I read something recently which made me consider how important language rights can be. Hywel Williams is the Plaid Cymru MP for Arfon in north-west Wales, and he writes a column in Y Cymro, the Welsh-language weekly newspaper. Last month he wrote about the inquiry which is being set up by the government in London at the moment to look into the subject of child abuse the length and breadth of Britain by the likes of Jimmy Savile and Cyril Smith, as well as gangs in northern England and abuse in care-homes in north Wales.

A report was published on this in 2000, but it paid no attention to the language spoken by children and staff in the care-homes. In Parliament last month Theresa May, the Home Secretary, made a statement about the new inquiry. Williams asked her whether any attention would be given to the Welsh language this time. May thanked him for raising this ‘interesting point’ that she had not considered previously, and promised that witnesses would be able to give statements on their experiences in Welsh or another language if they preferred.

But as Williams wrote in his column this matter raises deeper questions. How many of the children spoke Welsh? Were they more vulnerable in an English-speaking system?
Were the police aware of the language issue, and did they give the children the opportunity to give evidence in their language of choice? Was support and counselling through the medium of Welsh available to the children?

Though we tend to think, perhaps, that minority language rights issues are more symbolic than practical for the most part, this case reminds us that there can be serious consequences if the language people speak most naturally is not heeded and respected, especially when they have already suffered so much disadvantage and hardship in their lives. There are still thousands in Wales today who feel much more comfortable speaking Welsh about difficult or personal issues—for example when discussing their health with their doctor—than a language which is foreign to them that they rarely use.