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Leader for the whole of Wales

As someone who supported Rhodri for the job of Leader all those years ago, I am very conscious of the challenges facing anyone who aspires to follow his leadership. Rhodri has been an inspirational leader of our party, and I feel myself very fortunate to have served as a Minister under Rhodri for the last nine years.

To win over the people of Wales, we have to listen. We have to learn. To earn the right to lead Wales, we have to show we understand Wales. I am proud to be Welsh, proud to be British, and of course, proud to be Labour. I am standing in this election to be a Leader for the whole of Wales.

I came into politics during the miners' strike, when I saw the staggering indifference of the Tory government to the impact their policies were having on our local communities. I have been involved in Labour politics ever since, becoming one of Wales's youngest councillors in 1995 in my late twenties and campaigning hard as Secretary of the Bridgend Says Yes campaign in the devolution referendum of 1997.

My politics are Labour politics. I believe we have to renew our Labour values, applying them to Wales as it is today. My agenda for Welsh Labour will focus firmly on the issues that matter to ordinary people – strong public services that can protect and help people when they need help; a dynamic economy, growing well-paid jobs and providing apprenticeships and meaningful training, with a new focus on manufacturing; more green jobs, with investment in insulation and renewables to tackle climate change and boost the construction industry; continually improving healthcare, with better access to GP services, and working with staff and their unions to improve areas like the Ambulance service; a review of residential care arrangements for elderly people; a proper funding programme to improve our school buildings, and affordable child-care. I will promote policies to look after Wales's children.

Under my leadership we will continue to work in partnership with the rest of the UK: for example, while we want the strongest health services in Wales, we must also acknowledge how for example cross-border health provision is critical to excellent services provided to Welsh patients, particularly in North Wales.

As a Minister, I have had to tackle many challenges. My first Cabinet job meant I had to lead the Welsh response to the devastating foot and mouth outbreak in 2001. As Environment Minister, I led the Assembly Government's work in tackling climate change. I set ambitious targets on recycling, energy efficiency and renewable energy. I spearheaded programmes to promote affordable housing through the planning system and helped improve communities in tackling anti-social behaviour such as fly-tipping, noise pollution and introducing alley-gating.

My experience under pressure during the foot and mouth outbreak demonstrated that I can handle leadership in difficult times. We face real challenges in Wales over the next few years, as we try to protect public services at a time of financial stringency. Having been tested under fire, I believe I am the candidate best placed to lead Wales in these difficult times.

Over the last year, we have seen people turning away from politics and politicians. I believe that to rebuild, Welsh Labour has to demonstrate once again that it puts ordinary working people first. I have travelled throughout Wales this year talking to party members and trades unionists, and I know that they want a leader who listens not lectures.

Having spoken to most Welsh Labour AMs and MPs, I am encouraged by the level of support I have. I believe that I can be a bridge within the party, reaching out to colleagues in London and also in local authorities across Wales - helping to bring about real change to people's lives.

To win in Wales in the General Election next year and the Assembly election in 2011, we need a united party, with MPs, AMs, party members and trades unionists working together for the benefit of the people of Wales.

Over the coming weeks I will be listening to members about where they see the future for our party. I will also be outlining some new and radical ideas that I think can take Labour forward and take Wales forward. I hope that you will support my campaign to be Leader.