Chapter 16 Welsh Language Policy: A Long Twentieth Century

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It may seem somewhat self-evident to assert that language policy should be vitally indexed to the democratic, political and administrative fabric of institutional relations of any given polity. As we know, this nexus of relations is becoming ever more complex as governance continues to yield multilevel and discrete locations of power (Rhodes 1996). In the case of the Welsh language, however, for the vast majority of the twentieth century, language policy developed away from a 'Walesfacing' democratic mandate, being provided for politically, legislatively and institutionally at the UK level of government (Williams 2007). It is with the onset and deepening of asymmetrical devolution within the UK in the past 15 years that language policy has been more fully appropriated and 'brought in from the cold' by an emerging substate political, legislative and administrative system in Wales. This has resulted in the role of the Welsh language within a bilingual civil society being more deeply legitimated by the National Assembly for Wales (NAfW) as a public good worthy of policy and legislative scrutiny by the Welsh Executive and Legislature. Assessing the degree to which democratic and political values have underpinned language policy in Wales through the incremental growth of 'Welshfacing' institutions lies at the heart of this chapter.

Political communities may or may not coincide with the boundaries of a state, but self-ascribing nations may exert influence on *some* level of government, and the increasingly plurinational UK is no different in this aspect. Interpreted as a union state, the UK has over the centuries sanctioned, and to some degree subsequently given free rein to, the growth of cultural and administrative flexibility within its constituent nations (Wyn Jones 2005). In the case of Wales, in the absence of political institutions at the substate national level until 1999, local government represented to a large degree elected government in Wales, taking on significant

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substate symbolism (Morgan 1981). In the case of the Welsh language, the 'flawed consociationalism' of policy-making which is attributed to the pre-devolution system became terrain to be negotiated by a multifaceted movement which comprised of policy communities seeking to extract concessions from the UK government (Thomas 1997), with bilingual statutory education at the vanguard of broad civil society lobbying during the second half of the twentieth century (Jones 2000; Thomas and Williams 2013).

The aims of this chapter are twofold. The first is to problematise the incremental growth of Wales-facing institutions during the course of the twentieth century and to provide a summary of how such an institutional 'creep' has provided the political and social fabric within which language policy has and continues to operate in Wales. In sketching out such an outline, a link is made between substate language policy and a wider demo-driven surge for political accountability to a given territory. A second aim focuses on the uneven development from locally mandated forms of language policy to both negotiated and mandated policy and planning regimes which have been legitimated and conceptually driven by UK legislation in the first instance and later on by the substate legislature, the NAfW. It is argued that the development of language policy in Wales reflects the incremental growth of Wales as a converging political, legal and institutional system over and above a nation predicated on solely cultural and linguistic traits. Such a development would mirror the path of a 'complex normative language policy' which is premised upon 'the acknowledgement that the interface between power and language does not operate in a linear or predictable fashion' (Peled 2014: p. 313).

16.1 Building the Blocks: From Nation to Administration

Despite the fact that the UK *qua* legal and political system intermittently sanctioned cultural and linguistic heterogeneity² within its territory, until the turn of the millennium, the UK (or at least England and Wales) was essentially a centralised political system with power residing formally within a strong sovereign parliament (Jeffrey and Wincott 2006: p. 3). The 450 years between the Acts of Union (1536 and 1543) and the present period can be seen as two general 'tendencies' explaining broad-stroke historical change (Carter 1970: p. 30). The first tendency was the creation of formal English administration in Wales and the suppression of the various jurisdictions which at that time existed in Wales. It was during this period that legal structures and administrative areas which would treat England and Wales as one unit began to develop. The second tendency is in some respects a countertendency with the individuality of Wales being increasingly recognised from the end of the nineteenth century due to social, religious and political pressures. The

¹ Italics in original.

² For the demolinguistic vitality of the Welsh language, see Jones (2012).

effect of this counter-tendency would be the gradual growth of Welsh-facing institutions and Wales-related legislation at Westminster. This institutional and legislative incrementalism acted as the building blocks for administrative devolution midway through the twentieth century, with political and legislative devolution occurring respectively in 1997 and 2011.

