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THE CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENTS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF WELSH LANGUAGE POLICY IN THE 1980s AND 1990s*

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ABSTRACT. *This article focuses on the advances made to safeguard the future of the Welsh language under the Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s. These advancements included the establishment of a Welsh language television channel, advancements in the field of Welsh language education, the formation of a Welsh Language Board, and, finally, the implementation of a new Welsh Language Act in 1993. Challenging popular assumptions regarding the nature of Conservative governance during this period, the article examines the background and context of these developments by highlighting the limitations of ‘Thatcherite’ dogma not only in ‘second order’ areas of policy, but also in a nation where Tory roots were not deeply embedded.*

Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative party is once again attracting attention. In the 1980s and 1990s, academic interest came largely from political scientists. Some were concerned with her domination of the cabinet and contribution to prime ministerial rule.¹ Others were more concerned with the New Right ideas supposedly underpinning her policies.² Historians focused more on the evolution of her approach from ideas and tendencies evident in the 1950s and earlier.³ For at least one observer, analysis has been dominated by ‘conviction commentators’ who, like the nation itself, were divided between fervent supporters of the prime minister and her equally staunch opponents.⁴ If the left perpetuated the notion of

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† Duncan Tanner, Professor of History at Bangor University, died in February 2010 as this article was nearing completion.

¹ See A. King, ‘Margaret Thatcher as a political leader’, in R. Skidelsky ed., *Thatcherism* (London, 1988); M. Foley, *The rise of the British presidency* (Manchester, 1993).

² See R. Levitas, *The ideology of the New Right* (London, 1986); D. S. King, *The New Right: politics, markets and citizenship* (London, 1987).

³ See especially E. H. H. Green, *Ideologies of Conservatism* (London, 2002), and *Thatcher* (London, 2006). Now that the archives for the 1970s are open, attention is shifting to the 1975–9 period.

⁴ G. K. Fry, ‘Commentary: “A bottomless pit of political surprise?” The political “mystery” of the Thatcher era’, *Twentieth-Century British History*, 21 (2010), pp. 540–57.

an inflexible dominatrix, Thatcher's allies fashioned their own illusions, including that of a leader 'cast in the mould' of leaders like Winston Churchill', the Iron Lady with cast iron views.⁵ On account of these shibboleths, combined with problems of accessing government papers, the possibility of more complex governing values has scarcely been debated. The main exceptions are studies by journalists of the 1984/5 miners' strike, which have used the Freedom of Information Act (FOI), implemented in 2005, to outline hitherto private discussions between the miners and the government,⁶ together with research on Thatcherite policies in Scotland.⁷

This article builds on, and extends, recent work on the period since 1979. It combines central government material for the 1980s, obtained through FOI requests, with materials from the papers of Tory politicians and other groups, together with interviews and other sources. It uses this material to examine how Margaret Thatcher's governments married strong ideological views with the need to gain support and deliver a workable programme once in office. It draws examples from areas of Conservative policy in Wales during the 1980s and 1990s, specifically the development of policies towards the Welsh language. These were evidently 'second order' issues compared to trade union power, taxation, or the role of the public sector, but they still raised issues of principle within the government. The government nevertheless produced a pragmatic and 'Welsh' response, which clashed with the party's economic values, the prime minister's 'English' instincts, and the government's subsequent record for intransigence which cannot be explained by the influences of Tory 'wets',⁸ nor by the existence of a 'Welsh Conservatism'.⁹

In explaining this development, the article builds on questions raised more generally by social scientists. Parliament and parties were already in decline as a source of policy when the Conservatives took office in 1979, with fairly stable policy networks and a policy community consisting of pressure groups, public sector organizations, professional groups, and civil servants exerting more influence.¹⁰ In opposition, Thatcherites had set out to challenge such influences and

⁵ See, for example, memo of 12 Dec. 1978 from Saatchi and Saatchi, Churchill College Cambridge (CCC), Thatcher MS THCR 2/7/1/27. Dennis Kavanagh has likened Thatcher's personal impact to that of Lenin.

⁶ F. Beckett and D. Hencke, *Marching to the fault line* (London, 2009).

⁷ D. Stewart, *The path to devolution and change: a political history of Scotland under Margaret Thatcher* (London, 2009); D. Torrance, *We in Scotland: Thatcherism in a cold climate* (Edinburgh, 2009).

⁸ 'Wets' was a term used in this period to describe members of Thatcher's governments who were opposed to her strict monetarist policies. It was also used, more generally, as a derogatory term to describe party moderates.

⁹ There are two studies of the Welsh Office (WO) in this period, neither based on primary sources: D. Griffiths, *Thatcherism and territorial politics: a Welsh case study* (Aldershot, 1996), and R. Deacon, *The governance of Wales: the Welsh Office and the policy process, 1964-1999* (Cardiff, 2002). On the weakness of 'Welsh Conservatism', see works by the current Conservative politician David Melding, *Have we been anti-Welsh? An essay on the Conservative party and the Welsh nation* (Barry, 2005), and *Devolution: the battle lost and won* (Barry, 2005).

¹⁰ This approach is usefully summarized in D. Judge, *The parliamentary state* (London, 1993).

the consensus. They wanted to circumvent and constrain the influence of the policy ‘establishment’ by using think-tanks and special advisers to develop ideas, together with quasi-autonomous, non-governmental organizations (quangos) and other bodies to implement such ideas.¹¹ As a result of this alienation of old policy communities and the growth of new pressure groups in the 1980s and 1990s, the government faced new pressures from within civil society.¹² We know little of how this process worked. Although political scientists recognize that ‘old’ and ‘new’ policy processes clashed across Europe in the 1980s and 1990s, they have been primarily concerned with the creation of new policy networks from the 1990s onwards.¹³ The idea that Thatcher’s government may have been obliged to compromise by new political forces merits more attention than it has hitherto received.

This article argues that the Conservative party’s capacity to implement ideologically ‘Thatcherite’ policies in Wales was undermined by governing weaknesses stemming from changes in the pattern of governance. The Conservatives did not have a party structure, civil service, or new policy network that could deliver its policies in Wales. It did not control local government and Welsh civil servants were often unsympathetic to its aims.¹⁴ The government slowly developed a ‘new’ governing structure based largely on quangos, but those appointed to such organizations – often, but not exclusively, Conservatives – sometimes acted against the government’s wishes. The government was also vulnerable to pressure both from public opinion and from within a Welsh civic and political elite, especially when opposition political campaigning contested the legitimacy of (‘English’) Tory rule. The Conservative party at British level, like many Welsh Tories, succumbed to such pressure only very reluctantly because it involved diluting strongly held operational principles. The result was cultural policies which were hardly ‘Thatcherite’, and a governing process which did not match Thatcherite ideals.

I

The Conservative party is not a particularly ‘Welsh’ organization. In the 1940s, it tried desperately to overcome its image as the ‘English

¹¹ See, for example, M. Thatcher, *The Downing Street years* (London, 1993); J. Hoskyns, *Just in time: inside the Thatcher revolution* (London, 2000); A. Sherman, *Paradoxes of power: reflections on the Thatcher interlude* (Exeter, 2005).

¹² Work on this process in Britain has largely focused on the period before 1979; material on Germany is more useful. See, for example, Christoph Gusy and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, eds., *Inklusion und Partizipation: Politische Kommunikation im historischen Wandel* (Frankfurt am Main, 2005); Hans-Joachim Lauth and Ulrike Liebert, eds., *Im Schatten demokratischer Legitimität: informelle Institutionen und politische Partizipation im interkulturellen Demokratievergleich* (Opladen, 1999). We are grateful to Alexander Sedlmaier of Bangor University for these references.

¹³ See, for example, J. Richardson, ‘Government, interest groups and policy change’, *Political Studies*, 48 (2000), pp. 1006–25.

