919*. This article was first published in the Spring 2016 issue of *The Welsh Agenda*, the magazine of the Institute of Welsh Affairs, and appeared before the Tata decision to quit steelmaking in Britain.