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## ‘Symbols of Justice’: the Welsh Language Society’s campaign for bilingual road signs in Wales, 1967–1980

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### Abstract

In this paper we provide a critical evaluation of the campaign for bilingual road traffic signs in late 1960s and 1970s Wales, examining how *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg* (the Welsh Language Society) came to see English language road signs as mundane, ubiquitous and oppressive symbols of anglicisation and of British/English government authority in Wales. We suggest a rethinking of Michael Billig’s concept of ‘banal nationalism’, arguing that while English language road signs may appear as banal symbols and technologies of government authority and control, their banality is only ever experienced from particular perspectives by partial constituencies. For Welsh language campaigners, English language road signs were experienced and criticised as eruptive and disruptive symbols of oppression, rule and colonisation, and in the paper we trace the genesis of the bilingual road signs campaign, British government reactions to proposals for bilingual signs, and the shift in policy which followed the very public support of hundreds of respectable Welsh professionals for the campaign from December 1970. We conclude the paper by examining the work of the Welsh Office’s Committee of Inquiry into Bilingual Traffic Signs (the Bowen Committee), and the subsequent disagreements between language campaigners, government scientists and politicians on the issue of language order. Throughout the paper we suggest that it was the ubiquity, functionality and materiality of road signs which made this one of the most effective campaigns carried out by the Welsh Language Society.

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## Introduction

On 10 November 1966 A. W. Powell, Clerk of the Urban District Council of the West Wales town of Machynlleth, wrote to the British government's Welsh Office to request official translations of 'car park' and 'public conveniences' for two signs they were planning to erect in bilingual Welsh/English form.<sup>1</sup> At first glance the request might appear to be a fairly straightforward request for translation advice, but the letter arrived at a significant moment in the cultural and political history of Wales and of the Welsh language. On 14 July 1966 the Welsh National Party *Plaid Cymru* had had their first Member of Parliament, Gwynfor Evans, elected to Westminster, while during the year *Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg* (the Welsh Language Society) had been engaging in increasingly militant acts of non-violent protest as part of their campaign to force the British state to give official (bilingual) status to the Welsh language. In October 1965 the government's Committee on the Legal Status of the Welsh Language (the Hughes-Parry Committee) had recommended that 'the principle of equal validity be adopted' such that 'the legal status of the Welsh language is raised to that of equality with English',<sup>2</sup> and language campaigners used the report to push the government to introduce a new Welsh Language Act and establish bilingualism in all areas of public life in Wales. The Welsh Office's Roads Division feared that bilingual 'car park' and 'toilets' signs in Machynlleth may set an unfortunate precedent:

We have already had requests from North Wales for the use of Welsh names on directional signposting. This is the first occasion on which we have had a request for the use of Welsh on informative signs but in view of the increased activity of Welsh Nationalists, it is almost certain that we will get many more such requests. ... The object of the request is obviously to further the cause of the Welsh Nationalists and to advertise the Welsh language in support of their cause. I do not consider that we should permit our system of signposting to be used to further the cause of any one particular political party. However great the pressure, I feel it most important that we should resist this.<sup>3</sup>

The Council's request was interpreted as a Nationalist act inspired by the party politics of *Plaid Cymru*, and this civil servant was determined that these everyday functional 'official' signs of government should not be hijacked for propagandist purposes. The cost, safety implications and aesthetics of bilingual signs were also raised as issues of concern. Bilingual signs would have to be larger or more numerous to include both Welsh and English, 'cluttering up the roadside with a multiplicity of signs distracting drivers' attention from the road ahead'.<sup>4</sup> It was suggested that 'a policy of obtrusive Welshness' through bilingual signs 'might either help or hinder' the economy. Tourists might be attracted by the difference and exoticism of Welsh language signs, while 'industrialists considering moving to areas' may be put off in cases 'where the road signs are a constant reminder that one is

<sup>1</sup> The National Archives of the UK, Kew [hereafter TNA], BD 43/139, Letter, AW Powell to Welsh Office, Roads Division, 10 November 1966.

<sup>2</sup> Committee on the Legal Status of the Welsh Language, *Legal Status of the Welsh Language*, London, 1965, 58.

<sup>3</sup> TNA BD 43/139, Internal memo, L.P. Cole to Mr. Leadbeter, 23 November 1966.

<sup>4</sup> TNA BD 43/139, Internal memo, P.J. Hosegood to J.W.M. Siberry, 19 January 1967.

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