During this second 'tendency' characterised by an increased awareness of Wales as a national entity, a number of periods can be discerned. Until the arrival of administrative devolution with the creation of the Welsh Office in 1964, the first period between 1886 and 1959 oversaw a period of division within the UK Conservative, Labour and Liberal parties, with sections in favour of administrative and a degree of political devolution at loggerheads with those unwilling to countenance these developments occurring. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Liberal Party and its erstwhile Wales-facing Cymru Fydd movement were calling for a response to the increase in Welsh national consciousness, linked to pressure for political, administrative and cultural change following the Representation of the People Act 1884 at Westminster which increased suffrage in Wales to approximately 60 % of the male adult population, an increase of slightly under 300 %. This piece of legislation is regarded, unwittingly perhaps, as a constituent element in the birth of Welsh political democracy (Morgan 1981; p. 27). The Sunday Closing (Wales) Act of 1881, the Welsh Intermediate Act of 1889, the creation of the Central Welsh Board in 1897 in the field of education, the establishment of a Welsh department in the central government Board of Education in 1906 and the Welsh Church Act 1914 are all crucial building blocks in an appreciation of the degree to which the central UK state was beginning to publicly accept the distinctiveness of Wales as a separate nation and that this would need to be consistently managed in an increasing number of areas of public life (Griffiths 1996: pp. 46–47).

Under the stewardship of the Welsh UK Prime Minister David Lloyd George, during the second decade of the century, Wales-serving administrative capacity was added to, this time in the area of social services with the creation in 1914 of a Health Insurance Commission for Wales and a Welsh Board of Health in 1919. This was the first time that central UK departments assigned substantial powers to Welsh public affairs (Gowan 1970: p. 51). Indeed, during the 12 years after the Liberal Party regained power in 1906, Welsh-serving departments were created in four existing ministries (Deacon 2002: p. 15), bringing into relief the degree of incremental institutional growth. Although greater power was assigned to such institutions during the 1920s and 1930s as part and parcel of a regional devolution to offices throughout the UK, during the Second World War, significant linkages were made between government departments in Wales, industry and trade unions. By 1945, 15 Whitehall departments had offices in Wales (Gowan 1970: p. 52), and existing bodies such as the Welsh Board of Health had been given greater responsibilities (Rawlings 2003: p. 26). Additionally, the distinctiveness of Wales was recognised more than the English regions through the 'Conference of the Heads of Government Departments' which produced a yearly report on activity in Wales. By the time of the creation in 1964 of the UK ministerial cabinet post of Secretary of State for Wales and the Welsh Office, the governmental all-Wales devolved

administrative and policy co-ordination body, a somewhat patchwork yet significant Wales-serving institutional framework was by now in existence (1970: p. 53).

Party political debate responded in tune to incremental institutional growth. Throughout the 1950s, the Labour Party, which dominated the Welsh political landscape for the vast majority of the twentieth century, had to balance the presence of both devolutionists and anti-devolutionists within its ranks. Although a 'Parliament for Wales' campaign by a number of staunch devolutionists, including from within the Labour Party (Morgan 1981: p. 380), resulted in failure, the advisory Council for Wales, set up in 1949, called on the Conservative government of the day to create a Welsh Office which would co-ordinate government activity in Wales (Prys Davies 2008: p. 43). The growth in support for the nationalist Plaid Cymru (Party of Wales) provides an added reason for the inclusion of a Secretary of State for Wales and administrative devolution in the Labour Party's manifesto of 1959 (Davies 1990: p. 643).

By the 1960s, however, there were enough devolutionists within the governing Labour Party to facilitate the creation of the Welsh Office in 1964 (Deacon 2002: p. 21). The Welsh Office would, over a period of 35 years, oversee the development of an incipient institutional and policy community system which was subsequently inherited by the NAfW in 1999 when political devolution ushered in the beginnings of democratically mandated government accountable to the people of Wales (Rawlings 2003: p. 1). Welsh Office activity oversaw an increase to, and stabilisation of, statutory and policy responsibilities facilitated by both rational planning and 'ad hoc opportunism', with the embryonic regional system developing into a 'multi-functional ministry carrying out the majority of non benefit-related, revenue raising and social security government functions in Wales' (Deacon 2002: p. 39). Wales-specific policy communities, which brought forward differentiated policies to the rest of the UK, especially in the field of education, branched out and developed, with progressive divergence impacting upon language policy at both a Wales and local level.

