

Assembly Campaign takes off

Radical Wales reports on progress to date

On 26 November, 1988 in Merthyr Tydfil, the Campaign for a Welsh Assembly was successfully launched with contributions from, among others, Mr Ted Rowlands, MP for Merthyr, Mr Denzil Davies, MP for Llanelli and Mr Geraint Howells, MP for Ceredigion and North Pembrokeshire.

During the year prior to this first formal meeting of the Campaign, informal meetings had been held throughout Wales and Campaign groups established in Newport (Gwent), Ogwr, Merthyr, Aberdare, the Rhondda, Rhymney Valley, Swansea, Llanelli, Carmarthen, Pembrokeshire, Lampeter, Aberystwyth, Brecon, Llan-drindod, Mold, Bangor, Blaenau Ffestiniog and Cardiff, where the Campaign first began in the wake of the 1987 general election.

It was members of these groups that came together at the November 26 meeting,

attended by some 150 people, to launch the Campaign formally. At the meeting, a Campaign Council was elected, comprising fifteen members of the Labour Party, six members of the Social and Liberal Democratic Party, five members of Plaid Cymru, four members of the Welsh Communist Party, one member of the Green Party and four individuals with no party allegiance. This balance reflects the cross-party and non-party character of the Campaign.

Only a week earlier, the European Parliament had passed by a majority of more than 100 a report calling for the establishment of powerful, adequately financed regional parliaments throughout the European Community and since then events have moved on apace.

In the latest opinion poll on the subject (BBC Wales, December 1988), in answer to the question "Would you vote for or against an elected Assembly for Wales with substantial powers over public spending?" the percentages were (previous June 1987 poll figures in brackets): Yes 48% (41%); No 10% (10%); Undecided 22% (27%); Would not vote 20% (22%).

At the end of December, the Deputy leader of the Labour Party, Roy Hattersley MP argued strongly in favour of devolving power "to the nations and regions of Britain... a devolution of power to assemblies which possess the right both to legislate ind-

ependently of central government and to raise the revenue which finances their legislation" (*Independent* 30.12.88). Even Neil Kinnock was reported in the *Western Mail* (27.1.89) as having done a U-turn on the issues (a report which he later angrily denied saying a) he hadn't changed his mind b) that is to say, he'd always been in favour of a Welsh Assembly c) that is to say, of two or even three assemblies for Wales!)

But, comedy apart, there are exciting developments afoot. December also saw the first meeting of the European Commission's newly-appointed Assembly of European Regions where Wales is represented by Gwent County Councillor Ray Owen who commented in the *Western Mail* (19.12.88) that working with fellow-representatives of other small national and regional parliaments in the EC "has convinced me how wrong we were to oppose devolution in Wales in the 1970s." And gradually, local councils, some of the main opponents of Devolution in 1979 are beginning to register their support for the Campaign for a Welsh Assembly. (For further details about the Campaign, contact the Secretary, Maldwyn Pate, 55 Alfred St., Roath, Cardiff CF2 4TZ.)

Here, we are pleased to publish Professor Gwyn A. Williams' stirring address to the National Launch Conference in Merthyr on November 26th—and hope that the debate continues on the pages of *Radical Wales*.

Popular Front for Perestroika?

Address to the Launch Meeting of the Campaign for a Welsh Assembly Merthyr, 26 November 1988, by Gwyn A. Williams

It is an honour to be asked to speak to this meeting, It is a pleasure to speak here, in the town I was born in. Merthyr Tydfil has scored more firsts in Welsh history than Balliol College Oxford: the first real town in Welsh history, the first working class movement, the first working class press, the first Nonconformist radical and pacifist MP to be elected by popular vote, the first Labour M.P. in Wales. Many of the movements which reshaped modern Wales started here. I hope that today, Merthyr will add another honour to its standard.

But let's lift our eyes for a moment. If we look only to Westminster, we can feel ourselves to be some small freak people clinging to the edge of the British state. We are nothing of the kind. We are not alone. We belong to a great army of peoples, millions of them, who are now on the march. Look across the Channel. If you look across that Channel, you can't stop looking until you see Vladivostok. The momentous changes now under way in the Soviet Union will prove momentous for the human race. On next New Year's Day, the soviet republics of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Byelorussia together with the Ural city of Sverdlovsk and the Tatar autonomous region will switch to full regional self-financing. They will take full control of their own peoples and resources and the Soviet Union will have to re-negotiate its relationships with them. They are to be the vanguard of the struggle to transform the Soviet Union into the genuine federation of socialist republics

