

P-04-656 Establishing a Conscientious Objectors Day in Wales.**Correspondence: Petitioner to the Chair 11.01.16**

William Powell AM
Chair
Petitions Committee
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
CF99 1AA

Dear Mr Powell

Marking Conscientious Objector's Day in Wales

On behalf of the 'Conscientious Objectors Day Cymru / Wales' Committee I would first of all like to thank the Petitions Committee for its work on this matter thus far.

My response below contains points raised in response to recent correspondence by several members of the committee, including comments from UNA Cardiff, Cymdeithas y Cymod (Fellowship of Reconciliation in Wales), the National Justice and Peace Network and Quakers.

We are grateful for the instances mentioned by the Presiding Officer and the First Minister of recent and planned activities and events which have raised awareness and interest around the stories of conscientious objectors related to the commemoration of World War I. We are aware of these activities and are particularly grateful for the sponsoring by the Division of Museums, Libraries and Archives of the 'Faith in Action' exhibition as part of the 'Cymru'n Cofio' programme in 2016. We would however like to point out that these are all activities being planned and implemented by the Cymru

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dros Heddwch / Wales for Peace Project, based in the Welsh Centre for International Affairs, who are a partner in the 'Cymru'n Cofio' programme. What the petitioners were requesting was for the National Assembly itself to officially mark Conscientious Objectors' Day (i.e. 15th May) as part of its annual calendar and on a regular basis, in the same way as Remembrance Day is marked each year on 11th November. Our reasons for requesting that this should happen are outlined below.

There is mention in both the letter of the Presiding Officer and the First Minister to 'appropriate' commemoration. The names of 35,000 men and women of Welsh descent or who served in Welsh regiments and who perished in the First World War are commemorated in our Book of Remembrance, and it is fitting that we remember the supreme sacrifice made by them. In the same way, however, Aled Eirug who is currently completing his PhD on conscientious objectors in Wales has uncovered the stories of around 8,000 Welsh men and women who objected to war on grounds of conscience. This is a **significant number, including prominent national figures** such as the poet Gwenallt (who was imprisoned in Wormwood Scrubs), the Christian Pacifist George M Ll Davies (who has two benches to his honour in the crypt of the Temple of Peace where the Book of Remembrance is housed) and Emrys Hughes, Abercynon (who was later to become Keir Hardie's son-in-law). These individuals **represent important aspects of our Welsh heritage**, including the Nonconformist chapels and the Independent Labour Party. Others are of more humble origin, as flagged up by Michael Freeman's booklet about Conscientious Objectors in Ceredigion, but should nonetheless not be forgotten. Nor were Conscientious Objectors in any way a homogeneous group. It is important to remember that those who joined the Friends Ambulance Unit or the Army Medical Corps, for instance, did important and dangerous work tending the sick and the wounded in the field of war.

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It is appropriate to remember conscientious objectors also because **they represent men and women who have been willing to suffer defending the right to make a stance based on genuinely held beliefs and principles**, whether these be of a religious, moral or political nature. One can only imagine how brave one had to be to resist the tremendous pressure to enlist during World War One, and the social opprobrium this brought with it, as well as imprisonment and harsh treatment. Honouring the memory of these men and women is **fitting for an open democratic government such as the National Assembly**, which respects and supports a range of views and healthy debate in politics and public life. It is also appropriate that an **outward-facing government** should commemorate our own conscientious objectors in the light of those in other countries throughout the world who still suffer imprisonment and mistreatment because of their objection to armed combat on grounds of conscience – as is the case in countries such as South Korea, Colombia, Finland and Israel. As referenced in particular by the Presiding Officer, **young people in particular appreciate hearing a range of views and stories, and being able to debate and question on the basis of these**. This was certainly the case at the Schools' Conference in Wrexham in November last year.

We are heartened by the First Minister's comment that it would be fitting to continue to raise awareness of conscientious objectors as an element of our commemoration of the impact of wars on Welsh society. We look forward to being able to involve Welsh Government Ministers in events on and around 15 May in 2016 and in the future.

The question remains as to what sort of events and activities would be appropriate. These could include talks / lectures on figures of national importance or on aspects of research. At least one event is already planned

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for 2016, i.e. the launch by Jen Llywelyn of her new biography of George M LI Davies on 2nd March. It would be good if this event could be supported / sponsored by a Welsh Government Minister (if that is not happening already). Other activities could include a short commemoration service at the site of the stone to Conscientious Objectors in the Garden of Peace behind the Temple of Peace (conveniently opposite the Welsh Government offices in Cathays Park). It is also of interest to note that the Urdd's Message of Peace and Goodwill this year will focus on 'conscience and choice', reflecting the interest of young people in this issue. The exact form of annual commemoration should, however, vary from year to year, depending on circumstances and other planned events.

We look forward to working with Welsh Ministers in the future to raise awareness of conscientious objectors on or around 15th May each year. We believe that doing so would enable us to reflect a rounded and balanced view of Welsh history and heritage and promote healthy debate and discussion around a range of responses to war and peace in contemporary society, reflecting the National Assembly's role as an open and democratic government.

Yours sincerely

Jane Harries
(Secretary
Conscientious Objectors' Day Cymru / Wales)

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