¹⁴ For Thatcher’s view of civil servants, Thatcher, *Downing Street years*, pp. 46–7.

party'.¹⁵ There were certainly Welsh speaking Conservatives, especially in agricultural areas, whose support for rural life and communities included the preservation of those communities' culture and language. In 1953, a report on linguistic decline amongst second-language Welsh speakers produced a response from Conservative ministers,¹⁶ who proclaimed their support for Welsh language education whilst aiming to 'give no offence to forces that may be opposed to it'. The government allowed local authorities to determine the language of educational instruction in their schools, but also gave parents the right to obtain exemption for their children under the 1944 Education Act.¹⁷ Many schools in Welsh speaking areas taught in English, especially at secondary level, since education in Welsh beyond primary level was often seen as either unnecessary or a handicap. In anglicized areas, such as Newport in the south-east, Welsh had almost been eliminated as a language of instruction by the late 1950s and there was vocal opposition to attempts at its resuscitation. In 1958, for example, Lord Raglan opposed attempts to sustain the 'moribund' Welsh language, attacking it as a mechanism for generating anti-Englishness.¹⁸

In the 1960s, electoral considerations generated a reconsideration of the party's approach. A private Conservative opinion poll in 1966 showed that 73 per cent of voters supported stemming the decline of the Welsh language. Although 50 per cent supported greater use of Welsh in education, when asked which two languages should be taught in schools, only 6 per cent chose Welsh and English. There were similar responses to questions on the relative importance of buildings and teachers compared to expenditure on Welsh language tuition. Support for Welsh language policies was matched by concerns over the costs and consequences of such initiatives.¹⁹

The appointment of Margaret Thatcher as party leader in 1975 was unlikely to change this approach. Thatcher was a proudly 'English' prime minister: Scotland and Wales were perceived to be bastions of socialism, where the political culture and popular expectations needed to be challenged fundamentally. Devolution was a device for resisting Thatcher's efforts to undermine the post-war socialist system.²⁰ Wales and Scotland remained integral parts of Britain. Under Thatcher, discussions of party policy on Welsh devolution in the later 1970s were generally led by William Whitelaw, Francis Pym, and the party's

¹⁵ M. Cragoe, '“We like local patriotism”: the Conservative party and the discourse of decentralisation, 1947–1951', *English Historical Review*, 122 (2007), pp. 965–85.

¹⁶ Wales circular 15, 24 Feb. 1953 reporting on the Central Advisory Council on Education (Wales) report, 'The place of Welsh and English in the schools of Wales', The National Archives (TNA), BD 24/178.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, permanent secretary of the Welsh Department, address in Dublin, 9 Dec. 1957.

¹⁸ Lord Raglan, 'I take my stand', *Wales*, 2 (1958), pp. 15–19. We are grateful to Dinah Evans of Bangor University for this reference.

¹⁹ Opinion Research Centre poll, 'Special attitudes in Scotland, Wales and the West Country' (1966), Bodleian Library, Oxford (BLO), Conservative Party Archive, CCO 180/29/1/1.

²⁰ Stewart, *The path to devolution*, p. 215.

constitutional expert, Nevil Johnson, rather than by its Welsh Policy Group.²¹ Welsh Tories focused on traditional Tory interests. Nicholas Edwards, the shadow Welsh secretary, suggested increasing Welsh Office powers over agriculture, since the party was ‘anxious to make political progress’ in rural areas and increased powers would thereby address the ‘reasonable’ aspirations of the Farmers’ Union of Wales. Edwards wanted to avoid the ‘anti-Welsh’ tag, but had little to say about Welsh language policy.²² Indeed, Edwards’s role was to highlight the ‘tough and unpleasant acts of personal and national self-discipline and sacrifice that are needed to restore Britain and Wales to economic and political health’.²³ Party members in Edwards’s constituency and in other Welsh seats argued that Welsh speakers had already ‘taken over’ the BBC ‘and of course the Universities’.²⁴ There was little support for an accommodation with Welshness from this source – or from others. The party’s Machinery of Government Committee focused on reforming the civil service and reducing the scale of the ‘Public Service State’. The committee believed in the ‘devolution of decisions’, but preferably ‘to individuals and if necessary to local government’, rather than to Wales as a nation.²⁵ It wanted to challenge the institutions which supported ‘socialism’. Top of the list was reform of the civil service; devolution did not feature at all.

Recently opened files from the 1970s confirm Thatcher’s reputation as an ardent unionist, the most obvious manifestation of which was her attitude to devolution. When she replaced Edward Heath as Conservative leader, many Conservatives expected robust opposition to Labour’s devolution proposals. In Scotland, she wanted to join in the ‘non-political’ ‘Scotland is British’ campaign and robustly defend the Union, but pragmatically declined to participate.²⁶ Thatcher retained the party’s formal commitment to Alec Douglas-Home’s plan for a directly elected Scottish assembly, but claimed that Labour’s bill would create devolution ‘on the wrong lines’ and hence she opposed it vigorously.²⁷ There were some resignations as a result, but whilst Tory devolutionists like Lord Hailsham became ‘more and more out of sympathy with the party’, he and others remained loyal to the government.²⁸ Thatcher was more vocal in her opposition to the creation of a Welsh assembly. As she wrote privately in 1975, such an assembly would inevitably be dominated ‘by the Labour machines

²¹ Nicholas Edwards to Keith Joseph, 16 June 1975, BLO, Keith Joseph papers 33/1.

²² Nicholas Edwards, ‘Responsibility for agriculture in Wales’, 5 May 1976, BLO, Conservative Party Archive. LCC/76/109.

²³ Press release, 3 Nov. 1975, National Library of Wales (NLW), Aberystwyth, Lord Crickhowell papers, 2/4.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, See, for example, Captain E. W. Roberts (Fishguard) to Nicholas Edwards, and P. Goodsal (Clwyd) to Nicholas Edwards, 2 Nov. and 2 Dec. 1975.

²⁵ Policy Group on the Machinery of Government, interim report (by J. L. Barnes), 9 May 1977, CCC, Thatcher papers, 2/6/1/49.

²⁶ Thatcher to Charles Ball, (n.d. but Feb. 1978), CCC, Thatcher papers, 2/6/1/89.

²⁷ Thatcher to Gould, 5 Jan. 1977, CCC, Thatcher papers, 2/6/1/88.

²⁸ Hailsham to A. Maude, 12 Dec. 1976 (unsent), CCC, Hailsham papers.

of Gwent and Glamorgan', whose past performance did not justify giving an assembly 'vast powers and patronage'. Having an assembly would also turn the secretary of state for Wales into its 'messenger boy'.²⁹ There was little pressure from Thatcher's team to court opinion and become more sympathetic to distinctive Welsh cultural claims. Tory policies on trade unions, nationalization, crime, and the economy were demonstrably popular, party officials argued, even in Wales, where the 'great majority of the population realize how closely their interests are tied up with the rest of the United Kingdom'.³⁰ Whilst opinion was more favourable to devolution in Scotland, Thatcher's pollsters advised her against making an issue of devolution when other issues, such as housing and vandalism, played in their favour.³¹

Intervening to protect the Welsh language – as required by nationalist protesters – did not fit with the Thatcherite view that people should decide their own fate (or the fate of their culture). The party's Welsh manifesto in 1979 made its position abundantly clear: 'the problems of Wales', it proclaimed, were 'very much those of the United Kingdom as a whole'. The 'special characteristics' of Wales, the 'Welsh predicament', were all caused by the 'bleak inheritance' bequeathed by socialism. The Welsh language was discussed mainly in terms of educational provision, and proclaimed a matter of individual choice. Attention was, however, focused on the 'sadly misguided' people attempting 'to create an atmosphere of hatred and contempt for English influences' by seeking to make Welsh language education compulsory.³²

The 1979 election results demonstrated the importance of British, rather than Welsh, concerns. The Conservatives won an additional six parliamentary seats at the 1979 general election in Scotland. In Wales, the party gained proportionally more votes than in Scotland, nearly a third of the total, despite obtaining fewer seats. Similarly, the referenda on devolution in March 1979 did not produce a sufficiently large majority in Scotland for legislation to be enacted and, in Wales, devolution was also defeated because it attracted less than a quarter of the popular vote.³³

These facts are often passed over on account of subsequent events. The Conservatives' electoral position was gradually eroded, until in 1997 not a single Conservative MP was returned in either Wales or Scotland. In the intervening period, Conservative policies inadvertently enhanced support for devolution,

²⁹ Marginal comments on a devolution briefing, n.d. but Nov. 1975, CCC, Thatcher papers, 2/6/90.

