

## **The Welsh Political Archive Annual Lecture**

**6<sup>th</sup> November 2015**

**BBC Middle East Editor Jeremy Bowen**

Good evening. Thank you for the very warm welcome.

The first time I came to Aberystwyth was for the honorary fellowship this year, but I liked it so much that when I was invited back I had to come. It's a lovely spot and I like the fact that it takes a while to get here from London.

I thought that this evening I'd talk about being a Welshman in the world. I was born, brought up and educated in Cardiff. I was very much made there, I like going back and I feel very much at home although it's been a long time since I've lived there full time.

Over the years I've found myself covering a lot of dangerous stories, visiting dangerous places and meeting dangerous people such as Colonel Gaddafi and President al-Assad, but I never thought as a journalist that I would end up spending so much time in dangerous places. I thought I may do one or two wars but I've been to 20 as well as lots of other civil commotions. Part of this is a by-product of living in the Middle East.

I've often been asked is a story worth your life? If you ask any sane person the answer would be "Of course it isn't", but you may get justifications as to why journalists will take risks. They may say "It's not worth my life but that is the wrong question. I'm not going to get killed, I'm not going to go where there is trouble." But they are fooling themselves. If you're in a war zone you can be killed in an instant. So why do we do it?

I'll start off by explaining how I got into it. My first taste of war reporting was in El Salvador in the 1980s. Martin Bell was the BBC's Washington correspondent and usually covered El Salvador where the civil war was going on. There was a big flare up and he asked me if I wanted to go there. I thought "Wow". I didn't know what to pack, so I took my running shoes. These days we get special training before going to war zones and special kit including body armour. In those days it wasn't like that. There was a shop where you could buy the kit but it was heavy and not like the kit we have now.

That first day I couldn't believe what I saw. I'm embarrassed to say that it felt like I was in my own war movie. There was a night curfew, so we sat in the restaurant and watched fighting and tracer bullets in the distance. The first day was when I first heard the sound that bullets make when they are whizzing near your head. I didn't find it as frightening as I thought I would, but I was drinking of a dangerous cup - adrenalin. I felt that I was indestructible after a few days of being there. I'm glad to say that vacuous assessment of why I liked war reporting didn't last. I soon realised the only real justification for doing what we do – going into people's lives at their worst moments and asking them to share these moments with us and the audience. If you're doing this because you getting a kick from living on the edge – or living in a place without rules – it's like war tourism. Quickly I got a sense of journalistic purpose.

In the years after there was the first Gulf War, and the wars in the former Yugoslavia. I felt strongly that this was a conflict of our time, and in our continent. It was a dreadful event and I wanted to be there to cover it. I thought it was necessary to shine a bright light to expose what was going on in those dark corners. Terrible things went on, and some things went on because the British and our allies were not doing anything about it.

I couldn't really escape from journalism. My father worked for BBC Wales and earlier for newspapers in Cardiff and my mother was a photographer. They met at the Western Mail Christmas Party. I never really thought about doing anything else. I always wanted to be a foreign correspondent. My mother said "Don't be a journalist but if you have to, you should be a foreign correspondent".

Why do I go to dangerous places still? This year I've been to Yemen and Syria. A few years ago I wrote a memoir saying that I'd had enough. I said earlier about being in denial about your safety - I'm not drunk on adrenalin - I accept that if you go to a risky place you risk yourself and your family.

There was a day in 2000 south Lebanon. The Israelis were pulling out of a substantial piece of south Lebanon - what they called their Security Zone - and we watching them move out from a safe distance. We were a few miles back - we thought we'd be fine. We were going into villages after the Israelis had pulled out and meeting people who had just returned home for the first time in years. We stopped close to the border. I had a Lebanese driver and a fixer (we rely on fixers - they're local, they know the area and we rely on them to sort things out - I wonder if as a young journalist in Cardiff if there had been a war whether I would have been a fixer). Anyway, the camera man and I got out of the car to do a piece to camera and the driver and fixer stayed in. The fixer was on the phone to his son. There was this almighty noise and the car was on fire - he was on fire. The Israelis had fired a tank shell into the back of the car from a short distance - less than 1km away. Had I not got out of the car I'd have been killed. I couldn't even check on his body to see if he was still alive because the Israelis opened up heavy machine gun fire on us. I know that they were aiming at us from people who listened to the radio traffic. It was midday and there was no way that they couldn't have seen us.

