



**The Welsh Language Society** 

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# **SERIOUS ABOUT WELSH?**

## **The Challenge for Government**

We have now seen ten years of devolution in Wales, and have experience of various administrations at some point including the Labour party, the Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru. The past ten years have also seen a number of policies relating to the Welsh language. This pamphlet's first purpose is to show that none of these policies, from Iaitth Pawb to the current position of the One Wales coalition, have been serious about safeguarding the future of the Welsh language, either due to ideological failings or practical failings. Its second purpose is to set the current Labour-Plaid coalition a clear challenge – to introduce comprehensive and effective legislation on the Welsh language as a first step to showing that this situation is about to change.

*laith Pawb* was the Welsh Assembly Government's first attempt at a policy on the Welsh language, introduced in March 2003 as "A National Action Plan for a Bilingual Wales". The minister responsible for the Welsh language at the time was the Liberal Democrat Jenny Randerson. Rhodri Glyn Thomas was chair of the National Assembly's Culture Committee, who prepared the report *Our Language: Its Future* (January 2003) in collaboration with the Education Committee.

That Action Plan is now five years old. As the glaring deficiencies of the Welsh Language Act 1993 become increasingly apparent, and as momentum gathers behind *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg's* calls for new measures, statements were made by the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats in the Senedd that it is time to go beyond *laith Pawb*, and that a New Welsh Language Act is needed. In 2003, *laith Pawb* set the goal of "empowering individuals to make a genuine choice as to the language, or languages, through which they wish to live their lives" and discusses "the right of the individual to use the language of their choice and the responsibility of organisations within Welsh society to acknowledge and facilitate the individual's right to do so". The stumbling block in this regard is that it fails to address the need for new legislation to establish these rights or to place a duty on bodies to provide for them. The emphasis in Labour's policy since 2003 has been on promotion, encouragement and a dependence on good will. One of the main points of this pamphlet is that this ideology also dominates within the One Wales government. There is a risk that the current government holds the view that the citizens of Wales can have the right to choose in which language they wish to lead their lives without legislation to secure this right, a flawed argument as the Welsh Language Board's experience with a number of private sector companies has shown.

*laith Pawb* sets many commendable objectives – 60 action points in effect, including increasing the number of Welsh speakers by 2011, increasing the provision of Welsh-medium education, supporting Welsh as a community language, creating a Welsh Language Unit within the Assembly Government, etc, etc. Nevertheless, there are no definite timescales or relevant and detailed targets. The Assembly Government itself monitors the plan's progress, so each annual report lists a great number of successes, but we know that the actual progress made has been very limited. The lack of timescales and targets is a fundamental criticism of *laith Pawb* as an action plan. The policy's failings are clear from the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers response (March 2007) to the way in which the UK honours its commitments under the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages since 2001; it has stated that the UK should as a matter of priority develop Welsh-medium education further by ensuring continuity from primary education to secondary education, monitor the progress made in Welsh-medium education more effectively and take further steps to improve health care and social care through the medium of Welsh.

## Evidence 1: Welsh Language Act

**“The Welsh language belongs to everyone in Wales as part of our common national heritage, identity and public good. We will work to ensure that more people, young and old, can learn Welsh and encourage it to thrive as a language of many communities all over Wales.”**

**“We will be seeking enhanced legislative competence on the Welsh Language. Jointly we will work to extend the scope of the Welsh Language Legislative Competence Order included in the Assembly government’s first year legislative programme, with a view to a new Assembly Measure to confirm official status for both Welsh and English, linguistic rights in the provision of services and the establishment of the post of Language Commissioner.”**

