

## **Culture Committee - CC-10-01(p.3)**

**Date:** 6<sup>th</sup> June 2001

**Time:** 10.00am-13.00pm

**Venue:** Aberystwyth Arts Centre, Aberystwyth

### **Presentation by Dr Rhidian Griffiths (Keeper of Printed Books and Director Designate of Public Services, National Library of Wales) to the Culture Committee's Review of the Welsh Language, 6 June 2001**

Thank you for this opportunity to address the members of the Committee as part of their review of the Welsh language. It is a privilege to do so given the importance of the Assembly's commitment to foster the unique identity of Wales and the benefits of bilingualism.

Though the views expressed are my own, I shall draw on my experience of working in an organisation which not only preserves an important part of the Welsh heritage but which also provides bilingual services and uses both Welsh and English in its day-to-day operations.

I note in passing my disappointment that this consultation has not embraced either the Consortium of Welsh Library and Information Services (CWLIS) or the Welsh Library Association (WLA), two bodies which represent information services and information professionals and which have extensive experience of bilingualism in public services.

I should like to concentrate on two of the themes noted in the framework for the Review, namely 'Promoting bilingualism' and 'Public investment'.

#### **Promoting bilingualism**

It is the basic right of any citizen of a democratic country to be able to use his mother tongue in his homeland. An integral part of fostering the identity of the new Wales will be to create 'a perception of the Welsh language as a unique resource'. It is a matter of pride for Wales that Welsh is a long-lived European language, alive as an oral and written medium, and therefore a resource whose value should be above question. There is, regrettably, too much questioning and advancing of weak arguments about the cost of bilingualism. Although it must be acknowledged that there are significant practical problems to be overcome in order to establish Wales as a fully bilingual country, if the Assembly stands firm in favour of the principle, those problems can be surmounted.

At the National Library it is required that all members of staff who deal with the public should be able to speak Welsh. If for particular reasons a non-Welsh speaker is appointed to a post, he/she is actively encouraged to attend Welsh lessons; further, by using Welsh in our daily business, in an office as well as a public service situation, we afford the learner the opportunity to practice what has been learned. In our experience this is essential in order to ensure that bilingualism is seen to be normal and not merely cosmetic. Perhaps public bodies in Wales could meet to share their experiences and assist each other in this regard.

I also believe that the Assembly has an important role to play not only to support and fund policies which promote bilingualism, but also to set an example in its own deliberations. The practice of providing simultaneous translation and of publishing documents in Welsh and English is to be welcomed; but it is also very important that Assembly members should use Welsh regularly in committee and debate so that Wales may see our elected governing body actively promoting natural bilingualism. This, I would hope, would inspire confidence among Welsh speakers while not alienating non-Welsh speakers. Holding each other in contempt weakens us as a nation. The Welsh language must show confidence and self-esteem if it is to gain respect among those who now ignore it; but it is also important for Welsh speakers always to support and assist non-Welsh speakers in their efforts to get to grips with the language. Fostering healthy attitudes – on all sides – is essential.

As a librarian and someone who enjoys reading, I would also emphasise the value of Welsh as a written language. Without a firm basis of living literature Welsh could disintegrate into a mere patois. In all efforts to promote bilingualism we should always remember the importance of actively supporting publishing in Welsh (books, journals and newspapers), and fostering reading through reading initiatives and schemes such as the National Year of Reading.

## **Public Investment**

Because Welsh is a minority language, public investment is essential to support various aspects of its life. I believe such investment should be of the enabling rather than the prescriptive kind: it should promote guidelines for development, examples of good practice, and social opportunities which will enrich that which is gained from formal education. New investment is required more at community than at central level, as it is the local initiatives which are most likely to revive and strengthen the language, not only in its traditional heartlands, but also in the south-east. Central structures are needed, but to promote and support, not to create a language bureaucracy.

No doubt I speak from the privileged position of a public institution where Welsh is used regularly and effortlessly. But our experience confirms certain fundamental points:

- There are no insuperable obstacles to the use of Welsh as the language of office and business

- There is plenty of opportunity to use Welsh in the field of information technology by the provision of bilingual services
- There is a critical need to develop training and training materials through the medium of Welsh
  - in offices and business
  - in information technology
  - in information provision and customer service

I feel that there is scope for a partnership of the National Assembly and public organisations to consider the practical implications of bilingual activity. I am certain that developing these services and strengthening their effectiveness would be a great step forward towards full bilingual citizenship. And that goal cannot be reached if we all work independently of each other.

Thank you for your time and attention.