its creators dreamed of. In the Baltic states, with their troubled history, the drive is strongest. Already, with the agreement and in some areas the encouragement of Moscow, they have recovered their old national flags and anthems, they are establishing their own citizenship. Estonia, as we've seen, has the bit between its teeth but in fact an effective compromise is clearly in the making. God knows whether they'll succeed in the Soviet Union. We all know the difficulties and the strains; the ethnic violence of the Middle East has spilled over into the Caucasus. God knows whether they'll succeed. But what is certain is that we are going to confront a radically different society to our east and that its most striking feature will be the resumption of power by its constituent peoples in a more genuinely federal structure. And note, what has driven the Gorbachev generation into perestroika (reconstruction) is not only the renewal of the communist ideal but sheer, brute necessity. They cannot

regenerate their economy and society without radical constitutional reform. Brothers and sisters, we are in the same predicament. To talk of constitutional tinkering as a distraction from the urgent task of regeneration is fundamentally false. There can be no regeneration of our country without a radical restructuring of government on this Island of Britain.

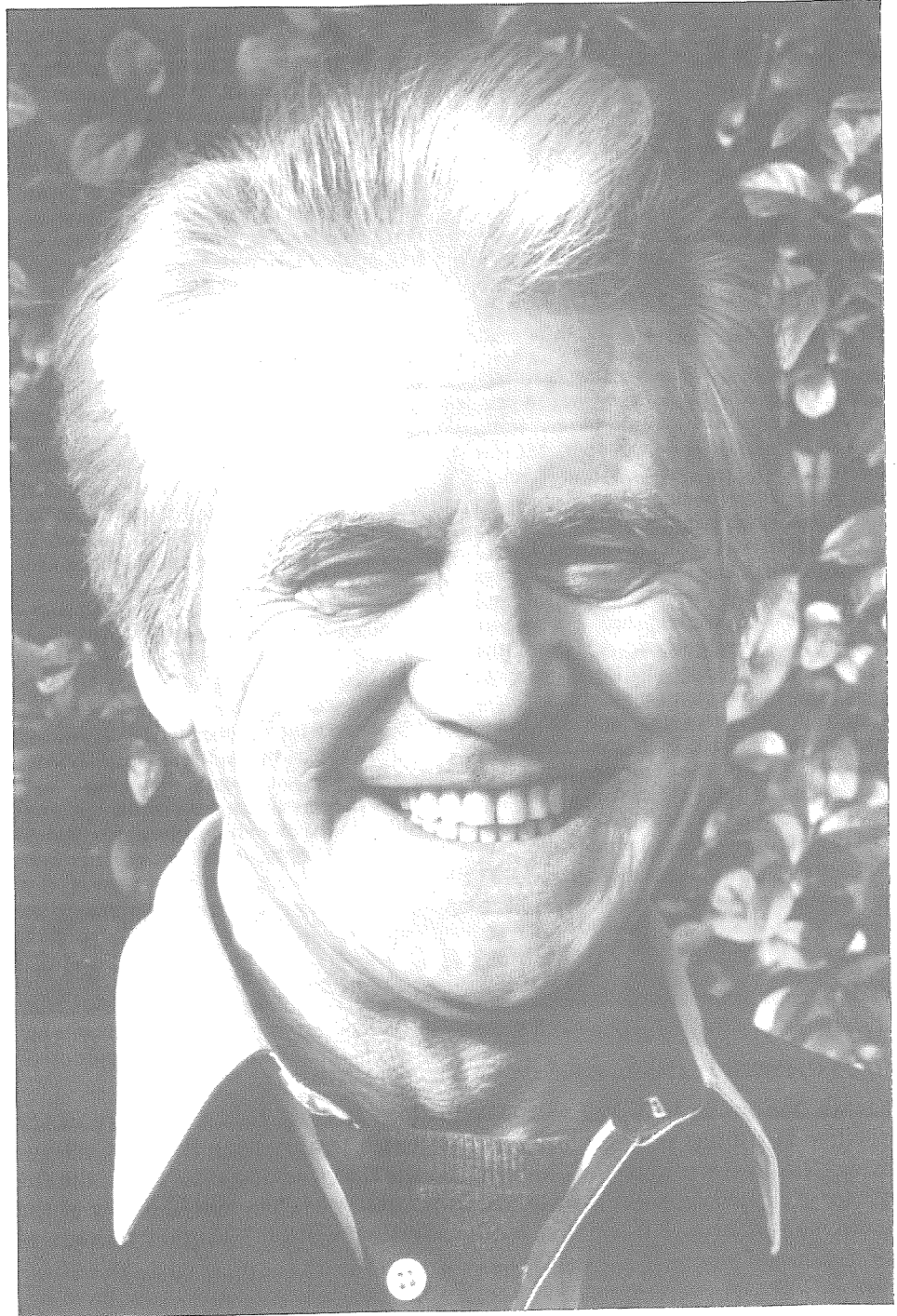
Despite our very different histories, it's worth looking long at Estonia. They are one and a half million people; we are twice the number. Many of them are passionately concerned to maintain their own language and culture in the face of the world language of Russian; many of our people are equally passionate about Welsh. Forty percent of the population of Estonia is non-Estonian; over a third of the population of Wales is non-Welsh. But at the critical vote in the Estonian Soviet, nearly every one of the representatives of the Russians in Estonia joined the native delegates, to call for a genuinely self-