The government is currently preparing a Legislative Competence Order to ensure that legislation over the Welsh language takes place in Wales, and it may be that the wording of that Order will be public knowledge by the time this pamphlet is published. It is very likely that the Order will include the right to name the Welsh language as an official language in Wales, and the right to create a Language Commissioner. The first is a symbolically important step, and the second is essential in order to ensure that any new act has the robustness that the 1993 Act lacked. However, a question mark hangs above the issue of ensuring language rights. The clause in the above quotation is very vague. The simple truth is that a citizen in Wales should have the right to receive any kind of service, by any kind of organisation, company or other provider, in any sector, through the medium of Welsh. People should be able to see and hear the Welsh language around them to the same degree as English in all aspects of life, be it in the public, private or voluntary sector. If this were not possible, there would be a right to complain to the Commissioner, who would take the matter further and have full use of the courts. The companies required to conform with this legislation in the first instance will be those companies who can afford to do so; time and support will be given to smaller businesses to conform over a much longer period of time. That is the only way of ensuring rights. The importance of including the whole of the private sector in a new Welsh Language Act cannot be over-emphasised. The private sector has the most influence on our daily lives. How many times a week do we purchase food? How many times a week do we phone the water company? The past decade has shown that persuasion will not work when it comes to ensuring the language rights of the people of Wales. Time and again, companies such as Orange and Vodafone have stated that they will not consider using the Welsh language until legislation makes it compulsory. In countries where private companies have a legal obligation to provide services in other languages, large companies such as Ikea are very happy to do so, but in Wales, where there is no such obligation, we are expected to be thankful for tokenism. It has taken more than ten years of campaigning for Tesco, a company that made £2.5 billion in 2007, to reach its current flimsy ‘bilingual’ status

in its shops across Wales. This means some bilingual permanent signage, occasional bilingual Tannoy announcements in a few branches and bilingual packaging on a very limited number of products. With an annual profit of £2.5 billion, anything less than a thoroughly bilingual operation, with marketing material, all signage including temporary signage, goods packaging and staff training to provide a bilingual workforce is an insult to customers and to the communities of Wales. Despite the positivity of some individuals from those companies who have engaged in discussions with Cymdeithas yr Iaith, to call the delayed response of Tesco and Morrisons as companies progressive and enthusiastic is an inability to face up to the reality.

Safeguarding rights in a meaningful way is impossible, therefore, without legislating – the challenge to members of government is to have the backbone to show that they believe that the Welsh language is important enough to introduce legislation in the private sector to protect its future. To limit a new act to the utilities (as is likely to happen), or to a few larger business, will be to miss an opportunity to make a difference. It will also be a failure to apply socialist principles to the Welsh language. This issue is about a simple matter of market intervention to ensure citizen rights, in exactly the same way as was done to establish a minimum wage, to end discrimination on grounds of race, sex, sexuality, disability and religion, and to establish the right to be a union member. That the above has been achieved is a source of pride for any socialist; what then is the barrier to treating the Welsh language in the same way? A lack of socialist principles in the governing parties in Cardiff? That is not impossible, but some policies, especially in health, suggest otherwise.

There are elements within the coalition that see the language as a middle class issue, as a concern only of academics and teachers; those elements act on that assumption when discussing the new Welsh language act. They must realise, before the opportunity is lost, that this is an ideological and practical error. To introduce a complete and comprehensive new Welsh language act would ensure that the Welsh language would become a live and accessible language to everyone in Wales, whatever their background, race or class. That would be an act of a socialist government.

## **Evidence 2: The future of Welsh as a community language**

**“Everyone has the right to an affordable home as owner, as part-owner or as tenant. A stock of good-quality, affordable homes is the foundation of thriving local communities in all four corners of Wales. Our ambition is to ensure that all households, in all communities and irrespective of their means, can afford a decent home.”**

**“We will also ensure that the supply of affordable housing increases by at least 6,500 over the next four years. We will also provide financial support to young people who want to buy their first home in their own community but cannot afford to do so.”**



**“We will review and reissue Technical Advice Note (TAN) 20 with a view to allowing local authorities to use Language Impact Assessments for planning purposes in areas of housing pressure.”**