The next day I went to my fixer's funeral in Beirut. I went back to work and a friend of mine came to me and said "It's a shame about Miguel and Kurt". These two friends had been killed on the day of the funeral in Sierra Leone in an ambush. Two wars - two continents - three friends dead. I thought "there is a message in this". My partner was expecting our first child so I stopped. I became a presenter and got to quite like it. I got on well with my co-host Sophie Rayworth. You develop a close relationship. But I was a journalist and I was being paid to sit on a sofa and tell jokes.

I became Rome correspondent. I covered the death of the Pope. Then the job of Middle East editor came up. At the time there were wars but nothing like now, so it's like I said - the war came to find me and as time has gone by I've gone back to doing more dangerous stuff. I don't walk into besieged towns like I may have when I was 30 and now my job is more to stand back and look at the trends. I don't want to chase bombs but they are part of it. I've noticed as a westerner that the Middle East is getting more hostile to foreigners. There is an increasing atmosphere of threat. Most days I have contact with bearded men with Kalashnikovs.

We have large boxes to keep all our safety stuff – flack jackets, first aid kits, gas masks and so on. My flack jacket index is a guide to how dangerous a place is. I feel I'm taking it out with me more and more - there was a time where I hardly took it out at all.

So what is this? Well the Middle East is going through a really significant generational (or multi generational) long period of change. There are powerful forces of work and the causes are many and varied. By the way I have written a book about it which makes an excellent Christmas gift! The world is porous – people know that life is better elsewhere and they know they can move their families not just to safety but to a better life.

As I said, there are many reasons for this change but there is one I'd like to concentrate on. 60% of the population of the Arab countries of the Middle East is under 30 years old. That bulge is important – those countries used to produce a certain size cake which would be sliced up with enough to go around. There was a time in the 1950s where countries like Egypt could provide subsidies – healthcare – education – but they can't afford it any longer. People have education but nowhere to use it. In the Palestinian Territories there is a very young population and one of the reasons for the upsurge in violence is that people are angry that their lives and opportunities are being taken before they can be lived. If we go back to the Egyptian revolution in 2011 – I spoke to a lot of people and my feeling was that people had lost their sense of fear of the regime because they were desperate enough to think it can't get any worse. They were prepared to take the risk. There was a critical mass of young people who thought they had been dealt out of the game before it started. Things have moved on since 2011 but that feeling is still there. Take Saudia Arabia for example. It has vast oil reserves and have been able to buy off the discontent but there are views on how sustainable that model is – and with oil at \$50 a barrel even the Saudis are feeling the pressure of demography.

There was an interview on the BBC with Saeb Erekat of the PLO on BBC *Hard Talk* the other day and he was absolutely despairing. He said, "Look I'm 60 years old. 96% of the population is younger than me." (The Palestinian median age is 15). "ISIS can offer these young people 70 virgins and a castle if they join the jihad. I can't offer them a job or a one room flat. Why do you think they join the jihadists?" Up until now Palestinians have avoided the attractions of the jihadist route – I think its because they are a very politicised people – very aware of political issues and politically sophisticated. I think you have to be a bit naive to be a true devotee of jihad and be prepared to blow yourself up. But Erekat had a point – if people's lives are desperate and they have no future - they can do desperate things.

How to you apply this to the British situation. We have people in not insignificant numbers going out to fight jihad. I think in the secular west we forget the power of religion. Of course the religious justifications for slaughter is a ghastly perversion of any kind of religion.

We hear about some of those that have gone out to fight, something like "he wasn't really very devout – was a bit of a layabout", but once again it's the sense of detachment. These perversions of religion have their appeal to people who feel separated from the roots of their society and culture in which they live. If you feel no part of something – if you feel that society is against you – it is a step to the next stage. I'm not justifying this – just trying to understand it.

I'm not a religious person but I understand the power of religion. In the Middle East it is all around you.

But why does the Middle East matter? We're taking 20,000 refugees as a result of the turmoil – compare that to Lebanon where half the population are refugees. It matters because the southern side of the Mediterranean is not far from here. It's not much a leap from north Africa to some of the southern European islands. The Middle East matters because we are connected with it. We can't separate ourselves from it. There is a lot of ignorance about the Middle East – I talk to other Middle East journalists and we worry that we may not be putting the region out there.

