

P-04-649 Welsh-Medium Education – Garland or Albatross – Petitioner to Committee, 09.09.15

<p>Text of Petition P-04-649 “Welsh Medium Education – Garland or Albatross?”</p>	<p><i>Text of Huw Lewis’s letter, dated 31 July 15, giving his views on the Petition.</i></p>	<p>The petitioner's response to the Minister's comments.</p>
<p>The Welsh Government is rightly committed to achieving best value for money in all Public Services: sadly, the Department for Education and Skills spends £2billion each year only to provide the lowest standard of education in the UK. The Minister has said that “Education today is the Economy tomorrow”; if he is right, the outlook for Wales is truly bleak.</p> <p>When set against International PISA standards, the quality of Education in our Schools has been in catastrophic decline since Devolution. The Government says, in its defence, that delivering Public Services in Wales is hampered by poverty and by a dispersed population: but, GDP is lower in Northern Ireland and there are fewer people per square mile both in Northern Ireland and in Scotland.</p> <p>The Environment seems to be in safer hands. A derelict site cannot be developed without a prior Environmental Impact Assessment; no stone may be turned if there’s the faintest chance of a newt hiding under it or a migratory bird fossicking over it. Our Children, it seems, don’t warrant such care – there being no corresponding Educational Impact Assessment before each new initiative further disrupts the classroom.</p>	<p><i>(no comment)</i></p> <p><i>Some additional analysis of PISA 2015 results has been undertaken, including analysis of performance by medium of instruction and subject. The analysis showed that in reading and science, the performance of learners attending Welsh-medium and English-medium schools is comparable. However, in mathematics, learners attending the Welsh-medium schools outperform those in English-medium schools by 10 score points. There appears to be no clear link, therefore, between the medium of instruction and performance in the PISA tests.</i></p> <p><i>(no comment)</i></p>	<p>The Minister does not deny that his Department spends £2billion each year only to provide the lowest standard of education in the UK. The outlook for Wales IS truly bleak.</p> <p>The Minister has given-up forecasting a “top twenty” finish in the 2015 PISA rankings and, from his complacent responses, it appears that he has also given-up on the children of Wales. He says that there is no clear link between our poor PISA performance and the unique burden of the bilingual experiment, but what alternative explanation is there? If not “poverty” or “population density”, then perhaps Mr Lewis blames “lower IQ”, “less supportive parents” or “poor teaching”. He ought to know - but he doesn't say.</p> <p>The Minister does not deny that, without the protection of an Educational Impact Assessment, the children of Wales are more endangered than our wildlife.</p>

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Given that, for every aptitude and ability, 50% of the population is – by definition – below average; it was irresponsible of the Government to implement the Welsh Medium Education Policy without first having established that children with below average language skills have the capacity to be bilingual. In the absence of any contrary evidence, it seems entirely possible that it is this extra burden of the bilingual programme that is crippling our young people both for the PISA tests and for life.

We ask that the Welsh Medium Education experiment be abandoned – unless it can be clearly shown that its continuance is doing no harm.

There is ... no evidence to support his assertion that 50% of the population with 'below average' language skills do not have the capacity to become bilingual...

...The processes involved in learners' acquisition of skills in more than one language are complex. At various stages of these processes learners will be at different levels of development in their ability to use both (or more) languages. In that sense bilingual learners will not necessarily display the same level or type of ability in their two languages at any one stage of their development.

The Welsh Government is committed to seeing the Welsh language thrive. This is clearly set out in the Welsh language strategy A living language: a language for living. In addition, the Welsh Government published a Welsh-medium Education Strategy in 2010, outlining our vision to have an education and training system ... that enables an increase in the number of people of all ages and backgrounds who are fluent in Welsh and able to use the language with their families, in their communities and in the workplace.

The provision of Welsh-medium education is not an 'experiment'. Welsh-medium education has always existed in Wales and has become more evident since 1947, when the first state Welsh-medium primary school was opened, and the sector has grown rapidly since then, led primarily by parental demand. In 2014 around 30% of primary, middle and secondary schools in Wales were Welsh-medium or bilingual schools, with 22% of 7-year-old pupils assessed in Welsh first language.

The Petition does not assert that individuals with below average language skills DO NOT have the capacity to become bilingual. The allegation is, in fact, that it was irresponsible of the Government to implement the Welsh Medium Education Policy without first having established that children with below average language skills DO have the capacity to be bilingual.

It seems highly unlikely that the complexity, to which the Minister refers, makes language skills easier to acquire in two languages than in one; and, it remains entirely possible that it is the extra burden of the bilingual programme that is crippling our young people both for the PISA tests and for life.

Perhaps the Minister is untroubled by the medical maxim "first - do no harm": but even a mandated commitment to seeing the Welsh language thrive cannot be pursued at "all costs". Education today is the Economy tomorrow and Education today is in crisis. Welsh-speaking is a hobby; it is a skill without a benefit - and, so far as Tourism, Exports and Inward Investment are concerned, the language presents an obstacle where we should be building bridges.

That a mistake has a long history does not make it less of a mistake. Enthusiasts may want the language to survive but not even the most fervent enthusiasts can live their 21st century lives through the medium of Welsh. The modern day necessities of food labelling; instruction manuals for gadgets, appliances and vehicles; the internet; popular culture (film, literature, music) are all in English.

