

# Leaving lockdown together: Why we are better united against coronavirus

This week we commemorate VE Day. It was a moment of profound national relief, tinged with the reality of the sacrifices made in reaching that point. As this week proves, even after 75 years we remember vividly what that long period of attrition and grief taught us.

And so the current coronavirus pandemic reminds us of what matters in times like this, and what we can achieve as a United Kingdom.

Because if there is one thing that these crises have shown us throughout our shared history, it's that the nations of the United Kingdom are at their strongest when they work together.

Politics is a profession that thrives on disagreement and debate so I pinch myself as I agree with Nick Thomas-Symonds, the Labour MP for Torfaen and the new Shadow Home Secretary, when he said that the UK Government had worked well with the devolved administrations during this emergency. His comments reflected the appeal I hear daily from businesses and residents across Wales – park our political differences and unite in the defeat of this unwelcome and invisible killer, COVID 19.

Here in the United Kingdom, the pandemic response has been marked by joint decision-making and collaboration between the UK Government and the devolved administrations.

This is the approach that a crisis dictates, and it is the level of grown-up politics that the public demands. This does not preclude challenge, disagreement and analysis. That is important, but for now it is a question of timing and effort, all of which is focussed on a common objective.

Sometimes there have been differences of approach in the different nations as our administrations reacted in real time to the incredible challenges faced every day. We all accept there will be some 'divergence' – that's the reality of devolved government. But it has been striking that despite the very different political make-up of the administrations across the UK, the similarities in approach taken have by far outnumbered the differences.

It may not be reported widely, but almost every day I speak to Welsh Government Ministers, and what we call the 'machinery of Government' – civil servants, advisers and officials – are in near constant discussion. And guess what? More often than not we agree on this very point.

Whether it's the protection of jobs and livelihoods, the vast UK wide welfare system, the UK armed forces support that is so visible up and down Wales or the world class UK wide research and development – the importance of the Union (including the presence of the UK Government in Wales) has never been so crucial to the lives of the people of Wales. And rather than pose a threat

to devolution and a sense of intense national pride, it actually empowers them.

So, as the First Minister Mark Drakeford himself has pointed out, all four nations entered lockdown restrictions at the same time and should, if at all possible make any modifications to the restrictions at the same time. This is because our economy and systems are so intertwined.

We agree that a UK-wide transport system that permits one thing in Bristol but demands another in Newport is doomed to failure. How would we explain to our bigger employers that the rules in Deeside are different from their plant in Doncaster, especially if staff members work between the two?

People across Wales have been magnificent in the weeks since March when social distancing measures began. The overwhelming majority have followed the guidelines, stayed indoors and have more than done their bit to slow the spread of the virus and protect the NHS.

This is because the guidance has been simple, and the approach from both governments has been united. It is why Welsh business has quietly risen to the challenge, making PPE, sanitiser or developing new ventilator technology. They have donated food and time, supported key workers and looked after the workforce.

This is the approach that we need to sustain in the weeks ahead.

Covid-19 will undoubtedly be with us for some time yet and until we have met the five tests set out to beat this virus, we must continue with the measures we have been taking to stay at home, protect the NHS and save lives. Later this week the Prime Minister will give an update on the measures and decisions we will need to take next to safeguard the economy and avoid the risk of a second peak that would be so damaging.

It is a UK wide approach in this next phase which will be the best for the people and businesses in Wales. We entered this fight as a United Kingdom and we will come out of it even more united.

**ENDS.**

**Note:**

This article was published in English in the Western Mail on Thursday, 7 May. A Welsh translation of the article will be made available shortly.