

Dr Kim Howells was MP for Pontypridd between 1989 and 2010. He was educated at Mountain Ash Grammar School, Hornsey College of Art, and the Cambridgeshire College of Arts and Technology, and was employed as an official with the national Union of Mineworkers between 1984 and 1985. Serving as a minister in successive Labour governments between 1997 and 2009, he also chaired the Intelligence and Security Committee. This is a history which put Dr Howells in an ideal position to write the foreword to the 2011 Library of Wales edition of *The Volunteers*, a novel by Raymond Williams set in the area around Cardiff and industrial south Wales. As a contribution to the RWF commemoration of the Raymond Williams centenary, Dr Howells has written this very personal memoir of time spent in the company of Raymond Williams.

The memoir is accompanied by a photo of Kim Howells the artist as he is today, and a much earlier photo of Kim Howells the student. We are grateful to Kim for supplying both images to accompany his memoir.

Raymond Williams and Sesame Street



The last time I met up with Raymond Williams in Cambridge, he wanted to know about the aftermath in Wales of the 1984/85 Miners Strike. It had ended a year earlier in defeat and huge job-losses. I was still working for the National Union of Mineworkers in Pontypridd and expressed to him my conviction that the year-long strike had been a disaster, not only for the miners and their families but for the trade union movement and for the Left generally in Britain. Mrs Thatcher had proved to be a more formidable opponent than any the trade unions and Left had faced since the end of the Second World War. He agreed with me that the idea of strike action bringing down democratically elected governments was dead in the water for all, other than fringe political groups who continued to preach that a socialist revolution was still possible if the leadership of the Left adopted and promulgated faithfully the ideas and tactics of Marx and Lenin.

It had been very different a decade earlier when the university town of Cambridge had been home to more than its fair share of Leninist - mostly Trotskyist - sects. There seemed always to be demonstrations, urgent meetings, emergency resolutions, fevered discussions about the possibility of Tony Benn transforming the Labour Party into a militant vanguard of revolutionary politics. It was in this 1970s' political melee that I met Raymond Williams for the first time. He was famous and I was a fan. I'd read *Border Country*, *Culture and Society* and *The Country and the City* and I was keen to talk with him about his book, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* which I was trying to read in the aftermath of a much-televised miners' strike that had just ended, in 1974, when the Coal Board and the government backed down.

Determined to meet him, I managed to get an invite to a discussion he was leading at one of the colleges. His television appearances had made him one of the most recognisable of political commentators and I assumed that, in the halls of academe, he would be grander and more distant than he seemed on the box. But there he was, the very antithesis of the self-regarding model of left-intellectual media star I'd been worried I'd encounter. Later, I sat with him in a bar in a King Street pub, giving him my views about the 'overwhelmingly anti-trade-union bias' of the news media. I must have been a fan that month of industrial syndicalism because I kept quoting from the Miners' Next Step. Raymond sat there, showing enormous patience before suggesting, very gently, that there may have been a few significant developments in society in the 62 years since that syndicalist pamphlet was penned in the Rhondda. More disturbingly, he began talking about issues that I had rarely, if ever, regarded as being worthy of urgent consideration. They included the burgeoning feminist movement and concerns about the environment: issues which us red-blooded revolutionaries regarded mostly as third-division stuff but, after I left the pub and set a course for home across Parker's Piece, his words kept going around in my head. I realised that it wasn't just the effect of Green King bitter that was making me less convinced than I had been earlier that day about how politics was likely to pan out over the next decade or so.

I had had a foretaste of the new political revolution for, as my friend Dai Smith has written, it was during this time that Raymond, through his television work as well as his publications, played a key role in changing the agenda for those of us who counted ourselves as torch-bearers of left-of-centre politics. As, subsequently, I watched him speak in meetings, large and small, I came to admire him as an impressive performer: calm, witty, a fine and sympathetic listener with a huge hinterland of learning and experience. Sometimes, however, he could drive the more fervent of the comrades to distraction, like the occasion, in a packed student union hall in the late 1970s, when he said that the hit American children's television series, Sesame Street, seemed to him to be an excellent way of helping to generate among very young people a sense of community and friendship across different ethnic and religious groupings. The expensively-educated comrades in the hall began screaming at him, "Sesame Street is a CIA-inspired capitalist plot to sabotage the righteous revolutionary struggles of the Black Power movement..." This, at a time when American cities were witnessing burning, rioting and looting.

As we walked to the nearest pub, afterwards, he chuckled, "Who'd have thought it, hey? Sesame Street, a nest of counter-revolutionaries."



Ten years later, when we last met in Cambridge, some of that crazed Left rhetoric was still rampant, but confined mainly to sectarian circles. The old agenda was crumbling. Industrial trade unionism was becoming a mere shadow of the force it had been in the 1970s. Its political influence waned as union membership plummeted. Those issues that Raymond Williams, a decade earlier, had insisted we address, increasingly were becoming mainstream concerns for all politicians, Left and Right. As we sat in the beautiful grounds of Jesus College on that summer's day in 1986, he told me that he was urging people to consider the profound implications for society of the development of new communications technologies and he warned me that it would be foolish to ignore the issue of devolution which, once again, was rearing its head. He knew that I wasn't a fan of devolution and I sensed that he would

have enjoyed a good argument but I didn't swallow the bait; after all, it was good just to hear him talk on such a lovely day in those fine surroundings. Instead, I suggested that we should walk to the river, hire a punt and buy a bottle of chilled wine. I'd punt him upstream to Grantchester, slowly. He laughed, shook his head and said, "Being seen in a punt, drinking wine? I'd never live it down. Besides, you don't think I'm going to risk my life in a boat commanded by a bloke from Pontypridd, do you? I'm not that daft."