

c y m d e i t h a s
yr **iaith** gymraeg

Leading From The Chair

How to make a
success of holding
National Assembly
Committee Meetings
in both English
and Welsh



DECEMBER 1999

Foreword

From the very start Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg has campaigned for a thoroughly bilingual National Assembly. To ensure this more is needed than just an effective translation system. We also have to make sure that Assembly Members make the most extensive use possible of the Welsh language.

Committee Chairs should create an atmosphere congenial to the use of Welsh. They must make sure that nobody feels under any disadvantage when they speak Welsh in the National Assembly.

The establishment of the National Assembly has enhanced the status of the Welsh language in Wales. Welsh is now a language of government. There is a responsibility on all Assembly members to make sure that this status is preserved.

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Introduction

Generally speaking, administration through the medium of both Welsh and English is a comparatively new phenomenon, and even though the public use of Welsh has increased dramatically during the last decades, operating through the medium of both languages is still not completely normal and straightforward. There are numerous systematic and psychological obstacles which stand in the way of a working bilingualism, but with an orderly effort these can be overcome. It is a matter of turning our backs on old attitudes and practices and embracing new ones.

The purpose of this booklet is to offer a *practical* guide on how to hold the committee meetings of the National Assembly of Wales in a way that will breathe new life into the principle of equality between the two languages, giving Welsh its deserved place as the language proper to Wales.

The Government of Wales Act 1998 imposes a statutory duty on the Assembly to operate the principle that Welsh and English are to be treated on a basis of equality in the conduct of its business. If the Assembly fails in this it will be subject to a judicial review.

We believe that Committee Chairs have a key role in creating an environment where members of the Committees and others who contribute to them feel completely free to use either language according to their wishes.

This booklet is based on a document produced by the Secretariat of the Canadian Treasury Board entitled *Chairing Meetings*, which in turn was based on the wide experience of specialists involved in the field.

Establishing a Framework

Working Bilingualism will not become a reality in the National Assembly by chance. As Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg argued in its document *A Working Bilingualism*, the National Assembly must develop a comprehensive and integrated language policy and establish a framework to carry out this policy. So far there is no evidence of any action being taken concerning this recommendation and we have the present unsatisfactory situation where there is a great deal of confusion and uncertainty regarding bilingualism in the Assembly, with individual decisions taken outside the general framework of the whole body.

We call on the Assembly:

- to develop a comprehensive and integrated language policy;
- to draw up practical guidelines on how to operate the policy;
- to communicate the policy and the guidelines to the members, Assembly staff and the public;
- and to monitor and review the policy.

In making sure that bilingualism works in the Committees, the role of the Chair is central. It is the Chair's responsibility to take steps to make sure that the members of the committees feel entirely at ease to use either English or Welsh in the meetings. The Chair must be aware of the nature of the task that confronts them and what they are aiming at.

Different chairs will have different language skills; some will be comfortable using both languages, some more comfortable in one than the other, and some will only be able to use one language. But the success of bilingual meetings (i.e. a meeting where the members feel at ease to use the language of their choice and do so) does not depend on the individual linguistic skills of the Chair alone. It is even possible for monoglot Chairs to promote bilingualism in a meeting. *One possibility for committees chaired by a non-Welsh-speaking chair is to appoint a Joint Chair who is comfortable in the other language to share the responsibility for chairing and make sure that there is equal opportunity for both languages.*

At the moment simultaneous translation is offered for Welsh language proceedings in the Committees but it is obvious from the use of facilities that putting translators in a booth is not enough to ensure that the service is used.

Before the Meeting

1. All documents relevant to the meeting should be available in both languages.
2. Make sure that all relevant documents have been given to the translator.
3. The agenda: the agenda should of course be bilingual. It should always be stated on the agenda that it is possible to use one or other of the languages and that a simultaneous translation service is available.
4. In order to promote the discussion in Welsh of subjects which have not usually been debated in that language it should be arranged to circulate a vocabulary of relevant terms amongst the members and translators. A Terminology Unit would have to be established so that this work could be done effectively.
5. Since old attitudes and practices take time to change, the Chair could, before the meeting:
 - i. remind fluent Welsh-speaking members that they are welcome to make use of the Welsh language in the meeting;
 - ii. invite those who have a certain amount of Welsh to contribute in the Welsh language.
6. It is very important that the members of the Committee understand from the start that they can use either English or Welsh in the meeting and this can be visually reinforced by placing a copy of the Assembly's Language scheme (when available) or the words of the Government of Wales Act concerning the use of both languages, or Standing Order 8.23 — *"Members of Committees and other persons addressing committees may speak in English or in Welsh and simultaneous interpretation facilities shall be available for proceedings in Welsh. Persons other than members may address committees in other languages by prior agreement with the chair"* — in a visible point at the Committee room or on little cards on the table in front of every member. This shows the meetings bilingualism is the result of the Assembly's official policy rather than the Chair's personal whim.
7. Ensure that the translation equipment is working properly.

During the Meeting

It is the responsibility of the Chair to show clearly to all those attending the meeting that Welsh or English can be used without difficulty. If speaking Welsh proves to be a problem then one tends to speak English.

1. Address all the members in Welsh as they arrive.
2. Make a formal declaration every *time* when opening the meeting that there will be an opportunity to speak either language.
3. Don't take it for granted that the meeting will be bilingual just because there are a couple of translators in the booth. You are responsible for creating the opportunity for bilingualism.
4. Make sure that the members know how to use the headphones and remind them to wear them in order to be ready for the translation. This is particularly important in meetings where there are only a few people able to take part in Welsh. If everyone else is not ready to listen when the Welsh speaker is going to contribute then the Welsh speaker will have to repeat himself/herself when everybody is ready, and that may undermine his/her willingness to contribute in Welsh in the future.
5. Remind the members to use the microphones when speaking, translators can only translate what they can hear.
6. If the members use only one language in the meeting, while another linguistic group is present, remind them from time to time that there is translation equipment available to enable people to make use of either Welsh or English.
7. When appropriate, refer to your fluency in your second language and use it even if it does not come easily to you. It will be an example to others.
8. Remind the members that the presence of monoglot English speakers should not prevent others from using Welsh. It is not impolite to speak Welsh in the presence of others who don't speak the language.
9. One should avoid putting the burden of upholding bilingualism on the shoulders of those who wish to speak Welsh. Don't make Welsh speakers feel that they are a nuisance for wishing to speak Welsh by asking "*Is anybody likely to speak Welsh in this meeting?*". Take it for granted that some people will wish to do this and state that any one may use the language of their choice.
10. Use as much Welsh as is possible when chairing (e.g. when opening and closing meetings, when asking for comments and when discussing the agenda).
11. Be sensitive to the linguistic make-up of the Committee:
 - i. If you sense that certain members are wary of contributing in Welsh, ask in Welsh whether he or she has any comments to make.
 - ii. If someone does contribute in Welsh reinforce this by contributing a remark in Welsh.
 - iii. Realise that Welsh speakers are very accustomed with turning to English if there is any sign of difficulty or problems, and make it clear to them that they have every right to speak Welsh at all times in the meeting.

Following the Meeting

If the Chair is serious about ensuring equality for the speakers of both languages in committees, every meeting should be monitored and assessed. One should also ask for feedback from the members on how the meeting was chaired from a bilingual point of view. Make a note of what you thought worked successfully and that which did not work so well. Also take into consideration any recommendations and criticisms offered. Most important of all — keep at it! Change will not happen over night but it will happen.