Although all Secretaries of State were 'expansionists, bringing fresh powers and functions to the Welsh Office' (Deacon 2002: p. 40), there was not a corresponding increase in the number of civil servants implementing the new functions, thus creating a distinct problem for capacity within the Welsh Office. Other factors led to further calls for an elected all-Wales Assembly: the image of five consecutive 'colonial' Secretaries of State representing electorates in England, and Secretaries of State after 1987 who were deemed to be using their post in order to raise their profile inordinately at the UK level (Deacon 2002: pp. 226–227); the tension between the dominance of the Labour Party within local government on the one hand and the lack of all-Wales power on the other; the shattering of industrial infrastructure in Wales; and the growth of new concepts around what a 'civic' Wales could look like (Prys Davies 2008: pp. 118–119; Rawlings 2003: p. 29). In its turn, a multiparty and multi-sectorial momentum was created with the aim of establishing political devolution with a layer of elected government, despite the rather lacklustre stance taken by some sectors within the Labour Party and local government (Morgan and Mungham 2000).

Following a successful referendum vote of 1997 and the Government of Wales Act of 1998, the NAfW came into existence in 1999 with roughly the same powers as those assigned to the preceding Welsh Office, including subordinate legislation within a framework of primary legislation (Royles 2007: pp. 39–40). Although some commentators were of the opinion that significant constitutional change was unlikely to occur for a considerable amount of time (e.g. Patchett 2000: p. 255), the 15 years following political devolution have witnessed sustained institutional and constitutional incrementalism, creativity and invention (Keating et al, 2012). The main examples of such incrementalism are, following a second Government of Wales Act in 2006, a formal split between the legislature and the executive (Wyn Jones and Scully 2008) and, following a referendum in 2011, the acquisition of primary legislative powers in 20 policy areas. These recent developments in the institutional and constitutional governance of Wales mirror the incrementalism occurring in the Welsh polity over a period of more than a century. Due to the advances in administrative, political and legislative devolution and the growth of policy areas now under the aegis of the Welsh Assembly and Government, an increasingly extensive regional institutional, legal and political system may now be said to exist in Wales. The concurrent, yet uneven, development of language policy within the emerging Welsh system will now be examined, in the first instance that of locally mandated political agreement around the creation, maintenance and adaptation of such policies.

16.2 Uneven Development in Language Policy: The Subnational Mandate

This section deals with language policy adopted by Gwynedd County Council (previously Gwynedd Council) in northwest Wales since its inception in 1974 (see Fig. 16.1). The Council is the stand-out case of local government³ in Wales whereby a raft of locally mandated language policies were introduced irrespective of, and before, Westminster and all-Wales language legislation.⁴ Such locally mandated policies were pre-emptive of national developments and facilitated the Council's graduated objective of becoming a bilingual tier of government, both internally and public facing. In doing so, the Council distinguished itself manifestly from other county councils in Wales.⁵

³ Understood here as referring to the tier of local government directly below both central and all-Wales elected government

⁴ Although the Welsh Language Act 1967 acknowledged the use of the Welsh language in public life (Roddick 2007: p. 273), with formal provision being for the Welsh language in certain legal proceedings and in statutory forms and signage in Wales, the legislation made no provision for other aspects of language policy.

⁵ For a wider comparative view of local government engagement with language policy both in Wales and further afield, see Carlin (2013).

