
Duncan Campbell: Welsh language guerrillas win some battles in a long war

The most vociferous opposition to the official line at the Cardiff Eistedfodd this week has come from the young activists of *Cymdeithas yr Iath Gymraeg* (Welsh Language Society). In recent years this group has proved a point which politicians find unpalatable: direct action works. From outside Wales its activities have been portrayed as isolated acts of hooliganism. However, Monday's incident involving the destruction of the British Rail stand at the Eistedfodd, the opposition to the investiture of the Prince of Wales, the daubing and erasure of monolingual road signs and persistent guerrilla action against television transmitters – all have been part of a sincere and well-articulated political campaign.

The campaign is for the Welsh language, and also for Welsh culture, community and socialism. The movement for Welsh nationalism has grown considerably in the last 15 years, and *Cymdeithas yr Iath* has often been the vanguard for more respectable political activity, such as that of the national party, *Plaid Cymru*. The movement is aimed at overturning some of the effects of centuries of English domination, a process in which survival of culture is less an end in itself than a key means to economic and social reform.

The campaign has had successes, including last month's announcement that a fourth TV channel for Wales (in Welsh) would go ahead. Ironically this statement shortly followed an unsuccessful prosecution of two members of the society's senate for conspiracy to damage TV installations.

The plan for the fourth television channel is only one in a series of items that the Welsh Office is anxious to proclaim as Labour faces a perilous time at the polls. (*Plaid Cymru*, although still small, has won

surprising local success in the South Wales valleys, a traditional Labour stronghold.) Another such offering has of course been the Wales Devolution Act, now law, which will establish a Welsh assembly in Cardiff – subject to a referendum yet to take place. In addition, there are grants to the National Eistedfodd; two Welsh pre-school nursery playgroups; and the final report of the Council for the Welsh Language, issued at the end of June, which startled even the activists with a forthright statement that Wales should become a bilingual society, and a call for immediate official financial support for measures to restore the language. The report was well received. But it was promptly placed on the shelf to await the arrival of a Welsh Assembly to act on its recommendations.

The campaign for the Welsh language is the result of four centuries of 'internal colonisation' by England, accelerated in the last hundred years by the effective homogenisation of peoples and cultures demanded by the capitalist market economy. Welsh speakers still form about 20 per cent of the population, but their numbers have been on the decline because of the prevalence of English, and the infiltration and destruction of Welsh-speaking communities, due largely to English speaking immigrants. To be able to speak English was – until recently – the *sine qua non* of any ambitious Welsh, and this had been reinforced by the barbarous practice of 'Welsh Nots' – a wooden block worn round the neck, intended to disgrace a child caught speaking Welsh at school. Wales itself had no separate constitutional identity from England until the 1960s, and even now it is inevitably governed in accordance with the larger and sometimes conflicting interests of the British state.

As the language has been the evident victim of these pressures, its resurgence is accordingly important to economic and political change sought by *Cymdeithas yr Iath* and *Plaid Cymru*. Both movements are generally socialist, although they do not always use the term. Some fondly quote Jean-Paul Sartre's reflections on the Basque struggle: 'For a Basque to speak his own language is a revolutionary act.' For the Welsh to speak their own language again would be the first and basic step, they hope, of the reversal of English colonisation, and the establishment of a socialist society.

The preservation of local Welsh speaking communities is threatened by the economic power of the English, in the purchase of second homes or simply in outbidding local residents for private housing resources. Local authorities and language campaigners have attacked the second home trade as far as possible. One of the language movement offshoots, the Gwynedd Housing Association (*Cymdeithas Tai Gwynedd*) is specifically aiming to save the communities by a direct reversal of the process. The Association purchases and renovates the existing housing stock, and then accommodates Welsh speaking families – the addition of a few young adults and children is enough to keep the local school and shop open, and ensure the survival of the community.