governing Estonia. And it was Estonians, led by their own communist party who started the movement which is now sweeping the whole Soviet Union, the Popular Fronts. The Popular Front for perestroika. Comrades, Wales needs a Popular Front for Perestroika. And Friends, we are it.

Come nearer home and look at this offshore island in the context of western Europe. Eighteen months ago, the still unreformed European Parliament passed a resolution which constituted a charter of rights for the minority languages of Europe, which are spoken by millions of people. It is clearly central to the campaign for the Welsh language. Such a resolution does not have the force of European law, but it goes to the Commission for presentation to state governments. So far as this country is concerned, it might never have happened. Now the European parliament has gone much further. A few days ago, by a majority of 100, it passed a very radical resolution calling for real powers for the regions of Europe, for elected bodies to run them with the cash resources to manage their own affairs. The aim is to reduce the growing gap between the richer and the poorer regions. The fiercest resistance came from a centralist Spaniard and, of course, an English Tory MEP. Two features particularly appalled him. Parliament said these powerful elected assemblies of the regions should be able to by-pass their state governments and deal directly with the Commission and European agencies. And it insisted on minimum requirements for a region, so that it should be a real entity not some phoney PR exercise. That, for example, a Welsh Office with its cluster of dependent quangoes should actually BE a Welsh Office, controlled by the people of Wales, not by Whitehall and the City of London, in so far as you can distinguish them.

We are in for great storms in Europe as 1992 approaches, frontiers start to dissolve and state sovereignty starts to become redundant. 1992 obviously poses the threat of yet greater centralisation of corporate power, yet more deprivation for neglected regions like Wales. But there are strong countervailing powers, best summed up perhaps by the current drive for a social Europe, reducing regional differences, enshrining workers' rights, women's rights, civil rights, the rights of small peoples. Under the Greek commissioner, the regional and social funds are merging. There is a campaign against what they call the democratic deficit, to win real power for the European parliament which will in any case shuffle forward under the Single European Act.

Europe over the next decades will resemble Britain in the seventeenth century, as parliament moved to wrest power from the Crown. We are facing endless struggle as the European parliament, handicapped by the fifth column within it staffed by MEPs committed to the state power of their country, but helped by its own fifth column within the Commission and the European agencies, moves to wrest power from the Council of Ministers of the states. What will be running through these endless conflicts will be the struggle to transform Europe of the



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corporations and the states into a Europe of the peoples, which will be a Europe of the people. That struggle will not be confined to western Europe. In that struggle, the small nations, the little, lost peoples of Europe will play a crucial role, as the reformers well know. They can be the lever which can get the whole shuddering hulk afloat, they can be what Che Guevara called the little motor that starts the big motor going (as they are doing at this moment in the Soviet Union). Our place is in that struggle. For, of course, there is one glaring exception to the general rule. Guess who? Who are the separatists now? The regime we live under. Nearly every country in the EEC is either an outright federation or grants major autonomy to its regions and minority peoples. This regime is

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driving an already over-centralised state into a veritable paroxysm of centralisation, destroying local self-government, eliminating regional democracy, invading civil rights more and more blatantly, and in complacent arrogance erecting a formidably authoritarian system of government—with the precise aim of letting the market loose into every corner of our lives without let or hindrance in a kind of greed-driven anarchy which is destroying all sense of community, and whose presiding genius denies that society even exists.

We can see the consequences day by day in Wales. Is the whole of Wales to become an Isle of Dogs? We face a kind of communal death in this country. And if Wales dies, you know that something in you will die too. Are we to become a people of zombies? Is this community of communities called Wales to dissolve into a rabble? A rubble, the dust of history blown every which way by the winds of the world? There is only one answer to that. To quote my uncle T. Rowland Hughes—*cadw dy blydi chips*. Or to adapt the more dignified words of Dylan Thomas... we will not go gentle into this good night.