³⁰ Briefing by C. Ogg on a Marplan poll of 20 Oct. 1976, CCC, Thatcher papers, 2/7/1/85; R. Ryder to A. S. Garner, 31 Mar. 1977, CCC, Thatcher papers, 2/6/1/274; for Welsh interests, briefing for Margaret Thatcher by D. Dear, 15 May 1975, CCC, Thatcher papers, 2/6/1/91.

³¹ The report is with K. Britto to R. Ryder, 29 June 1978, CCC, Thatcher papers, 2/6/1/89.

³² *Conservative Manifesto for Wales 1979*.

³³ In the 1979 referenda on 1 Mar. 1979, Scottish voters approved devolution by a margin of 52 to 48 per cent. However, only 32.9 per cent of the total electorate voted in favour, 7.1 per cent short of the 40 per cent margin required for the legislation to progress. In Wales, only one fifth of voters supported the proposal.

which gained majority support in Wales and Scotland in further referenda on devolution in 1997.³⁴ The run-down of coalmining and other heavy industries, introduction of the so-called ‘poll tax’, combined with assaults on Scottish educational differences, created an impression that Thatcherism was, at best, the imposition of uniformity with England and, at worst, English colonialism. In Wales, being passionately anti-Conservative became a defining feature of Welsh national identity.³⁵ Paradoxically, however, Conservative policy on the Welsh language during the same period was progressive and interventionist and became the cornerstone of subsequent Welsh language policy. Indeed, a similar combination of approaches has been used to support minority languages around the world.³⁶ Such policies were the subsidized development of Welsh language television through the formation of the Welsh ‘fourth’ television channel; the establishment of a statutory Welsh Language Board (WLB) in 1988, with a remit to protect and develop the Welsh language; the 1988 Education Reform Act, which led gradually to the Welsh language becoming a compulsory part of the school curriculum and, finally, the passing of a Welsh Language Act in 1993, which placed an onus on the public sector to treat Welsh and English equally.

Little has been written on Conservative policy by historians of the Welsh language,³⁷ whilst socio-linguists, sociologists, and geographers have tended to focus more on the implications and impact of language policy than on the reasoning behind the legislation.³⁸ Most Welsh political scientists have become preoccupied with the post-devolution era, seldom venturing back to the situation before New Labour’s constitutional changes. Conservative secretaries of state for Wales and their political allies have, however, been keen to take the credit for these initiatives, alongside other departures from Thatcherite policies. Whilst playing down differences between his views and those of Thatcher, Nicholas Edwards himself has stressed how his policies as Welsh secretary of state between 1979 and 1987 laid foundations for subsequently distinctive Welsh policy decisions.³⁹ His successor, Peter Walker, goes further in arguing that he constructed anti-Thatcherite Welsh policies because he disagreed with Thatcher’s views. Walker

³⁴ In the 1997 referenda, 74.3 per cent of Scottish voters and 50.3 per cent of Welsh voters supported the government’s proposals.

³⁵ R. W. Jones, R. Scully, and D. Trystan, ‘Why the Conservatives do (even) worse in Wales?’, in L. Bennie, C. Rallings, J. Tonge, and P. Webb, eds., *British parties and elections review*, XII (London, 2002), p. 243.

³⁶ See C. H. Williams, ‘Articulating the horizons of Welsh’, in C. H. Williams, ed., *Language and governance* (Cardiff, 2007).

³⁷ For a partial exception, J. G. Jones, ‘The attitude of political parties towards the Welsh language’, in G. H. Jenkins and M. A. Williams, eds., *Let’s do our best for the ancient tongue: the Welsh language in the twentieth century* (Cardiff, 2000), pp. 249–77.

³⁸ Examples include J. Aitchison and H. Carter, *A geography of the Welsh language, 1961–1991* (Cardiff, 1994); G. Williams and D. Morris, *Language planning and language use: Welsh in a global age* (Cardiff, 2000), and C. H. Williams, ‘Iaith Pawb: the doctrine of plenary inclusion’, *Contemporary Wales*, 17 (2005), pp. 1–28; C. H. Williams, *Called unto liberty: on language and nationalism* (Clevedon, 1994), and *Linguistic minorities in democratic context* (Basingstoke, 2007).

³⁹ N. Crickhowell, *Westminster, Wales and water* (Cardiff, 1999).

suggests that he was appointed secretary of state for Wales because he was prepared to challenge Thatcherite economic policies and only accepted the job on the condition that he could do it 'his way'; even Labour trade unionists felt that Walker's was a very different style of leadership from that of the prime minister.⁴⁰ The minister of state throughout this period, Wyn Roberts, has also stressed his contribution as the only Welsh speaker in the governing group.⁴¹

Such views seriously overstate the influence of government ministers on the direction of policy, as opposed to its detail or timing. As Dylan Griffiths has rightly concluded in a little-read contemporary account of the Welsh Office, the 'main source of policy ideas for the Welsh Office is not Wales itself but the centre, the Cabinet, the prime minister, Whitehall and Westminster'.⁴² Even where a secretary of state entertained an alternative vision, their powers were limited, whilst all of the Welsh secretaries of state were, to varying degrees, sympathetic towards their government's policies during this period, irrespective of subsequent claims or protestations. Nor could secretaries of state depend on the Welsh Conservative party to produce a 'wet' alternative, since it had neither the capacity nor the inclination to do so. Welsh secretaries of state did not 'lead' Welsh Tories with policies substantially different from the national line; indeed, when individual Welsh Tory MPs disagreed with the prime minister, the party in Wales rallied to its national leader. The erstwhile chair of the Welsh Conservative party, Beata Brookes, has described the dissident Welsh MP, Anthony Meyer, who challenged Thatcher for the party leadership, as 'never really a true Conservative' and one of the 'old school', a friend of Edward Heath's who may have resented taking orders from a woman and thus 'wanted to vent his hatred by demeaning her'. Brookes confesses to having been 'a Thatcher fan' and a 'total supporter of Margaret Thatcher', who respected her courage, strength, and single-mindedness both as a woman and as a leader. Wyn Roberts claims to have objected to some Thatcherite policies, such as the poll tax, but 'still felt bound to Margaret by a [sic] umbilical cord' and 'never wavered in my support for her'.⁴³ Both Walker and David Hunt, who succeeded Walker in 1990, were imported to the Welsh Office from outside Wales, and were more inclined than Edwards to take advice on Welsh concerns. Nonetheless, there is nothing to suggest the existence of a clear Tory policy or a 'vision' for Wales. Interventions by individual Welsh Tories *were* influential at particular moments, but the pressure of

⁴⁰ P. Walker, *Staying power: an autobiography* (London, 1991), p. 203; D. Jenkins, 'Sleeping with the enemy: trades unions in Wales during the Thatcher years', Welsh Political Archive lecture, National Library of Wales, 2007.

⁴¹ Lord Roberts of Conwy, *Right from the start* (Cardiff, 2006); Geraint Morgan MP, 'How Welsh are the Welsh Conservatives?', *Planet*, 54 (Dec. 1985/Jan. 1986), pp. 60–5.

⁴² Griffiths, *Thatcherism*, p. 164.

⁴³ Interview with Beata Brookes, Cymru 2000 archive, Bangor University, and Roberts, *Right from the start*, p. 237; Meyer stood against Thatcher for the leadership of the party in 1989. See his appropriately titled memoir, *Stand up and be counted* (London, 1990).

external influences was easily as significant as pressure from within the Conservative party in explaining the policies that were introduced.