Both *Plaid Cymru* and the direct action campaign of the language movement have roots in the 1920s and 30s. Plaid was formed in 1925, a year before the restoration of the gold standard ended coal exports and put Wales into a twenty-year depression. The first act of insurrection against England was in 1935, when a new bombing school was burned as a protest against Welsh communities being ousted by the military.



However, the next substantial move did not come until 20 years later, when Liverpool Corporation put a bill through parliament to have a reservoir built at Tryweryn in Merioneth, involving the evacuation and flooding of the village of the same name. The water was required to service the growing Merseyside industrial conurbation. No Welsh MP supported the bill, and the project met widespread hostility throughout Wales. *Plaid Cymru* abstained from direct action, after considerable debate, and the reservoir was built. But the incident blew the whistle on the claims of Welsh parliamentarians that the hope of Wales was to return people of their calibre to Westminster.

The next initiative came from Saunders Lewis, the playwright and lecturer who had been charged with conspiracy after the 1935 protest against the military. In a celebrated 1962 radio lecture on the 'Fate of the Language' he charged that *Plaid Cymru* had failed to work for the defence of the language: 'To restore the Welsh language in Wales is nothing less than a revolution. Only revolutionary methods will succeed'. The lecture secured his future as a folk hero of the Welsh nation, and led to the founding a year later of *Cymdeithas yr Iath Gymraeg*. It carries on the tradition of direct action which first flourished among the nuclear disarmament activists; other groups have long since abandoned such tactics.

The sustained campaign has had a direct effect on Welsh speakers themselves, creating a new determination to stay Welsh. It has brought about some acceptance (by no means total) of the methods used. Court appearances for refusing to comply with some monolingual English process, such as tax or TV licensing, or for painting out or removing monolingual road signs are so commonplace that the legal system has lost its power to intimidate. The numbers involved in the campaigns are substantial enough; in the 1970s, over two hundred people have been taken to court, and some imprisoned, over TV licence protests. At least the same number have put their names to a variety of activities against the broadcasting authorities.

The first campaign by the language society was a small but successful token of their plans. Their demand for a bilingual road tax disc was refused and a host of offenders

prosecuted until 600 people signed a declaration that they would not display the monolingual disc. The 'practical difficulties' which the authorities claimed were insuperable in introducing bilingual discs were quickly overcome. Similar campaigns for bilingual forms from other public authorities quickly followed. But a key question was the legal status of the Welsh language.

In short, the language had no legal status, as a 1963 official report on the language observed. Wales had been conquered by England in the 16th century, and laws relating to the union had required that the English government 'utterly extirpe alle the sinister usages and customes' of Wales. It was clearly laid down that English would be the language of those in official positions, and in the courts. With the growing nationalist pressure, this situation was reviewed, and a 1965 report (incidentally the last official report concerning Welsh language or culture not to have been published in Welsh) recommended legal status for the language. The Welsh Language Act was duly passed in 1967.

The most celebrated campaign of *Cymdeithas yr Iath Gymraeg* concerned English road signs, whose prominence and unavoidability in daily life made them a suitable target. The 'daubing' - painting out of offending signs - became famous and is still in evidence. The society periodically organised the collection and dumping of destroyed or painted signs on the steps of courts and local authority offices. Between two and three hundred people went to court over such offences. In 1971, the increasing involvement of prominent people and the presentation of a petition allowed the government gracefully to accede to the pressure and appoint a committee to investigate the matter. In 1972, the Bowen committee recommended bilingual signs throughout Wales, with Welsh given precedence.

Bilingual signs are now the rule rather than the exception, and there is no denying that the change was won as a result of the direct action by the language society. As in previous and subsequent campaigns, the activities involved were often initially seen as unduly fierce and hooliganesque. But since they were based on solid political issues, broad support followed, more traditional initiatives were eventually taken by 'respectable' figures and politicians, and the government went into action.