But remember what we are up against. The present regime can use and build on an existing British state structure which dates from 1688. We are unique in Europe. We are the only country in Europe now where there is no sovereignty of the people. The people are not sovereign in this country; sovereignty resides in the Crown-in-Parliament which is a constitutional fiction to mask the real, almost untrammelled power of an oligarchy, an oligarchy which has constantly shifted, changed and adapted over two centuries, now opening to admit selected new groups into the elite, now closing up again. We have no written constitution, because that might inhibit the action of a state government which is more and more arbitrary and removed from control. We did not win the vote in this country, the vote was doled out in carefully phased and rationed packages, so that the inner and paranoically secretive heartland of power survived unscathed. It has been an enormously successful regime which has conditioned the British people into a belief that this regime with its Westminster parliament is the only form of democracy which exists.

It faced two major crises, the upsurge of social Liberalism around 1900 and the breakthrough of Labour after 1945. Both of them won major gains for the people but both were tamed, channelled, contained. And as nation-states now lurch into their crisis of

obsolescence and a reactionary regime here launches its ruthless offensive, we can see that those gains were in the long run precarious. This regime is now undoing not only what Labour did, what Lloyd George did, it is even undoing what the Victorian reformers did. There is no safe hiding place from this state; it is essential that at the very minimum we build a shelter against it. Because it is now clear that the Marxist critique of social democracy was correct. You cannot use an existing state power to create a new and more just social order. You have to dismantle that state and reconstruct government on this island so that power returns where it belongs—to the people.

This means a long, hard struggle, but it is no pipe-dream; in the new Europe, the states are beginning to dissolve under the pressures of social, economic, cultural and, yes, spiritual forces much stronger than anything we here in Wales can command. We must make our campaign, alongside the Scots and as many of the English regions as we can rally on this island, one jaw of a nutcracker; the other will be our allies in Europe. We must close those jaws on this British state to start our own

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perestroika, our own reconstruction. This is already happening. This state's powers have begun to drain away to Brussels. In its Northern Ireland province, it has been at war for twenty years; the Scots are going to drive this island into a constitutional crisis whether we like it or not.

We in Wales face a more difficult job. We do not have the independent history of the Scots; our history has been a history of division, internal fragmentation which has often left us helpless. It is an elementary democratic right we are demanding. No-one is so stupid as to think we can stand alone. No-one wants to stand alone. We want to stand alongside our sister-peoples on this Island and in Europe. But we want to stand as ourselves and for ourselves not as creatures of somebody else. People say Wales is a nebulous concept. This is nonsense, it's no more nebulous than an idea of England. What IS poisonous is the capitalist definition of Wales by regions defined according to

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capitalist convenience. That definition defines us out of existence. There is a higher law than the law of the market; it is the law of survival, of communal survival. We have a border in Wales (Act of union). No-one proposes to make it a Berlin Wall, but it exists. Everything west of that line is Wales, everyone west of that line who commits herself or himself to Wales is a member of the Welsh people, I don't care what language they speak, I don't care what colour their faces are, I don't care where they come from. If they live in Wales and commit themselves to Wales, they are Welsh people. And it is the elementary democratic right of that Welsh people to take possession of its own country, to elect in full democracy an assembly which will take over the Welsh state which already exists in embryo and will exercise as much self-government as is humanly possible within the new Europe in which we will take our place.

The first essential is unity. No doubt many of us here will have different visions of the Wales, the Britain, the Europe we want to see. Many of us belong to different parties and are loyal to those parties. But there is one elementary democratic and human right on which we are all agreed. The right of the people of Wales to have their own assembly to establish some control over their own lives. Seize hold of that. Focus on what unites us, not what might divide us. After all, it is a pretty elementary claim, isn't it? We as a people have been around for 2,000 years. Isn't it time we got the key to our own front door? So take our example from the peoples of the Soviet Union; form our Popular Front. We're used to Popular Fronts in this part of the world. Take our motto from the embattled peoples of central America. *Un pueblo unido nunca sera vencido*. A people united can never be defeated. Let us unite and then let us try to unite enough of our divided, disoriented and deluded people—so that we can win power for the people. If we work

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together, if we work sensibly, if we work in good faith, if we steel ourselves for a long haul, if we work with our friends, in Scotland, in England, in Europe, including our friends in the Soviet Union, we will win. Because history is on our side. Though, as any Marxist will tell you, history needs a helping hand. Right then, let's give history a shove.

Power to the People. Cymru am Byth.