II

To appreciate such pressures, we need to understand the position of the Welsh language by the 1970s. Concern for the fate of the Welsh language had grown since the 1920s, but campaigning groups felt that worries over its decline had escalated substantially during the 1930s and 1940s. Census figures in 1951 showed such fears to be valid, with the number of Welsh speakers having fallen to 28.9 per cent (from 36.8 per cent in 1931). The Welsh nationalist party, Plaid Cymru, was joined by a series of politically unaligned civic figures to become part of a 'liberal nationalist' tradition which was a feature of the governing polity.⁴⁴ By the 1950s, the Welsh Boards of Health and Education contained many politically motivated Welshmen like Ben Bowen Thomas, permanent secretary of the Welsh Board of Education, whose circulars enabled local authorities to provide Welsh language education. In Welsh speaking areas, there was also pressure from parish councils and other bodies for the provision of official forms and literature in the Welsh language.⁴⁵ Census figures in 1961 showed, however, that these quiet pressures had been unsuccessful since the proportion of Welsh speakers had fallen still further to just 26 per cent.⁴⁶

What followed was an iconic moment in nationalist mythology. In 1962, a radio broadcast by one of the founders of Plaid Cymru, Saunders Lewis, explicitly addressed these figures. Lewis called for a crusading movement of popular activism and protest which led directly to the formation of Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg (the Welsh Language Society), and to a decade of campaigns in favour of bilingual road signs and other changes, based around direct action rather than parliamentary politics.⁴⁷ From the 1950s onwards, the leader of Plaid Cymru, Gwynfor Evans, had also put the language campaign at the forefront of his many populist interventions.⁴⁸ In 1963, the Conservative government initiated an official inquiry to 'clarify the legal status of the Welsh language' and to 'consider whether any changes in the law ought to be made'. When an official report of the committee's findings was published in 1965, it recommended that the status of the Welsh language for legal and administrative purposes should be

⁴⁴ W. Griffith, 'Devolutionist tendencies in Wales, 1885–1914', in D. Tanner, C. Williams, W. P. Griffith, and A. Edwards, eds., *Debating nationhood and governance in Britain, 1885–1930* (Manchester, 2006), pp. 89–118.

⁴⁵ See M. E. Wiliam, 'Hunaniaeth a Moderneiddio yng Nghymru, c.1950–1962: Yr ymadwaith diwylliannol rhwng "Prydeindod" a "Chymreictod", gyda sylw penodol i ogledd ddwyrain Cymru', (Ph.D. thesis, Bangor, 2008), pp. 192–270. Forms included applications for vehicle excise duty and television licences.

⁴⁶ Aitcheson and Carter, *A geography*, p. 50.

⁴⁷ P. Merrimen and R. Jones, 'Symbols of justice: the Welsh Language Society's campaign for bilingual road signs in Wales, 1967–1980', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 35 (2009), pp. 350–75; for the Welsh Language Society, D. Phillips, *Trey Ddulliau Chwyldro...? Hanes Cymdeithas yr Iaith 1962–1992* (Llandysul, 1998).

⁴⁸ R. Evans, *Gwynfor Evans: portrait of a patriot* (Talybont, 2008).

raised and clarified.⁴⁹ The incoming Labour government responded to the report by passing a Welsh Language Act in 1967 which guaranteed the right to use Welsh more widely in court and also provided for its use in public administration. Despite this new legislation, together with increased funding for Welsh language nurseries, schools, and books, the proportion of Welsh speakers was nevertheless falling unchecked as census figures in 1971 again revealed.⁵⁰ The Welsh language campaigns led to a sharp political response. During the 1979 Welsh devolution referendum campaign, the Labour MP, Leo Abse, whipped up fears that devolution would privilege Welsh speakers from north Wales in employment terms. If Wales was a nation, it was perhaps a nation divided by language.⁵¹

By 1980, Edwards was claiming that the Conservatives had done more than any other government administration to address the decline of the Welsh language. Edwards cited support for Welsh language schools in the 1950s, the formation of committees which had reported positively on the need for a Welsh language act and on bilingual road signs in the 1960s, together with Peter Thomas's role in forming the 'Council for the Welsh language' in the 1970s. Edwards nevertheless detected an 'unreality' about language activists and their support for a universal bilingualism. He stressed 'individual and local choice', the importance of voluntary bodies in developing demand for Welsh in education, and 'the over-riding need to act in accordance with the wishes and desires of the people of Wales'.⁵² By contrast, what became the four planks of language legislation (the fourth channel, the establishment of the WLB, Welsh education provision, and a Welsh Language Act) in fact emerged through a mixture of influences, cumulatively exposing a lack of a vision, or method, for governing Wales.

The disjunction between Edwards's thoughts and the ideas of those concerned primarily with Welsh language and culture became evident during the development of the first of these episodes: the conflict over a Welsh language 'fourth' television channel in 1980–2. The problems that emerged proved a harsh learning experience for the Conservatives, and hence the fourth channel debate had a much larger impact. In a rare concession to Welsh opinion, the Conservative party manifesto of 1979 had stated that in Wales, the equivalent of Channel 4 in England would contain all the Welsh language programming when the new fourth channel started. Shortly after the general election, however, the home secretary, Whitelaw, insisted that this commitment be rescinded. Instead, Welsh

⁴⁹ WO, *Legal status of the Welsh language: report of the committee under the chairmanship of Sir David Hughes Parry, Q.C., LL. D., D. C. L., 1963–65* (HMSO, 1965).

⁵⁰ The 1971 census revealed that the number of Welsh speakers had fallen by 5.1 per cent in the space of a decade (from 26.0 per cent in 1961 to 20.9 per cent).

⁵¹ See D. Foulkes, J. B. Jones, and R. A. Wilford, eds., *The Welsh veto: the Wales Act 1978 and the referendum* (Cardiff, 1983), pp. 125–6.

⁵² 'The Welsh language: a commitment and challenge: the government's policy for the Welsh language.' Speech by Nicholas Edwards to Gwynedd County Council Llanrwst, 15 Apr. 1980, NLW, Crickhowell papers 2–7.

language programming was to be spread across both the BBC and ITV. The Tories' surprisingly substantial election victory was seen as an opportunity to rescind a pragmatic manifesto commitment.⁵³ The decision was decreed by the home secretary and the chancellor of the exchequer; Edwards was not even consulted. Whitelaw argued that a single channel would have required a huge subsidy; at the Treasury, John Biffen also argued that a 'Welsh' channel would be a commercial liability.⁵⁴ Westminster attitudes may have been influenced by pressures from both HTV⁵⁵ and the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA), who were both concerned about the risk of running a service with little mass appeal if the new channel – Sianel Pedwar Cymru (S4C) (Channel Four Wales) – collapsed. Commercial channels that were financially self-sufficient now became a part of the Conservative's cultural hostility to what they perceived to be a bloated and distant public sector. If the Conservatives were worried that people would 'turn their aerials to English stations' to avoid receiving Welsh language programmes,⁵⁶ rank-and-file Tories from Pembrokeshire (Edwards's constituency) voiced distaste at this prospect in the disdainful tones of an emphatically English Conservatism.

The Home Office policy shift was sprung on the Welsh Office in July 1979. Edwards himself complained bitterly to Whitelaw, writing that he was 'frankly astonished' to receive proposals 'without any consultation with me or my Department', and again observing that the proposals 'will create the most profound political problems in Wales'.⁵⁷ It was, however, the political obstacles and the personal insult to which he objected, rather than the policy. The senior Welsh Office civil servant, Dr R. H. Jones, shared Edwards's irritation, complaining that the secretary of state had been presented with a 'fait accompli' which was 'intolerable'. Jones argued, however, that, if adopted, the proposals would 'cause considerable embarrassment', prompting calls for a pragmatic response, rather than one which accorded with principles developed by the party in opposition.

Welsh Conservative MPs were sensitive to such claims, having developed new hopes of building support in Wales following the election victory in 1979. In January 1980, the Welsh speaking Conservative MP, Geraint Morgan, was part of a cross-party delegation representing a 'large body of opinion in Wales' that wanted a 'fourth channel'. Morgan argued that 'many people in Wales had voted

⁵³ Evans, *Gwynfor Evans*, p. 504 n. 30.

⁵⁴ J. Biffen to W. Whitelaw, 2 Nov. 1979, NLW Crickhowell MS 2-7, WO website, FOI releases. www.walesoffice.gov.uk/2005/foi/foi-20050616.html, accessed on 7 Sept. 2010. Where documents released under FOI have since been made available on the Wales Office website we have used the web address.

⁵⁵ HTV was an independent television company, formed in 1970. The company's name derived from its predecessor, Harlech Television. The company was re-named ITV West and Wales in 2006.

⁵⁶ 'Note of a meeting between the secretary of state and Lady Plowden (chairman, IBA)', 30 July 1979, WO website, FOI releases. www.walesoffice.gov.uk/2005/foi/foi-20050616.html, accessed on 7 Sept. 2010.