**“We will provide local authorities with the ability to secure 100% affordable housing on development sites to meet local needs in areas of high housing pressure.”**

**“Together, we will ensure that the supply of affordable housing increases, through investing in social housing, including council housing, and stimulating the supply of affordable private sector homes.”**

**“We will require all sizeable new housing developments to include a percentage of social housing reflecting local need.”**

**“We will improve radically the supply of publicly-owned land, including land in the ownership of the Assembly government, for local, affordable housing.”**

A majority of the quotations above use the term ‘affordable housing’. In abstract, and in an ideal world, this is a seemingly fair concept. In reality, however, an affordable house as defined and used by local authorities and housing developers ensures that the concept is impractical, unfair and immoral. Local authority planning policy criteria for affordable housing varies significantly, even in seemingly similar areas. Very often, a percentage of houses in a new development is designated as ‘affordable’. This is completely immoral in that it means that the rest of the development is by definition unaffordable and out of the reach of the local population. This situation is heightened by the huge difference between house prices and wages, which often means that not even the ‘affordable’ houses are within the reach of young people. In the current credit crunch, where does this leave a young individual, pair or family who wishes to live in their own community? Where does this leave the first quotation above, that everyone “has the right to an affordable home as owner, as part-owner or as tenant”? Has the government started to work towards ensuring this right to every citizen? When will an individual have a ‘Right to Buy’, to borrow an old slogan, a house in his or her local area? Or, possibly more relevant in the current financial climate, when will there be a Right to Rent? As suggested elsewhere in this pamphlet on the issue of a new Welsh language act, there is no way of establishing the right to something as fundamental as an affordable home without introducing an act to intervene in the free market, and to have an element of positive discrimination in favour of local people. Ensuring that a proportion of each development includes affordable homes does not ensure the right to a home.

The only policy point in this area that mentions the Welsh language is the ones that states that Technical Advice Note 20 should be reissued to allow local authorities to use Language Impact Assessments on new developments. Even here there is a reluctance to accept responsibility.

Both the principle and intention are essential and are to be welcomed. Very often a language impact assessment is the only protection a community has against inappropriate developments. These reports are independent of those prepared by the developers themselves, which are superficial and unrealistic assessments of the effects of their developments on the local community. The validity and the arrangements for these independent assessments must be formalised. Indeed, they should be a prerequisite before any development is permitted; the failure of the above method is that the government, by 'allowing' local authorities to forgo these independent assessments, is missing an opportunity to ensure that the Welsh language is a central consideration in planning matters. We are not arguing against devolving power to local communities, but it is essential that there are clear and unambiguous guidelines for local authorities. A similar objection is made to the commitment to 'provide local authorities with the ability to secure 100% affordable housing on development sites to meet local needs in areas of high housing pressure.' This could have been made an essential requirement. Similarly, Local Action Plans, works of research that can be commissioned by local authorities in areas identified as special cases, are also optional. Although they can be commissioned, local authorities are unlikely to do so in the case of Welsh language communities without guidance to this end from the Assembly Government. This will lead to a situation in which both sides can pass the responsibility to each other.

If implemented, the plan to provide more publicly owned housing will be an important step forward, as well as the plan to ensure that the current stock is not lost to the private sector. Again, as in the case of the new Welsh language act, the government must show that it has the backbone to be different, and show its willingness to take radical steps to ensure the future of the Welsh language as a community language, in the face of the most critical period in its history.

### **Evidence 3. Education**

**“We will establish a Welsh-medium Higher Education Network - the Federal College - in order to ensure Welsh-medium provision in our universities.”**

In reality the government has made the commitment to establish a Welsh-medium Federal College when very few elected members of either of the governing parties knew what this meant. This is no surprise, since the discourse over the past few years has been clouded by mystery regarding what exactly the Federal College is. It is perhaps no surprise, therefore, that the government's plans for realising its promise is very different to the college for which we have campaigned for so long. The essential basic principles of the College are laid down in 'Welsh-medium Federal College: Action Plan, November 2007,' Cymdeithas yr Iaith's policy document on the subject. The college must be a constitutionally independent entity, with its own charter



and independent remit (including a contribution towards community education and research). Special departments within Wales' Higher Education Institutions will be commissioned by the Welsh-medium Federal College to employ lecturers and to develop meaningful teaching provision and research through the medium of Welsh.