Fig. 16.1 Welsh County Councils between 1974 and 1996 showing (in *bold*) Gwynedd County Council



Although the Council's language policy was to receive a greater degree of legislative legitimation in the form of the Welsh Language Act (WLA) enacted at Westminster almost 20 years later, the changeover period of local government reorganisation in 1973–1974 was, however, a political opportunity not to be missed during a period in which Plaid Cymru began to flex its muscles, aspiring to become a significant political actor at the national level (Morgan 1981). A shadow council created a tier of senior officers who could work in both languages (Shadow Gwynedd County Council 1973), and, in 1975, deputy senior officers were requested to be able to comply with the same requirement. A Bilingual Subcommittee was created which was to wield substantial influence over public bodies not only across North Wales but nationally as well. In its early years, it focused on ensuring bilingual services for the public and developing language courses for officers. As regards the use of the language by elected members, the Subcommittee's aim was to establish the principle that Welsh should be made the language of the plenary sessions and subcommittees, and, in this vein, a translation unit was set up to facilitate and extend the use of simultaneous translation. However, Gwynedd harboured substantial doubts about its ability to push the policy forward due to indirect lines of communication with the Welsh Office in Cardiff and a legal regime unable to support its activity (Thomas 1997: p. 334). This uncertainty would lead to a number of restrictions on the internal language policy, for example, the unwillingness to usher in a requirement of Welsh for all officers and the lack of budgetary details concerning the rolling out and maintenance of the policy. Indeed, in 1985, the Council was involved in a legal dispute with labour unions and the Commission for Racial Equality on this requirement. Internal Council language policy was adversely affected by the publicity generated around this case (interview with senior officer 2006), and it was not until enactment of the Welsh Language Act (WLA) in 1993 and further local government reorganisation in 1996 that Gwynedd Council designated Welsh as the administrative internal written and oral language, thus becoming the first county council tier of government within the UK to designate a non-statewide language the working language of internal administration. With the enactment and subsequent implementation of the WLA, the Council was able to continue with its singular language policies, yet the tenor of the local mandate was now to include and build upon concepts and practices of a different – and national - magnitude. This would enable the Council to move from adopting a 'pre-emptive' stance regarding their language policies to one whereby it could simply categorise itself as being adherent to, and complying with, state legislation. Conceptually, the Council was able to incorporate its normative decisions within a national framework whereby the newly created government quango, the Welsh Language Board (WLB), would reach agreement with public bodies on how they would provide citizens with public services in Welsh within particular geographical areas or sectors of activity. These consensuated agreements are entitled language schemes. On a practical level, the Council was able to repackage its policy on bilingualism within the framing of language schemes, availing itself of legislation enacted at Westminster in order to legitimise a raft of activities which had been consistently mandated at the local level.

16.3 Local, National, Uniform? A Thorny Triangle

This final section deals with the development, implementation and conceptual premises of the most recent Welsh language-specific legislation, the Welsh Language Act 1993 and the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011. The WLA, as we have seen, was passed by the central UK Parliament at Westminster, and its statutory requirements currently remain on the statute book. It is a rather peculiar piece of pre-devolution legislation in that it was driven forward by Conservative party elites in Wales, pressured due to its inability to gauge the strength of lobbying groups calling for new language legislation, and which was accepted meekly by a weakened central UK Conservative Party (Edwards et al. 2011).

The passage of the WLA gave a statutory basis for Welsh-medium public service provisions. However, from a symbolic and cultural perspective, the WLA is also significant because it repealed several of the historically significant pieces of legislation which had shaped the contours of Welsh public life for centuries,

going back to 1535 and 1542, the so-called Acts of Union, which determined English as the only language of official public administration and office in Wales.

Following the WLA, the Welsh Language Board was established as the Waleswide principal agency for the promotion of Welsh in public life. As the policy process which developed from the WLA matured, there remained significant structural weaknesses in terms of the implementation of public body language schemes, partly due to an inability to successfully resolve public and lobbyist expectation regarding uniform access to Welsh language services at the point of delivery but also to the perception that the language scheme mechanism was open to claims of fragmentation because of the elevated number of schemes operating throughout the territory. Additionally, the WLB did not have any independent powers of enforcement, but rather it was the Secretary of State for Wales before the establishment of the NAfW, and the Welsh Ministers after devolution, who were authorised to take enforcement actions, but were not obliged to do so.

At the time of writing, it is not yet clear how the institutional, conceptual and implementation elements contained within the Welsh Language Measure (WLM) of 2011 will interact,⁷ not least due to the lag in implementing a number of the statutory components of the legislation. Such a systemic delay in itself would suggest at the very least uncertainty on the part of political and institutional actors regarding the interpretation of, inter alia, the new language standard regime and the degree to which this new mechanism will be able to bridge the perceived gulf between the supply side of the implementation of government policy, the demand side of public and lobbyist expectation and the demolinguistics of a minority language, albeit one which represents a significant cleavage in Welsh society (Jones 2008).