⁵⁷ R. H. Jones to P.J. Hosegood, 16 July 1979, TNA, BD 25/327; Nicholas Edwards to Willie Whitelaw, n.d., cited in Evans, *Gwynfor Evans*, p. 399.

for the Conservative party in the belief that they would institute a Welsh language channel'.⁵⁸ Keith Best, MP for Anglesey, with its large Welsh speaking population, and various Tory peers, also indicated that they could not accept party policy, as did the Welsh select committee, with its chair, Leo Abse, transformed into an unlikely defender of the Welsh language.⁵⁹

The most dramatic protest was Gwynfor Evans's statement that he would fast until the government relented or he died. Thatcher herself was temperamentally opposed to conceding in such circumstances; public protests on language and other issues by Welsh demonstrators were common, and simply reinforced determination.⁶⁰ Edwards agreed, claiming that it was 'impossible to surrender to such blackmail'.⁶¹ He added that 'apart from a powerful articulate minority, there was no great interest in the subject' – which made the 'blackmail' even less persuasive.⁶²

Various efforts were made to dissuade Evans from seeking, as officials put it, 'the martyr's crown'.⁶³ Keen to extend the party's basis of support, Plaid Cymru MPs Dafydd Elis Thomas and Dafydd Wigley objected to the ways in which language was again dominating their party's image and policy and privately suggested a committee to 'join up' provision spread over two television channels and to oversee its quality.⁶⁴ Internal pressure was also mobilized. In September 1980, a delegation of civic leaders, including Cledwyn Hughes, Labour's secretary of state for Wales 1966–8 and now a member of the Lords, Goronwy Daniels (vice chancellor of Aberystwyth University and, politically, a Liberal), and the archbishop of Wales, offered a face-saving compromise: a single channel for a two-year trial period.⁶⁵ Such internal pressure was, however, presented as a decisive intervention by the government. In fact, Edwards had been warned by one senior Welsh Office figure that 'the tide of public opinion' was turning against the

⁵⁸ 'Note of a meeting held on 21 Jan. 1980, Welsh Language Broadcasting', WO website, FOI releases, www.walesoffice.gov.uk/2005/06/16/establishment-of-s4c-1979-81/, accessed on 7 Sept. 2010.

⁵⁹ Evans, *Gwynfor Evans*, p. 420.

⁶⁰ For examples, *Western Mail*, 25 Sept. 1981, 14 June 1983. Nicholas Edwards was regularly pelted with rotten eggs. See e.g. *Cambrian News*, 9 Mar. 1984; *Daily Post*, 12 Mar. 1984; *Western Mail*, 3 and 30 Mar. 1984; *Daily Telegraph*, 3 Mar. 1984. This helped ensure that they felt like colonial rulers in an inhospitably radical land.

⁶¹ 'Note of a meeting held on 21 Jan. 1980, Welsh language broadcasting', and 'Note of a meeting on Fourth Channel/Welsh Language-Broadcasting Bill' 1 July 1980, WO website, FOI releases, www.walesoffice.gov.uk/2005/06/16/establishment-of-s4c-1979-81/, accessed on 7 Sept. 2010.

⁶² 'Note of a meeting held on 29 July 1980: Welsh Language Broadcasting', www.walesoffice.gov.uk/2005/06/16/establishment-of-s4c-1979-81/, accessed on 7 Sept. 2010.

⁶³ WO official (name redacted), 'Confidential memorandum for the secretary of state', 9 Sept. 1980, www.walesoffice.gov.uk/2005/06/16/establishment-of-s4c-1979-81/, accessed on 7 Sept. 2010.

⁶⁴ 'Confidential minute' (author's name redacted), 28 May 1980, and 'Note of a meeting on Fourth channel/Welsh language broadcasting', 27 June 1980, www.walesoffice.gov.uk/2005/06/16/establishment-of-s4c-1979-81/, accessed on 7 Sept. 2010.

⁶⁵ 'Deputation on Welsh language broadcasting', 9 Sept. 1980, www.walesoffice.gov.uk/2005/06/16/establishment-of-s4c-1979-81/, accessed on 7 Sept. 2010. See also Nicholas Edwards interview, Cymru 2000 archive, Bangor University.

government.⁶⁶ Whitelaw informed Thatcher that ‘opinion in the Conservative party in Wales was now firmly in favour of going back to the manifesto positions’.⁶⁷ Hence the decision was reluctantly reversed. This distinctly un-Thatcherite response was possible partly because Wales was not particularly important to the government, and partly because ‘moderate’ Welsh speaking Wales was seen as a potential ally and moderates apparently saw government policy as unreasonable.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, it proved a difficult and embarrassing experience for a party whose image was based on remaining resolute. This reversal was not due to ‘wets’ in London or Cardiff obstructing Thatcher, since most of those involved supported her stance. Rather, it was a conscious decision by Thatcherites to accommodate the opposition.

III

A second decisive episode occurred after the Conservatives’ second general election victory in 1983, when academic analysis and contemporary commentary suggest that the prime minister’s hold on power had strengthened. The government had already moved to restrict the financial powers of local government in Wales, as elsewhere. Despite the prime minister’s determined confrontation with coalminers during the 1984/5 strike, concessions on the Welsh language nevertheless continued. In this type of area, the party did not have the capacity to establish quangos which it could control, whilst Welsh civil society – and traditional areas of influence like the civil service – continued to exert a strong influence. Although Tories could become the voice of such movements and hoped to tame them, they were never their masters.

Concerns over the Welsh language evident in the early 1980s became even more pronounced after publication of census figures in 1981 showed a further decline (to 18.9 per cent) in the number of Welsh speakers. There were two immediate demands for legislation; both proposed a new and more demanding Welsh Language Act with a statutory body to support and enforce such an act. The first proposal came from the Labour peer, Lord Prys Davies, in 1985 and the second was a 10 minute bill to amend the 1967 Welsh Language Act, which was introduced by Dafydd Wigley in 1986, the latter attracting cross-party support, including Conservative MPs.

Prys Davies initially formed a working party to consider the position of the Welsh language.⁶⁹ Produced in 1985, the working party’s report identified some

⁶⁶ ‘Note of a meeting held on 21 January 1980, Welsh Language Broadcasting’, www.walesoffice.gov.uk/2005/06/16/establishment-of-s4c-1979-81/, accessed on 7 Sept. 2010; WO official (name redacted) to secretary of state, 9 Sept. 1980, www.walesoffice.gov.uk/2005/06/16/establishment-of-s4c-1979-81/, accessed on 7 Sept. 2010.

⁶⁷ ‘Private secretary Home Office to No. 10 Downing Street’, 15 Sept. 1980, www.walesoffice.gov.uk/2005/06/16/establishment-of-s4c-1979-81/, accessed on 7 Sept. 2010.

⁶⁸ J. B. Jones and R. A. Wilford, *Parliament and territoriality* (Cardiff, 1987), p. 42.

⁶⁹ Its membership included Professor D. Jenkins, Dr G. O. Williams and Messrs Emrys Evans, David Davies and Cyril Hughes.

progress since the 1967 Act, but argued that the position of Welsh in ‘core areas’ was a major concern.⁷⁰ The working party met with the secretary of state and proposed a standing ‘language commission’ to ‘monitor progress’, together with legislation to secure officially supported amendments. When Welsh Office civil servants had proposed a similar language commission in 1983, ministers had rejected the idea, arguing it would ‘lead down an uncharted road’.⁷¹ Edwards was no more enthusiastic on this occasion. Referring explicitly to a Confederation of British Industry (CBI) report on the costs that their working party’s proposals would place on industry, he deemed such ideas unworkable and impracticable and observed that legislation was not the best way forward. Roberts supported this stance, arguing that ‘the fate of the language depended on the use people chose to make of it’. Such proposals clashed with core Thatcherite concerns. Shortly afterwards, Wigley produced his own language bill and the Welsh Office sent the two sets of legislative proposals out to consultation. Welsh Office civil servants played a substantial role in shaping the government’s response. Their summary of opinion suggested the benefits which a ‘positive Government lead would bring’, possibly in terms of undermining public interest in formal legislation.⁷² The secretary of state started to support the formation of a committee to advise on the Welsh language and on appropriate policies to maintain it.