Welsh-speaking students would enrol in the individual HEI, and would register de facto with the Welsh-medium Federal College when they enrol on a course or module funded through the Welsh-medium Federal College, so that the national network of Welsh-medium expertise would be at their disposal. By enrolling with the college, students would become part of a Welsh-medium community and educational institution, which would add a dimension, in turn, to the notion of Welsh citizenship. The federal college must receive a separate, additional and independent funding stream, in the same manner as the other HEIs in Wales. This would not only ensure that Welsh-medium education receives a fair proportion of higher education funding, but would also ensure that HEIs in Wales take Welsh-medium education seriously, since developing Welsh-medium provision would give them a financial advantage. This would be a very positive step forward from the current position where Welsh-medium education is considered to be a minor addition to the mainstream, needing very little funding and competing with all the other considerations of HEIs and HEFCW. It is a choice between ensuring a comprehensive Welsh-medium education sector acting as a full member of academia on the one hand, and continuing to be a secondary consideration within the "real" English language academic world on the other. Each one of the above principles must be adhered to in order to establish a successful Welsh-medium Federal College; any development that fails to include every one will be a weak and ineffective compromise.

The offering made by the government in November 2007 was a continuation of the theme offered by Arad Consulting's appraisal in 2006, a plan to work within the current constitutional and financial system, a plan, in essence, to continue within the status quo. £4.3 million over 4 years has been allocated, and when this is considered next to the huge English-medium higher education budget in Wales of approximately £424 million in the next financial year, it is obvious that something more is needed if the government is serious about creating a Welsh-medium higher education sector of any merit. It is not a plan to establish a Welsh-medium Federal College, but a plan to establish a management board to distribute the additional pennies that will be made available, without aggravating the HEIs. The government must reconsider its plan, or it will lose yet another opportunity to work in an innovative and exciting way.

**"We will set out a new policy agreement with Local Education Authorities to require them to assess the demand for Welsh-medium education, including surveying parental wishes, and to produce a resulting School Organisation Plan, setting out clear steps to meet need."**

**"We will create a national Welsh-medium Education Strategy to develop effective provision from nursery through to further and higher education backed up by an implementation**

programme.”

**“We will continue the existing grant arrangements for small and rural schools, making greater use of school buildings to improve viability.”**

The first point above is certainly an important step forward, and if implemented it will require Local Education Authorities to plan for Welsh-medium education in advance and in a much more co-ordinated manner than happens at present. The success of this policy is dependent upon ensuring that local authorities comply with these guidelines much more stringently than in the past.

The intention of creating a co-ordinated Welsh-medium Education Strategy also seems like a positive step. However, Cymdeithas yr Iaith's experience in this area already suggests that the Assembly Government does not behave in the co-ordinated manner suggested in its policy documents. The above quotation on the alternative uses of village schools is something Cymdeithas yr Iaith has been calling for throughout the recent campaign in Carmarthen, Gwynedd and Powys, starting with the essential premise that positive discrimination in favour of village schools is needed in light of their role as community centres that often enhance the natural vitality of Welsh speaking communities, which includes acting as a means of integrating incomers to those communities. It must also be acknowledged that empty spaces in schools cost local authorities a great deal of money. So what is the solution? The above commitment could include transferring the responsibility for village school building to the Rural Affairs department, and specifically to community regeneration. The space needed to run a viable school could then be rented back from that department by the Local Authority. The rest of the building could be used for social and community regeneration projects. This, of course, would mean two departments within government having to co-operate. The response so far to the idea that two separate departments should work together has been lukewarm at best. It seems that Cardiff's attachment to Westminster's silo system of government is hindering the Assembly Government's ability to govern in that co-ordinated, progressive way that it is so proud of on paper. This must change, in all areas, if the government is to realise its promises.

