

Agan Tavas—The Society for the Promotion of the Cornish Language

**SUBMISSION TO THE COMMISSION OF EXPERTS—
CORNISH LANGUAGE PARTNERSHIP**

History of the reason for the reformation of Agan Tavas

In September 1986 Dr Kenneth George published *The Pronunciation and Spelling of Revived Cornish* which set out his proposals for what came to be known as Common Cornish. This followed his thesis submitted at the University of Rennes. On the 13th June 1987 a meeting was called by the Cornish Language Board at the Friends' Meeting House, Truro, in order to discuss a proposal to adopt Dr George's theories with the aim that his system would eventually replace Unified Cornish, the spelling system which had been the basis of the revival since 1929. Cornish users were given only 2 weeks notice—others as little as 48 hours and that only by chance—that this meeting was taking place.

It was not surprising therefore that attendance at this meeting was only 40 people. Annual Language Weekends, (all Unified users), at this time were attracting about 200 people. The meeting was conducted through high register Cornish thus excluding less able speakers. A vote was taken, (despite there being no mention of this on the meeting's agenda) and this in the afternoon, when many of those present in the morning had left because of a meeting of the Cornish Eisteddfod. Those remaining made a decision to adopt Dr George's new spelling with 3 people voting against. At a meeting of the Cornish Language Board in the following July a vote was also carried to adopt Dr George's proposals and it was suggested that Unified Cornish would be phased out within a period of 5 years.

At no time was the major publisher of Cornish language books, Dyllansow Truran, consulted about this decision, nor was the Cornish Gorsedd, nor The Federation of Old Cornwall Societies who held the copyright to many of the Unified Cornish publications. Dr George's work was not subjected to independent assessment by academic Celtic scholars or linguists, within the U.K or the Irish Republic.

The Reformation of Agan Tavas

Agan Tavas (Our Language) was formed in 1987 as a society to encourage the growth of Cornish as a spoken language. It was only possible to become a member by invitation and only consisting of those observed to be regularly and fluently using Cornish. Those who became members were presented with a badge.

Following the decision of the Cornish Language Board in July 1987 a number of people were becoming increasingly concerned about the way in which the work of the past 60 years was being discarded. A meeting was therefore called at The Royal Institution of Cornwall in Truro

in May 1989 to try to resolve differences between those who wished to use Common Cornish and those who wished to retain Unified Cornish. A working group was chosen with the Grand Bard of the Cornish Gorsedd, Dr John Chesterfield, as chairman to try and find a compromise position. This met in October 1989 but no progress was made.

Therefore at the next annual general meeting of Agan Tavas members present voted to reform the society into an open membership organisation whose aim was to support Unified Cornish and to act as a “Language Board” for it and to support other forms of traditionally based Cornish. A new constitution was drawn up and an open meeting to which supporters of Unified Cornish had been invited was held in December 1989. Following that meeting the membership of Agan Tavas increased from 28 to 90—a threefold increase.

The Work of Agan Tavas

Since the time of its reformation Agan Tavas and its members have been engaged in a number of activities. We have maintained a list of classes using traditional forms of Cornish and we encouraged people who dropped out of Cornish activities because of the change to Common Cornish to become active again. This included a number of teachers of Cornish.

We have ensured the continuation of publications in Unified Cornish. This includes dictionaries grammar books and, through the company Spyrys a Gernow, literature in Unified Cornish. We revise and re-publish Unified texts and research historical texts.

The Cornish Language Board continued to provide exams in Cornish and we have encouraged students to take those exams. In a number of years more students passed the final Language Board exam and became Bards of the Gorsedd of Cornwall through the medium of Unified Cornish than through Common Cornish. Nevertheless, the total number of candidates per year taking Language Board exams declined after the introduction of Common Cornish from 72 in 1986 to 35 in 1989. We have been unable to obtain figures from the Language Board for the number of candidates taking exams, by orthography, after that date.

Agan Tavas has organised social events for members since its formation including fun days, trips out and residential language weekends. Attendance at our language weekends has averaged at 20 (plus or minus). We understand that attendance at the language weekends of C/Kowethas an Yeth Kernewek has fallen by two thirds since the introduction of Common Cornish. Our members organise church services in Unified.

The Introduction of Unified Cornish Revised

In 1995 Professor Nicholas Williams of University College Dublin published through ‘Kernewek Dre Lyther’ *Cornish Today*. Professor Williams was the first fully qualified professional Celtic scholar, with extensive linguistic experience, to study revived Cornish in depth. Professor Williams had carried out a full study of the traditional corpus of Cornish and in his book, *Cornish Today*, he compared the existing forms of revived Cornish, Unified, Common and Modern/Late against that corpus. He found them all to be lacking but, particularly, Unified less so than the others and he put forward amendments to Unified which made it more authentic and in some cases easier to learn.

Agan Tavas considered Unified Revised to be sufficiently close to Unified, a natural progression from the work of Robert Morton Nance, that it was quite happy for those members who wished to do so to use it. Since then we have supported it with publications while continuing to print some books in Unified. Agan Tavas has made two requests to the Cornish Language Board to provide examinations in Unified Cornish Revised but on each occasion our request was refused and no adequate reason given.

(Similar approaches by Cussel an Tavas Kernuack on behalf of Revived Late Cornish have also met with rejection).

We do not consider Unified Cornish Revised to be “a fourth form of Cornish” it is simply a number of amendments to an existing form and if Robert Morton Nance, that great pioneer of the language revival, had been alive we feel that he would have been totally supportive of those amendments to his system.

Membership of Agan Tavas

Membership of Agan Tavas has increased from the original 90 to about 140 including family members. We noticed an increase in membership after the publication of Professor Williams’s work. Members are of all ages and spread all over the world. We have found that people of a more scholarly background wishing to learn Cornish, after having the rationale behind the differing forms of revived Cornish explained to them, invariably decide to learn Unified Revised.

The Future

Agan Tavas is fully committed to the Single Written Form process. We believe that the divisions in the language movement over the last 20 years have been damaging to the promotion of revived Cornish and wasteful of resources, both human and otherwise. Nevertheless there is a fundamental difference of philosophy between the promoters of Common Cornish and ourselves. We do not believe that it is legitimate/academically sound to invent a completely new ersatz spelling system for a language that can only, and should only, be revived from the written records.

We have been able to co-operate with the users of Modern/Late Cornish to the extent that we have issued a joint statement on how the Single Written Form process should proceed and we attach a copy of that statement.

More recently members of Agan Tavas and Cussel an Tavas have been involved in negotiation to arrive at a form of Cornish, inclusive of Modern, Unified, and UCR which would be unobjectionable to both our memberships. This we believe is in the spirit of what is required by the Strategy Document to which all Cornish language groups have subscribed. Our compromise form of Cornish will be/has been presented to the Linguistic Working Group and your good selves.