



STRONG LANGUAGE

Does Wales need a new **Welsh language act** – and is direct protest the only way of getting it?

words: Cathryn Scott

It's not very often Gwenno Ffrancis finds herself agreeing with the first minister of Wales, Rhodri Morgan. The 19 year old is currently in her first year at Aberystwyth University, studying for a degree in politics and Welsh and has plenty to say about the various pieces of legislation introduced by the National Assembly for Wales.

But there is one point the two are firmly united on. When the Welsh Language Act 1993 was introduced by John Major's Conservative government, Morgan, who was then an MP, refused to vote for it, commenting, "The government calls this a Welsh Language Bill, but it would be better described as a Welsh Language Quango Bill. What one would call a Quango for the lingo ... We shall be abstaining tonight because we hope to have the opportunity before long to do the job properly. That will be done when we revisit the question of a Welsh language measure when we are in government."

That was 13 years ago, yet six years since the establishment of the National Assembly for Wales, and there has been no new Welsh language legislation. In fact, The Welsh Language Board, which was created by the 1993 legislation, is about to be scrapped, with its duties being absorbed by the Welsh Assembly Government as part of Morgan's 'bonfire of the Quangos'. Does this mean – as claimed by campaign group Cymdeithas Yr Iaith (The Welsh Language Society) – that the 1993 Welsh Language Act is effectively devoid of any real worth and that Wales is in dire need of new legislation?

Ffrancis certainly thinks so – two weeks ago she became the first member of Cymdeithas Yr Iaith to be jailed in 11 years when she was sent to a young offenders' institute in Gloucestershire for five days for refusing to pay a fine after being found guilty of damaging the property of the bilingual Radio Carmarthenshire.

That protest, in 2004, was specifically about the station's lack of Welsh language output, which has been the subject of an OFCOM investigation, and is proof, she says, that the current Welsh Language Act is not doing its job.

According to Steffan Cravos, chairman of Cymdeithas Yr Iaith, who was with Gwenno during the protest and is also refusing to pay his fine, the current Welsh language act "belongs in the bin of history because it is completely outdated".

"Since 1993 many public bodies [which would have been statutorily required to have Welsh language provision] have become privatised, and due to the revolution in telecommunications and internet the current language act is not relevant to the people of Wales," he says, adding that he sees examples every day that the law is not being enforced. "The current act states all public bodies should provide Welsh language services to an extent, but even with current legislation most public bodies don't keep the law. For instance, under the Welsh Language Act you are allowed to have a court case in Welsh. In Gwenno's initial case, Carmarthenshire could not provide a Welsh language hearing because it did not have Welsh language magistrates."

Cravos believes that the imminent demise of the Welsh Language Board means that now is the perfect opportunity to re-think ►



Welsh language provision. Cymdeithas Yr Iaith would like to see a Wales where "people can choose to lead their lives through the medium of either or both Welsh or English and where the presence of both languages is a source of pride and strength to us all". It hopes a new law would secure official status for Welsh, make it illegal to discriminate against the use of Welsh, establish a Welsh language commissioner and a National Council For The Welsh Language.

But the labour-led Welsh Assembly Government has so far refused to meet with Cymdeithas to discuss its campaign for such an act. "Alun Pugh [the minister for culture, sport and the Welsh language] told me point blank when I met him last year that they won't even think about revising the act," says Cravos.

This lack of communication, he explains, is why Cymdeithas has resorted to the controversial measure of non-violent direct action, such as the protest against Radio Carmarthenshire. Other demonstrations have included graffiti-ing public property and ripping English only labels off food produce. Cravos feels that without previous direct protest, "Wales would not have secured two Welsh language acts, bilingual road signs, and the television channel, S4C".

Although Alun Pugh was unfortunately not available to comment on his party's stance on the Welsh language before *The Big Issue Cymru* went to press, representatives from the Conservatives and Plaid Cymru told us that they are currently preparing manifestos on the Welsh language ahead of the Assembly elections in 2007.

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Lisa Francis, Assembly member and the Conservative's spokeswoman on the Welsh language, feels that the current legislation needs to be strengthened in order to allow people the option to live their lives through Welsh. She adds that bringing the Welsh language under Assembly control means "the language could once again become a political football".

Ieuan Wyn Jones, Plaid Cymru Assembly group leader, says the major flaw with the current act is "its failure to secure official status for the language" and that it doesn't give Welsh speakers any rights as such,

"simply an obligation on public bodies to comply with their schemes". He adds that there are no meaningful sanctions available to the Welsh Language Board when public bodies fail to deliver on the obligations they have entered into under their schemes. Plaid would like to see official status for the language and to widen the range of bodies which have to provide schemes, such as the now privatised utilities companies.

Meri Huws, chairwoman of the Welsh Language Board, believes that a reform of the current act, rather than a new act is what is needed – a common practice with old legislation. "We don't necessarily need new legislation," she says. "We need to look at what we have got and strengthen it. I'm not trying to defend the Welsh Language Board and its members, but we need to try to continue its work. We don't need to take a step backwards."

Whether what's needed is new legislation, or an update of the old laws, Francis is concerned that Labour has so far refused to discuss the issue. "I recently attended a forum in Cardiff to discuss this with Cymdeithas where all political parties were present but which the Labour party decided not to attend," she says. "I don't really understand their reasons for this. Even if they were to put forward a contrary viewpoint or to disagree with Cymdeithas it is insulting to this lobby group that they cannot be gracious enough to accept an invitation to engage in what was an open, friendly and democratic discussion.

"[This shows] a fundamental lack of understanding about what is a very important and emotive issue for thousands of people in our country."