When I was covering the Bosnian war, I felt that people didn't want to get involved with the politics. Croats, Serbs and Bosniaks were fighting each other but what got on the news and led the bulletins were the awful things that happened. The trouble with reporting like that is that you almost have to outdo the last atrocity to make it newsworthy. I'd get back and people would say "I know you do your best but when you go on about the awful things that happened I want to go away and make some tea". So now I feel you have to provide strong political context to why these awful things happen or it just becomes white noise.

BBC has a code of impartiality. I'm glad about that but impartiality is not objectivity. We all see the world through a prism and if you're a journalist you decide to go to this or that place because something sparks your interest. You have an interest in the plight of a certain group of people while another journalist may go somewhere else. As journalists we should try to be fair and give a snapshot of what is going on, but being fair and honest can make you enemies - especially in the Middle East. With social media the reaction can be instantaneous, and things being seen out of context can create more problems. I've had examples of people being angry with me for a report seen out of context. You need to develop thick skin.

Like I said, you have to be fair but honest. A colleague of mine did a training video in which he dealt with this idea. He talked of a bar fight where the journalist asks the bar man why the men are fighting. The barman replies that one man thinks  $2+2=4$  while the other says  $2+2=5$ . So when you report as an impartial journalist you explain honestly that they are fighting over whether  $2+2=4$  or  $2+2=5$  - but  $2+2=4$ ! Being impartial doesn't mean that you say that the truth lies somewhere between those two claims.

So if you're in the Middle East and you're reporting on Syria or the Israel/Palestinian conflict you have to report the facts - you can't say that the truth lies somewhere in between. In many cases, the answer is almost less important than the working out. When I do my piece to camera I need to show my working out. I get flack when I mention that Israel has been occupying part of the West bank for decades when reporting on an incident, but that is an important part of the equation. Fortunately, as I've got the title Editor I have a bit of leeway to go into these things and that is something I like about the job.

The medium – TV can make it difficult for journalists. It is different to newspapers who tend to know who their audiences are but we have a more varied audience. It has to work for everyone. When we give a piece on the news we expect intelligence and interest but we can't expect knowledge. For example, my brother is an intelligent man. As a QC he's argued cases in the Supreme Court but I remember talking to him and him asking whether it was the

Israelis or Palestinians on the West Bank! I think he knows the answer now. We can't assume knowledge – so we give the background and context – but people do have to make an effort too. You can learn a lot from the web and so on – so it is a bit more of a two way street now.

Before I finish, one thing I want to throw out there is a thought about Welsh identity. I don't want to offend anyone here, but this is worth a discussion – perhaps in the Q&A. I think I'm as Welsh as they come. I was born and brought up in Cardiff. My father was from Merthyr Tydfil and his family came from Carmarthenshire. I did a family history programme with BBC Wales and followed the migration and jobs of my ancestors. My great grandparents were the first ones who were literate – then they acquired some education and the family came to Cardiff during the depression. My father was the first to go to university and also the first generation not to speak Welsh.

I've been asked on my travels whether I speak Welsh – well no I don't – but I am Welsh. I think I'm as Welsh as you can be. Would speaking Welsh make me more Welsh? I don't think so, but I've had some people suggest that it would. I've had people suggest that I would have stayed in Wales if I'd been able to speak Welsh.

Somehow we lost the connection because my grandfather didn't pass the language on to my father. So – is that a good thing or a bad thing? There are jobs in Wales I couldn't apply for because I don't speak Welsh. Now I understand the need to safeguard and strengthen the language. But what about those who don't speak it? Maybe I'm out of date with things as I haven't lived permanently in Wales since I left before I went to university in 1979 but I am a regular visitor to my family. I'd like to look at the national issue as well. Would nationalism ever have the appeal here that it does in Scotland? Could you imagine Plaid Cymru wiping out the Labour Party in Wales in the same way as the SNP has wiped out the Labour Party in Scotland? Maybe – I know Plaid Cymru have been trying to change their image on this but it does seem a bit more tied up with the language to me.

I think it's very important to safeguard Welsh. I rather regret that my grandfather didn't teach my father Welsh and that he didn't pass it on to me. Would it be better if all Welsh people could to speak Welsh? Maybe it would, but am I less Welsh because I don't? I don't think so. Would I have tried to make a career in Wales if I'd been a Welsh speaker? Once again, I don't know.

When I travel around the world I think of London as my home – my family and children are there after all – but this is where I come from. I am from Wales. I feel 100% Welsh and so I'd like your opinions on that ladies and gentleman. Please throw that back at me!

Thanks very much to listening.