Welsh Office civil servants pursued this line, rather than endorsing London’s doubts or the claims of language activists. In October 1987, J. Walter Jones suggested drawing up a list of what could be achieved ‘without legislation’, either by the Welsh Office ‘or an external agency, e.g. a permanent Language Commission/Language Council’. More broadly, he suggested that ‘a more co-operative attitude might be forthcoming if the Welsh Office indicates that it proposes to act positively without legislation on a voluntary basis’.⁷³ A second and equally influential civil servant, R. H. Jones, concluded that there was ‘significant support for the Government to take some action’. In fact, Wyn Roberts had evidently already decided that a ‘voluntary’ and advisory council should be established, that this body ‘could eventually be given a statutory basis’, and that a White Paper creating a new Language Act might follow.⁷⁴ Roberts wanted to ensure that moderate Welsh speakers – and influential elements within civil society – were not radicalized by government ‘indifference’. Again, civil servants deployed arguments that resonated well with Conservative concerns. Jones

⁷⁰ This paragraph draws on the archives of the Welsh Language Board (WLB) and especially the ‘Note on a meeting at the WO, 23 Apr. 1985, to discuss demands for new language legislation’. This material was examined at the WLB offices in Cardiff following an inquiry about access under FOI. We are grateful to the Board for allowing unfettered access to its papers, which have now been deposited in the National Library of Wales.

⁷¹ J. Walter Jones, ‘Welsh Language Study group’, 21 Nov. 1985, WLB papers.

⁷² WO, ‘Points made in favour of legislation’, n.d., papers released under FOI (in author’s possession), EWL 1/2/8. ⁷³ *Ibid.*, J. Walter Jones, ‘Welsh language consultation’, 18 June 1987.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, Ceri Thomas, PS/secretary of state, to R. H. Jones, ‘Welsh language consultation’, 16 Oct. 1987; R. H. Jones to PS/secretary of state, 13 Oct. 1987.

warned that ‘Ministers will wish to bear in mind the importance and influence of the moderates ... It is as well to remember that it was the alienation of this group which created problems in the fourth channel debate.’⁷⁵

Historians should not, however, assume that what eventually occurred was what Roberts and other Tories wanted, or was a consequence of civil servants’ own views, which are often hard to determine. A summary document by Roberts recognized that the consultation had ‘raised widespread expectations of action’, but he did not automatically accede to such pressures. Indeed, he reported that the consultation raised two classic Thatcherite concerns: ‘the *compulsion* implicit in the proposals and the unquantifiable *cost* of the implementation’. Roberts argued not for an act of parliament backed by a statutory commission, but for an advisory group that would meet a few times per year. This would be a ‘responsible’ and ‘controllable’ body, comprising ‘the heads of public bodies in Wales who have an interest in the language ... together with prominent people in the private and voluntary sectors with a similar interest and sympathy’. Roberts also emphasized the Conservative party’s achievements in education, and hoped the media would now link such achievements in order to spread and sustain the Welsh language. The resulting package ‘would go far towards reassuring the majority of people in Wales that the Government is sincere in its commitment to safeguard and promote the language. The extremists who will never be satisfied in anything less than compulsory bilingualism, would be isolated further and the middle ground secured.’⁷⁶

In the event, a committee of eight ‘wise men’, as it was reported in the media, was put together, and met under the chairmanship of the minister of state.⁷⁷ The committee was not comprised of Tory stalwarts; that would not have been credible; they were, however, ‘civic’ patriots, with a history of working for the public good. The committee started to investigate ways of improving the position of the Welsh language and considered the role of a WLB and of legislation. Despite Roberts’s wishes, it met monthly rather than occasionally. By its third meeting, and orchestrated by John Elfed Jones (at the time chair of the Welsh Water Authority), the committee’s demands were clearly tabulated: a language unit within the Welsh Office and a permanent and funded commission to ‘begin work immediately on creating a new framework for a new Language Act’. Thereafter, this independent commission would be ‘responsible for all Welsh Office activity regarding the language’,⁷⁸ according with the role envisaged in earlier legislative demands. Shortly afterwards, the committee was renamed the

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, R. H. Jones memo to I. H. Lightman et al., 21 Nov. 1987, WLB papers.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, Wyn Roberts summary, ‘Current thinking on the Welsh language package’, 11 Jan. 1988, WLB papers.

⁷⁷ *Daily Post*, 21 July 1988; ‘Minutes of the minister of state’s working party on the Welsh language’, 25 Jan. 1988, papers released under FOI (in author’s possession), WO EWL 1/4/1. The members were John Elfed Jones, D. Hugh Thomas, Prys Edwards, Tom Jones, Alun Daniel, Elfed Roberts, Euryngwen Williams, and Wyn Roberts.

⁷⁸ ‘Minister of state’s working group, third meeting’, 28 Mar. 1988, WLB papers.

Welsh Language Board and given a statutory role. Roberts had evidently sought concrete action; but he had been pushed further than he had proposed. The result was a direct contradiction of the Tories' hostility to legislation and of previous ministerial comments. From the start, the WLB also attracted media attention, creating pressure from the 'fourth estate' as well as from within the civic elite.⁷⁹

IV

The third plank of language policy was the introduction of compulsory Welsh language teaching across Wales, initially largely confined to the Welsh speaking 'heartlands' in rural north-west and west Wales. Since these were also frequently areas of English in-migration, compulsory Welsh language teaching became a politically contentious issue. An arson campaign directed against second-home owners in rural areas during the 1980s was part of a growing concern with the decline of Welsh language and culture in these areas. Whilst the violence involved did not attract much popular support, there was extensive local sympathy for wider issues against which the action was targeted.⁸⁰

The UK-wide Education Reform Act (1988), allowed the position of the Welsh language in education to be addressed. The intentions behind the act accorded well with a variety of Thatcher's key concerns: strengthening increased choice and parental responsibility, whilst assaulting an educational establishment which included the Department of Education and Science (DES), trade unions, and local authorities.⁸¹ The act was also used to make Welsh language education compulsory in some areas. Wyn Roberts has correctly claimed that this outcome had little to do with the protests of Welsh language campaigners, but instead was attributable to Welsh educational organizations.⁸² Wales had established its own Education Board in 1918 and had developed its own inspectorate and examination systems. This was a Welsh institution with Welsh views. Research based on interviews with Welsh Office civil servants shows that such individuals quietly asserted their separation from the DES, particularly in areas of jurisdiction (such as the language) where there was a Wales-specific element. The chief inspector of the Welsh inspectorate was strongly in favour of an enhanced role for the Welsh language within a national curriculum.⁸³ Such groups may have remained stronger in Wales than in England, in the same way that Scottish trade unions and other groups united in order to defend Scotland's distinctive educational

⁷⁹ See e.g. the front page story following the formation of the WLB, *Daily Post*, 21 July 1988, and the two-page spread indicating the need for the group to have concrete powers, *Daily Post*, 2 Aug. 1988.

⁸⁰ 'Welsh issues: tabulation', vol. 1 (Dec. 1988), NLW, un-catalogued Welsh election papers, NOP/3767. We are grateful to Michelle Walker of Bangor University for this reference.

⁸¹ G. K. Fry, *The politics of the Thatcher revolution* (Basingstoke, 2009), pp. 127–36.

⁸² Roberts, *Right from the start*, p. 234.

⁸³ R. Daugherty and P. Elfed-Owen, 'A national curriculum for Wales: a case study of education policy-making in the era of administrative devolution', *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 51 (2003), pp. 242–4.

system.⁸⁴ Many English inspectors also accepted that the role of Welsh in the curriculum was an issue that ‘the Welsh had better sort out’ themselves.⁸⁵

The government accepted this outcome only reluctantly. Although Thatcherites aimed to challenge the power of such groups, Wyn Roberts faced an assault from Thatcher who felt ‘betrayed’ by his actions and those of civil servants at the Department of Education. This was the genuine voice of the prime minister, rather than that of her Welsh adviser, Lord Griffiths. Roberts himself narrowly evaded a ‘cosh from Margaret’s handbag’.⁸⁶ Welsh Office officials felt that, in the event, pragmatism dominated because the controversy over S4C had created an increased sensitivity in all aspects of Welsh policy making. Even Wyn Roberts was keen to set any requirement to teach Welsh at a low level in order to defuse antagonism in non-Welsh speaking areas. This is politically understandable since there had been flash points and conflicts in the 1970s when the children of English in-migrants or other non-Welsh speakers had been obliged to learn Welsh by local education authorities.⁸⁷ Roberts had smoothed the way for action by supporting exemptions where parents objected, arguing that a Conservative belief in choice was being respected. Since this allowed English in-migrants in areas like Pembrokeshire to opt out of local Welsh language schooling at local expense, it provided a framework that led to dramatic and well-publicized local conflicts, but which also helped persuade Thatcher to acquiesce.