It is not perhaps unexpected that language legislation emanating from the Welsh legislature contains a degree of conceptual novelty regarding the official status of the Welsh language. The first part of the legislation section states that 'The Welsh language has official status in Wales', the legislative articulation and breadth of which formed the basis of significant evidence giving and plenary discussion during the measure's passing through the legislature. As previous language legislation encapsulated a legal customary interpretation that the official status of the Welsh language was de facto official and therefore did not require a declaration to that end in legislation (HC Deb 1993), a declaration regarding the status of Welsh in substate legislation is significant for language policy per se but quite possibly as regards the wider implications as to the relationship between bilingualism and the increasingly asymmetric UK.

A traditional view is that the customary and partly written UK constitution, of which the WLM now forms a part, is based upon pragmatism and adaptation, with

⁶ By 2011–2011, there were 557 operational language schemes (Welsh Language Board 2011).

⁷ This subject forms the basis of a current major 3-year study by the School of Welsh at Cardiff University and financed by the UK Economic and Social Research Council entitled 'The Office of Language Commissioner in Wales, Ireland and Canada' (ES/J003093/1).

practices being created through precedent rather than sweeping value-laden statements. It is often described as being a 'political' constitution in that it is through political processes and institutions that those who wield power are made accountable to citizens. UK sovereignty, thus, resides in Parliament (Gee and Webber 2010). Such a constitution develops as a result of a reasonable degree of conflict in politics whereby 'the democratic process *is* the constitution' (Bellamy 2007: p. 5). Recently, however, it has been argued that the UK is gradually moving away from a 'political' to a more 'legal' and Europeanised constitution (Claes 2007). Examples of this include the Human Rights Act 1988, the creation of institutions such as the Supreme Court and the impact of devolution in the UK in general, despite there not being any 'settled procedures for dealing with constitutional reform in the UK' (Oliver 2011: p. 340).

With this in mind, the language scheme mechanism of the WLA is understood in the context of a 'political' constitution, being a somewhat creative modern day revival of the commutation schemes which form part of the Welsh Church Act of 1914 (Williams 2013) constitution as such an exceedingly ad hoc example of Welsh – and British – language planning. Since the referendum result of 2011, however, full lawmaking powers in devolved areas reside in the NAfW. With a Welsh legal jurisdiction being mooted (Welsh Government 2012), it is reasonable to reflect on what might be the position of the Welsh language in such a jurisdiction and under what legal mechanisms its use would function. Reference once more to the customary British constitution might shed some light on this if one considers that the UK constitution is not perhaps as flexibly customary as portrayed:

It has [the constitution] over the centuries embodied substantial formal and written elements, and these have grown more extensive and prominent in recent times. Indeed, it could be maintained that it is precisely some of these formal provisions – Magna Carta, the exclusion of papal jurisdiction, the various acts passed between 1533 and 1560 establishing the Church of England, the Petition of Right, the act abolishing the Court of Star Chamber, the Habeas Corpus legislation, the Bill of Rights of 1689, the Act of Union of 1707, the Reform Act of 1832 and many others – that constitute the milestones marking out the growth and nature of the British constitution . . . the constitution is largely defined by those institutions and practices which emerged from and were confirmed as acceptable conclusions facilitating a renewal of constructive political activity after phases of acute conflict and division. (Johnson 2004: pp. 14–15)

On such a view, the recent constitutional changes in the UK referred to earlier could be seen to funnel into such 'a renewal of constructive political activity'. Similarly it might be asked to what degree the *declaration* of the official status of the Welsh language in WLM, and in a subsequent declaration in future 'consolidated' legislation in Wales, such as a third Government of Wales Act, or in legislation regarding the establishment of a Welsh legal jurisdiction, might resemble such constructive political activity.