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The Government, it seems, is unable to distinguish between MUST and WANT: it must manage the Economy successfully, it must deliver a first rate Education and it must achieve best value for money in all public spending; in addition, as a perfectly legitimate national aspiration, it may want to foster a thriving Welsh language... but such whims cannot be allowed to interfere with absolute necessity.

The execution of Policy is said to be subject to intense scrutiny both from the Assembly and from other, supposedly independent, Public Bodies: it is, then, astonishing - that neither Assembly Committees nor Estyn nor the Auditor General's Office can produce any evidence to show:

- that Employers value and want workers who are bilingual in English and Welsh;

- that a person with below average language skills has the capacity to be bilingual;

Mr Hudson's rationale appears to be conflating two different considerations: the perceived negative effects brought about by Welsh-medium education, and the disadvantages faced by the school population as a whole (as evidenced, he claims, by low PISA results).

(no comment)

Mr Hudson also suggests that there is no evidence that employers value and want workers who are bilingual in English and Welsh. A report published in April 2014 Welsh language skills needs in eight sectors found that over a quarter of establishments (28 per cent) believed that it would benefit them to have more staff able to communicate in Welsh, or more staff with a higher level of Welsh language skills.

(no comment)

The DfES is failing and the Minister is defending that failure. By signalling a low skills workforce, low PISA scores deter inward investment: the causes of poor performance need to be identified and eliminated.

The Minister does not deny that a thriving Welsh Language **MUST NOT** be promoted at the expense of the absolute necessities (of a successful Economy, a first rate Education and best value for Public Money).

The findings of Welsh language skills needs in eight sectors are of limited value. Childcare; Social Care; Hospitality; Creative; Finance & Professional Services; Retail; Agrifood; and, Construction - do business largely in the Internal Wales Economy and the results reflect nothing more than the presence of Welsh speakers among the customer-care base. The needs of Inward Investors, Exporters and Wealth Creators, in the External Wales Economy, were simply not addressed.

The Minister offers no evidence to show that a person with below average language skills **DOES** have the capacity to be bilingual.

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- that it is NOT the extra burden of the bilingual programme that is crippling our young people in the PISA tests;

(no comment)

- that, with particular reference to our deteriorating PISA standings, the Government IS achieving best value for money with regard to its spending on Education;

(no comment)

- that the business of creating wealth is carried out in Welsh; or,

(no comment)

- that, in spite of all indications to the contrary, the DfES is fit for purpose.

(no comment)

As a further illustration of DfES folly, £12m is frittered away, each year, on the Welsh for Adults programme: not in the classroom, on “teaching”, but on administration. Worse, no-one can say how many (if any) learners have emerged fluent in Welsh.

He also suggests that £12m is frittered away, each year, on the Welsh for Adults programme: not in the classroom, on "teaching", but on administration. Of the £12m invested in the Welsh for Adults programme each year, approximately £10m of this is spent on the delivery of the courses themselves. The remaining £2m is spent on developing specific aspects of the programme e.g. tutor training, e-learning and improved marketing.

In summary, there is no evidence to suggest that Welsh-medium education has a detrimental effect on learners' attainment, and the Welsh Government has no intention of 'abandoning' the 'Welsh-medium experiment'. It is the provision of Welsh-medium education that has generated the greatest gains in the number of young people fluent and confident in their Welsh language skills, and there is no question that the education system has a vitally important role in securing the future of the language. As noted above, Welsh-medium education pre-dates the Welsh Government and the National Assembly for Wales, and is a key part of our education and training system in Wales, driven in the main by parental demand and specific local policies.

The Minister offers no evidence to show that it is NOT the extra burden of the bilingual programme that is crippling our young people in the PISA tests.

The Minister offers no evidence to show that the Government IS achieving best value for money with regard to its spending on Education.

The Minister offers no evidence to show that the business of creating wealth IS carried out in Welsh.

The Minister offers no evidence to show that the DfES IS fit for purpose.

The Minister is unable to say how many (if any) learners have emerged fluent in Welsh.

Compared to the other Regions of the UK, our GCSE and PISA results are in catastrophic decline. The single distinguishing feature of education in Wales is the Welsh-medium experiment but the Minister refuses to accept the possibility of a causal connection.

In a deliberate snub to the Petitions Committee and regardless of the latter's consideration of these matters, the Minister declares that the Welsh Government has no intention of abandoning the Welsh-medium experiment.

Dear Ms Driscoll

I attach a Data Sheet in support of " Welsh Medium Education – Garland or Albatross"

PISA Results for Wales (E) England : (S) Scotland : (NI) Northern Ireland						
2006		2009		2012		
Score	Rank	Score	Rank	Score	Rank	
484 495(E) : 506(S) : 494(NI)	33 rd	472 493(E) : 499(S) : 492(NI)	40 th	468 <i>Shanghai 613</i> 495(E) : 498(S) : 487(NI)	43 rd 1 st	
505 516(E) : 515(S) : 508(NI)	22 nd	496 515(E) : 514(S) : 511(NI)	30 th	491 <i>Shanghai 580</i> 516 (E) : 513(S) : 507(NI)	36 th 1 st	
481 496(E) : 499(S) : 495(NI)	29 th	476 495(E) : 500 (S) : 499(NI)	38 th	480 <i>Shanghai 570</i> 500(E) : 506(S) : 498(NI)	41 st 1 st	
5 GCSE A*-C 62.1%(E) : : 71.7%(NI)		65.5% 66.9%(E) : : 75.1%(NI)		65.8% 69.5%(E) : : 75.6%(NI)		