The enthusiasm of educational bodies gained momentum because of the strong compliance demonstrated from within civil society, as measured by the public consultation conducted by the Welsh Office.⁸⁸ Again, the Welsh Office defended this case against other pressures, but any proposals to depart from the English model required support from both the secretary of state and the cabinet. Although Walker was convinced by Roberts of the need to act, Thatcher became directly involved, and again raised a series of doubts. Roberts and Griffiths were called to the prime minister’s office to discuss the issue. Thatcher needed to be persuaded that the proposals would not deter new companies from moving to Wales, which was a key part of the Conservatives’ strategy for altering both the economy and public attitudes. Roberts’s intervention was arguably vital in saving the day. The desire to retain support amongst ‘middle Wales’ and the cathartic impact of the S4C debacle remained strong influences on ministerial attitudes. The net result was an act which adapted ‘Thatcherite’ ideas, in some small ways, to Welsh circumstances, showing that ‘traditional’ and ‘new’ influences could combine to influence policy content.

⁸⁴ Stewart, *The path to devolution and change*, pp. 140–56.

⁸⁵ Daugherty and Elfed-Owen, ‘A national curriculum’, p. 243.

⁸⁶ Roberts, *Right from the start*, pp. 219–23.

⁸⁷ C. Baker, *Aspects of bilingualism in Wales* (Clevedon, 1985), pp. 55–6; P. M. Rawkins, *The implementation of language policy in the schools of Wales* (Glasgow, 1979), pp. 79–84, and G. E. Humphreys, *Heym yn y tân* (Caernarfon, 2000), pp. 150–3.

⁸⁸ Daugherty and Elfed-Owen, ‘A national curriculum’, p. 248.

V

The final element of Conservative policy was the passing of a Welsh Language Act in 1993. This act gave Welsh a defined role in the public sector, and gave the WLB the task of policing it by spreading best practice and supporting fresh developments. This was no part of a Thatcherite agenda or even a Welsh Conservative one. On the contrary, when Thatcher was asked about a new Welsh Language Act during a visit to Wales in June 1988, she responded by stating that legislation was unnecessary, compulsion was fundamentally misguided, and that the only real way to preserve the Welsh language was by people choosing to speak it.⁸⁹ When Wigley made an official complaint at the tone of her response, the manner of its handling revealed a good deal about Conservative opinion. The Welsh Office drafted a letter stressing the ‘unfortunate’ misinterpretation of the prime minister’s comments by a hostile Welsh media. Thatcher’s office altered both the tone and the context of the speech, adding a defence of government policy and support given to the Welsh language. The reply to Wigley continued: ‘to achieve objectives by voluntary means is far preferable to legislative compulsion. Indeed, I very much doubt whether legislative compulsion can ever be effective in ensuring the future of any language.’⁹⁰

Legislative intervention was thus hardly at the forefront of the party leader’s instinctive thoughts on the position in Wales, despite being a clear aim of the new WLB and some Tory backbenchers. When Welsh Office officials completed a lengthy in-house consultation process in 1988, they too aimed at minimizing support for legislative intervention. Their paper, ‘The Welsh Language – the future’, observed: ‘A greater degree of consensus about what is needed and is acceptable and about practical measures for bringing it about could secure acceptance that legislation might not after all be needed in order to achieve most, and perhaps all, of the desiderata now being identified’.⁹¹ The paper, however, also noted that idea of a new Language Act had ‘lodged itself fairly firmly in the Welsh psyche’. Once again, civil servants used arguments that played on Tory fears of losing public support if proposals fell short of expectations. The paper continued ‘We are probably past the point at which pure logic will prevail ... feeling at the moment is strongly reminiscent of the S4C affair’.⁹² The fear of humiliation and defeat through the S4C affair re-surfaced to promote consideration of a positive approach to new proposals. The Conservatives’ shallow political roots and limited intelligence-gathering abilities meant that they had little sense of whether this assessment was correct.

⁸⁹ *I Cymro*, 16 June 1988.

⁹⁰ WO draft reply to Mr Dafydd Wigley’s letter; ‘Draft reply for the prime minister to send to Dafydd Wigley’, n.d., 4 July 1988, WO website, FOI releases, www.walesoffice.gov.uk/welsh-language-legislation, accessed on 7 Sept. 2010.

⁹¹ ‘The Welsh language: the future’, 8 Apr. 1988, www.walesoffice.gov.uk/welsh-language-legislation, accessed on 7 Sept. 2010.

⁹² ‘The Welsh language: the future’, 27 Apr. 1988, www.walesoffice.gov.uk/welsh-language-legislation, accessed on 7 Sept. 2010.

Public opinion was thus a powerful lever, used by the WLB with some success. Although the Conservative party had previously used polls extensively, and continued to do so at national level, other institutions were polling and not simply to measure opinion. In the hands of newspapers and television programmes, polls stimulated discussion, raised expectations, and generated an impression of political and popular momentum. A similar situation had emerged in the 1960s and 1970s when devolution had been discussed.⁹³ In 1979, the political scientist, Denis Balsom, conducted a poll for HTV which had been used to identify levels of support for Welsh programming, whilst Balsom had also been involved with polling Welsh speakers on support for the arson campaign.⁹⁴

Although the WLB alienated many language activists in being less strident than some anticipated and by acting in concert with the government, it was hardly a pliant government quango. Most of its leading figures were nationalists of some form, although its legal spokesman, Winston Roddick, was a Liberal Democrat whilst others were not politically active. When the Board's chair John Elfed Jones, was informed by Roberts and Walker that its proposed Welsh Language Act was unlikely to succeed since many government departments would oppose it, Jones simply refused to accept the point but instead worked within and outside government to generate acceptance of the need for change.⁹⁵ In 1988, for example, the WLB worked with Balsom and National Opinion Polls (NOP) to examine public attitudes to the Welsh language. The opinion poll had a wider remit, since questions on devolution were carefully phrased in order to identify responses to a mixture of complex options and scenarios, whilst questions on language were less complex and more guided. The question on Welsh language education, for example, asked only whether such education should be available to all; only 7 per cent disagreed. Two-thirds of those questioned supported bilingual public services and a new Welsh Language Act. Support was spread evenly across all parties and across both Welsh and non-Welsh speakers. Conservative respondents were the least enthusiastic, although more than half were in favour, whilst nearly 60 per cent of Liberals and over 70 per cent of Labour voters supported the proposals, confirming high levels of acceptance and support overall.

Inevitably, the survey's questions reveal nothing about the length to which respondents were prepared to go to support their preferences. There was no repetition of polls conducted in the 1960s to establish if these were choices that people would prioritize. Although the polls supported a strategy for change, they did not provide value-free evidence as some might assume. At this stage, the WLB was not dominated by sophisticated approaches to language planning, but by

⁹³ A. Edwards and D. Tanner, 'Defining or dividing the nation? Opinion polls, Welsh identity and devolution, 1966–1979', *Contemporary Wales*, 18 (2006), pp. 66–7.

⁹⁴ Welsh cultural study, Gallup and HTV, Sept. 1979, NLW, Denis Balsom (Welsh opinion polls) papers 3/1. For the arson campaign, *Arcade*, 20 Mar. 1981, and interview with Balsom 2009 (courtesy of Michelle Walker, Bangor University).