The campaign for Welsh broadcasting has run for ten years. A fully Welsh channel for Wales, under the control of a Welsh Broadcasting Authority, is now promised by the present government - although not until 1982, and then only for three hours a day. In the early 70s, many campaign members and sympathisers refused to pay for TV licences until a fully Welsh channel was planned. A campaign against the broadcasting authorities led to yet one more conspiracy trial, and four key figures were sent to prison. But the initiative once again entered the mainstream of traditional politics in 1973, when the Lord Mayor of Cardiff instigated a conference of Welsh organisations, which called for a fourth

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channel. This had followed an enormously active three-month campaign of disruption.

Again, the idea won approval in the reports of three successive government committees which examined broadcasting in Wales, in reports from 1974 up to last year's Annan report. But nothing was done to implement the recommendations; in the meantime, the government found time to plan for and implement an English TV service for the British Army of the Rhine, which would serve a linguistic minority group about one third the size of the Welsh speaking population, at equal or greater cost. Last year, *Cymdeithas yr Iath* resolved to intensify their campaign by destroying broadcasting equipment, a policy implemented for the first (and only) time at the Blaen Plwyf station near Aberystwyth last February. The present conspiracy charges against the current and immediate past chairmen of the society, Rhoddri Williams and Wynford James, result directly from this incident. A good section of the nationalist movement is in active or passive sympathy with them and the refusal of the Carmarthen jury to return a verdict may be evidence of the same support. The reported determination by Welsh Office authorities that the two should be retried highlights fears that the rule of law may be undermined if the nationalist movement continues its success with direct action.

Such politics are revolutionary – not, as

Plaid spokesman Emrys Roberts said, 'guns and violence, but responsible, direct action outside the ambit of normal respectable British party politics'. *Plaid*, he suggested, could have decided to back *Cymdeithas yr Iath* all the way, and accept the inevitable polarisation, or to evolve as a traditional political party. It has chosen the latter and might in time succeed Labour as the natural party of government in Wales.

Plaid Cymru has a manifesto at least as left-wing as the Labour Party. But the word 'socialism' can now be translated into Welsh with two separate meanings distinguishing the Labour corporate industrial state from other socialist ideas: *sosialaeth*, the common translation of 'socialism' – and *cymdeithasiaeth*, an 'ism' derived from the Welsh for society or community. *Cymdeithasiaeth* was a term first used by Welsh interpreters of early communist literature, and has been readopted by *Cymdeithas yr Iath* to signify that the fight to preserve Welsh is not separate from the emancipation of the Welsh working class. For their part, Welsh socialists are able to reject the simple economism that places their struggle simply at the level of the relations of production.

A section of the Labour Party, including notable left wingers like Neil Kinnock, still reject Welsh nationalism in favour of broader class solidarity, and have opposed plans for a Welsh assembly. At the grass-roots of the party, however, a different

view is held, indicated by such developments as the new significance of the Welsh TUC.

The Labour anti-nationalists' point, not without justification, to the rise of a new class within the nationalist movement, a Cardiff based Welsh speaking professional elite whose fortunes will rise with the language revival. Cardiff has its own version of Hampstead, and *Plaid Cymru's* attempts to widen its social, as well as geographical, basis of support do not allay suspicions that a party which sees England as the principal enemy of the Welsh will fail to recognise a new class of rulers arising within itself.

Those on the left of *Plaid Cymru*, whose main representative is Merioneth MP Dafydd Elis Thomas, hope to engineer a nation without the worst aspects of the nation state, and above all to avoid transferring a London administration unaltered to Cardiff. *Plaid* are poised to make a further evolutionary step in the general election, perhaps prising one or two further seats from the Labour machine. They should be a major party in the putative Welsh Assembly. At present, their politicians have a public ambivalence towards *Cymdeithas yr Iath*, recognising their successes without subscribing to their methods. Many of the present party workers and local councillors have in fact come from the activists' ranks. In the future, the continuing and evolving traditions of direct action make it unlikely that Welsh politics will lose its sharp edge.