**“We will explore the establishment of a Welsh for Adults Unit with sufficient funding, giving priority to tutor education.”**

Once again, this is a praiseworthy point; increasing the opportunities for people to learn Welsh is essential. However, the question that has to be asked is, what is the point of doing this without ensuring at the same time that the language will be visible and accessible to those learners in all aspects of their lives? We must ensure not only that potential learners have access to lessons, but that they also have the opportunity to use the language every day. As suggested, this cannot

be done in a meaningful way without robust legislation.

#### **Evidence 4: The Welsh language press and the Daily Newspaper**

**“We will expand the funding and support for Welsh-medium magazines and newspapers, including the establishment of a Welsh-language daily newspaper.”**

The decision to provide an additional £200,000 a year to the Welsh language press as a whole rather than provide the necessary funding to honour the commitment in One Wales of establishing a daily Welsh language newspaper was the cause of great disappointment and disillusionment to a great number of Plaid Cymru members and likewise to members of Cymdeithas yr Iaith. The promise was very clearly set out in the One Wales agreement, and that promise was broken. This was made much worse by the attitude of elected members of Plaid Cymru in the aftermath of the announcement. Very quickly, prominent members of the party came forward to pour scorn on the concept of a printed daily newspaper through the medium of Welsh, calling instead for a web presence for Welsh-medium journalism. Whilst we would obviously not wish to argue against any innovative plans to use the Welsh language in new technology, the hypocrisy here is clear. A daily newspaper in the minority language is an essential component of a people's identity and confidence as a nation; the European Union has stated that every language should have such a paper. Giving people the opportunity to read the news in Welsh would make a huge contribution to normalising the language for the people of Wales. It would be an encouragement and an inspiration to learners, and it would also be a step in the right direction in terms of a diversification within the Welsh and Welsh language journalism, much-needed in post-devolution Wales.

A large number of the population of Wales do not use the world wide web from one week to another, for various reasons including financial considerations and accessibility of services. These people are to be found in every social class and across the whole age range. What would be the use of a web newspaper for these people? We who spend our days in front of computers every day – we will be given the daily news in our own language (leaving aside for a second the fact that we already have a Welsh language online news service, Cymru'r Byd). Those who do not own a computer will have to make do without these things. This is another example of the government's inability to apply socialist principles to language matters.



## **SERIOUS ABOUT WELSH? THE OPPORTUNITY IS NOW.**

Many promises in the One Wales agreement could become historically important policies, but they must be executed with vigour and with conviction. Every area mentioned above must be considered carefully – they are all relevant to the future of the Welsh language. Many points could be implemented immediately. Many others call for a change in mindset and a breakaway from the traditional, conservative, British methods of governing, a change that will take more time.

The first step this Government must take in order to show that it is serious about the Welsh language is to ensure an effective and comprehensive Welsh Language Act. If this is not done, the government will be throwing away an excellent opportunity to make a permanent and historic difference to the identity of this nation. We will miss the opportunity to join with the nations of Europe, confident in their own abilities and unafraid of presenting robust policies to protect their languages. We have already seen the way in which the Labour Party was punished in the local elections, the Assembly elections and the UK elections by the electorate in the west and the north. This pressure is now on Plaid Cymru too, as was seen in the local elections. They now have the opportunity, the best opportunity since the party was established, to make a difference to the future of the Welsh language, to restore the language in Wales. This is an opportunity for politicians of all the parties – be they Plaid Cymru, Labour, Conservative or Liberal Democrat – to show that they are serious about the Welsh language.

The opportunity is now – we must seize it before it is lost.

*Hywel Griffiths*