⁹⁵ Roberts, *Right from the start*, p. 235.

advocacy and a desire to promote the cause of the Welsh language through more moderate and constitutional channels than *Cymdeithas Yr Iaith Gymraeg* (the Welsh Language Society). Those who used the data generated by the polls were apparently less concerned about statistical niceties. As the debate shifted to address concerns of language planners, so too did questions used in other opinion polls. By the early 1990s, an NOP poll for the Welsh language programme, 'Y Byd ar Bedwar' ('The World on Four'), asked about language use and transmission at work, in family life, at the use of informal Welsh in the media, and the media's role in sustaining Welsh language use in homes.⁹⁶

Whatever advocates of action claimed about public opinion, and the WLB said about the need for intervention, the Conservatives did not leap into action. It took a year for the WLB to receive a response to its first proposal, in 1989, for a new Welsh Language Act. It complained constantly that Welsh Office civil servants were unenthusiastic about legislation, observing that Wyn Roberts remained to be convinced that voluntary means were insufficient. Many traditional Conservative supporters, especially employers, were clearly unhappy about legislative change. In February 1989, the director of the CBI in Wales declared the organization's support for propagating and encouraging the Welsh language, but stressed the confederation's concern at the 'cost implications for industry and business' and the way in which compulsory provision for Welsh speakers would 'cause particular difficulties for immigrant industries and could deter potential overseas investors'. The CBI only supported a voluntary code of practice with 'commercial criteria' determining whether or not such a code should be adopted by individual companies.⁹⁷

David Hunt, who succeeded Walker as secretary of state for Wales in 1990, was an English MP with little knowledge of Wales and no 'Welsh' programme in mind. By January 1991, Hunt had 'not yet been convinced of the benefits of an all-encompassing piece of legislation' on the Welsh language, which was a sentiment supported by the party's north Wales organizer, D. Elwyn Jones, himself a convinced Thatcherite and anti-nationalist.⁹⁸ The climate was nonetheless changing. By 1990, the Labour party was treading carefully. Doubts over local authority language policies in south-west Wales were stifled to produce a more positive and 'Welsh' Labour image.⁹⁹ Hunt also sought to arrest his party's declining popularity in opinion polls and local elections by appealing to moderate Welsh opinion. Whilst *Plaid Cymru* was less of an electoral threat than Labour,

⁹⁶ St David's Day poll, Feb. 1991, Balsom papers 3/1.

⁹⁷ See, for example, I. Kelsall to John Walter Jones, 27 Feb. 1989, and the CBI's 'Welsh Language Board – proposals for a Welsh Language Act by CBI Wales', June 1990, WLB papers.

⁹⁸ D. Elwyn Jones, *Y rebel mwyaf?* (Caernarfon, 1991), p. 248.

⁹⁹ The Labour MP Alun Williams complained that Dyfed's language policies were 'introduced with a Stalinist authoritarianism'. A. Williams to W.J. Phillips, director of education in Dyfed, 1 June 1990, CCC, Kinnock MS, box 45. However, Labour's working party on the Welsh language requested that a document detailing such views 'should not be distributed to the media'. Minutes of the Welsh language working party, 2 Aug. 1990, NLW, Labour Party Wales Archive, File S25.

both it and the Liberal Democrats had to be challenged if the Conservatives were to preserve their shrinking electoral base.

Despite its rhetoric in opposition, the Conservative government had created new boards and agencies to develop and administer various policy areas. In 1991, for example, the secretary of state for Wales made 1,400 appointments to eighty quangos. It was difficult to find reliable Conservative members in a country where Conservatism was so weak, and where civil servants in London and Cardiff had only limited knowledge of individuals proposed for specific posts.¹⁰⁰ Whilst notions of a ‘democratic deficit’ played a major role in developing support for devolution, in 1991–2, it was just one of many political problems facing a Conservative party under siege. Establishing a quango to deliver a (moderate) Welsh language policy was hardly out of step with the party’s approach, even if the accompanying legislation which gave the quango considerable influence represented a serious departure from Thatcherite principles.¹⁰¹ Wyn Roberts was gradually converted to the WLB’s ideas, but felt that the Board’s leaders were politically naïve and ‘had no idea of what was involved in getting approval for a legislative proposal within the government’.¹⁰² Roberts’s own role was in facilitating the progress of such legislation, rather than initiating it, and also to ensure that the party in London accepted the proposals.

Quangos – and Welsh civil society generally – were also important factors. Civil servants found that organizations such as the Welsh Tourist Board and the Farmers’ Union of Wales also supported change. Conservative members of quangos could support a Welsh Language Act not as government loyalists, but as members of an organization that had to play a different, specifically Welsh, role or risk its reputation. Several therefore ‘went native’. Hunt’s civil servants emphasized the breadth of this support and played down the continuing opposition of some local councils and the CBI. After such lobbying had started to take effect, the challenge, Wyn Roberts told the WLB in July 1991, was not to convince him but ‘to obtain support in Government, at all levels’.¹⁰³

The 1992 general election results further reduced the Conservative party’s representation in Wales, whilst broader European trends may also have increased pressures on the government to accommodate minorities. But the language question was nevertheless accumulating a head of a steam, and Hunt himself accepted that legislation was necessary. Despite his strong support for keeping the Anglo-Welsh union intact, John Major, by now prime minister, did not react ‘as

¹⁰⁰ Information supplied in confidence.

¹⁰¹ K. Morgan and W. Roberts, *The democratic deficit: a guide to quangoland* (Cardiff, 1993), p. 56. For the Tories’ publicly negative views of quangos in the 1970s, T. Stott, ‘“Snouts in the trough”: the politics of quangos’, *Parliamentary Affairs*, 48 (1995), pp. 323–40. However, in private Kenneth Baker (and others) felt that quangos were ‘manned by middle-class persons who were our supporters’, and hence were a useful tool. Machinery of Government Committee, 13 Jan. 1977, CCC, Thatcher MS 2/6/1/49.

¹⁰² Roberts, *Right from the start*, p. 257.

¹⁰³ Winston Roddick brief, n.d., and ‘Note on the minister’s meeting with the Welsh Language Board’, 5 July 1991, WLB papers.

adversely as Margaret would have done' to the proposal and apparently accepted Roberts's advice.¹⁰⁴ The Welsh Language Act (1993) proclaimed the equal validity of the Welsh language in public life and obliged public bodies to provide all official literature and other services both in Welsh and English. If this legislation reflected the impact of Welsh civil society, including the WLB, it also displayed the continuing role of more traditional elements in policy formation. The CBI's views on the need to avoid increased business costs were heeded, for there was no attempt to apply the legislation in the private sector.

Even in the early 1990s, supporters of the original Thatcherite policy revolution and its agenda of institutional change, had come to believe that the assault on established policy groups had dissipated rapidly.¹⁰⁵ When the Thatcherite, John Redwood, became secretary of state for Wales in 1993 he found both the Welsh Conservative party, and the Welsh policy process, a bitter disappointment. There were no Tory think-tanks, few Tory intellectuals, and little commitment to Thatcherite principles, as opposed to Thatcherite prejudices. His Welsh political adviser has also claimed that Redwood saw the Welsh Conservatives as a 'decadent party', 'weakened by government largesse' and dominated by 'quango crazy' sycophants.¹⁰⁶ The Conservatives' policy process had not, however, failed to resist departures from Thatcherite principles, like the Welsh Language Act, because of the weaknesses of party members.¹⁰⁷ Rather, the institutional mechanisms proposed by Thatcherites in opposition were suitable only for key policy areas where people and organizations were available to assist. A government that had alienated so many policy groups and which lacked any real alternative source of support could hardly extend its reach into all areas of national life.

VI

This article has focused specifically on the dynamics of Conservative policy towards the Welsh language. Thatcherite aims were powerful influences on that policy, even at the start of the period, when non-Thatcherites remained influential in the cabinet. British-wide subjects with a Welsh resonance, notably public sector broadcasting and education, were introduced before and after the general election in 1983, with British – and Thatcherite – concerns to the fore. Such influences were, however, unable to neutralize traditional 'Welsh' policy networks or to overcome the influence of either Welsh public opinion or Welsh civil society. Accordingly Welsh Conservatives used such circumstances to moderate some policies, rather than to present a 'wet' alternative based on a distinctively Welsh Tory vision or programme.

As the article suggests, the role of quangos – in Wales and elsewhere – merits far more attention from historians of the 1980s than it has hitherto received, not

¹⁰⁴ Roberts, *Right from the start*, p. 257.

¹⁰⁵ Hoskyns, *Just in time*, pp. 387–402.

¹⁰⁶ H. Williams, *Guiltily men* (London, 1998), p. 51.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

least because the 'new' policy network established by the Tories after 1979 seemed no more compliant on some 'second order' issues than its predecessor. Similarly, the article exposes a government which was, at times, much more pragmatic and susceptible to compromise than its many opponents and critics in Wales may suggest. Even in a nation where the party did not enjoy significant success, electoral considerations, not least the party's attempt to appease moderate opinion whilst at the same time cutting one of the taproots of nationalism, played a prominent role in moving forward the party's Welsh agenda in unexpected directions.