On an initial view, the legislative drafting tradition in the UK does not support this possibility. According to lawyers at the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel, declarations do not form part of UK primary legislation (Williams 2013). In other words, primary legislation must be substantive, noting what is permissible in

legislation and what is not, rather than having recourse to declaratory statements. However, to what degree might this interpretation of UK law be comprehensive? Although declaratory statements do not often appear in legislation, it is not completely unknown either. An example of this, with undoubted constitutional ramifications, can be seen in the first part of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, whereby:

It is hereby declared that Northern Ireland in its entirety remains part of the United Kingdom and shall not cease to be so without the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland voting in a poll held for the purposes of this section in accordance with Sch. 1. (Northern Ireland Act 1998)

This piece of legislation makes a *declaration* regarding the continuance of a specific territory within the UK until such time as citizens living there choose otherwise. It seems appropriate on occasion, therefore, to design declaratory legislation in the British context. One possible reason for a declaration might be for reasons of absolute clarity:

The argument that it is not legitimate [declaratory statements] rests on the assertion that the sole purpose of legislation is to change the law. But if there is a real doubt as to the state of the law in respect of a particular matter, *removing the doubt by express provision does effect a change in the law*, even if it does no more than to restore as the sole construction what would probably have been the better construction in the face of doubt. (Greenberg 2008: p. 68)⁸

One might wonder, however, whether certain criteria under which a 'real doubt' is removed might be linked to a value-laden cultural sphere whereby declaratory claims in legislation offer signposts for clarity whilst couching subtle normative – and political – values? In the realm of language, might not the statement regarding the official status of Welsh begin to link political values with statutory language mechanisms and specific territories within Wales?⁹ It is thus conceivable that precedents exist within the British legal tradition which might facilitate the development of a language regime in Wales, open to democratic scrutiny yet diverging significantly from earlier versions. Seen thus, the flexible British constitution might make the development of the WLM declaratory statement in future Welsh constitutional texts more legally acceptable where political consensus in the NAfW obtained. The acceptance of such a mechanism could form the legitimising basis for Welsh Government strategic plans and strategies in the form of soft law for general promotional and sector-specific policy areas 10 as well as providing the required statutory framework for those local governments in Wales already engaged in working towards offering Welsh as a default priority language within a wider bilingual service framework.

⁸ Italics inserted by author.

⁹ Sections 44 and 150 of WLM 2011 hint at the territorialisation and sectorialisation of language regimes within Wales.

¹⁰ See, for example, Welsh Assembly Government (2003, 2010).

16.4 Conclusion

The former First Minister of Wales, Rhodri Morgan, stated in 2007 that the depoliticising of the language question during the 1980s and 1990s was the most appropriate strategy in the search for consensus (Morgan 2007). Such a path was tactically purposeful and, indeed, in line with government language policy throughout the twentieth century. However, with the arrival of the NAfW and the further development of the Welsh political and legal system, the possibility of a normatively informed language policy is within reach, indexing thus policy with polity in a much more defined manner. Such a policy need not necessarily be predicated on the moral grammar of language rights but rather on a contingent, context-driven process. The argument is forwarded here that it is specifically within the context of a flexible British constitutional setting that such a development might occur, representing an applied interpretation of language policy rather than the static prism of third-generational language rights. The appeal to politics within a broad institutional setting is clear:

One cannot simply expect polities, languages and their interplay to remain unchanged through time, at least not outside a highly ideological perception ... [d]enying future generations the opportunity and responsibility for a meaningful participation in the shaping of their own political and linguistic circumstances effectively neutralises the dynamic prioritisation process of politics as a human activity. (Peled 2014: p. 313)

A practical and adaptable policy of this description could only be viable were it to achieve party political consensus within the Welsh political system in order to support its design, implementation and maintenance. An extended and inclusive 'national discussion' would invariably be needed for this purpose. At a time when the British constitution is rapidly adapting to the continuing relocation of power relations within the UK, a flexible approach to language policy forming part of future Welsh constitutional documents would legitimise variations for territories where the capacity for community-based Welsh language transmission is deemed to exist whilst promoting other aspects of language transmission in the rest of Wales. Might a more creative and flexible approach to language policy in Wales represent a partial recognition of, and response to, the language practices of citizens living in Wales?

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