

Cornish Constitutional Convention



- ▶ Established in the year 2000
- ▶ Petition submitted to 10 Downing Street in 2001
- ▶ Cross-party and cross-sector
- ▶ Not pressing for any form of separatism

The new millennium saw Cornwall off to a flying start with its establishment of the Cornish Constitutional Convention in November 2000. This is the body that in 2001 attracted ‘about 50,000’ signatures, some 10% of the population of Cornwall, in support of the following declaration:

“We, the People of Cornwall, must have a greater say in how we are governed. We need a Cornish Assembly that can set the right democratic priorities for Cornwall and provide a stronger voice for our communities in Britain, in Europe and throughout the wider world.”

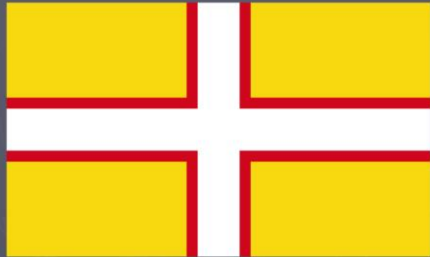
Following on from this, a petition calling for a referendum on the establishment of a Cornish Assembly was presented to 10 Downing Street on 12 December 2001, by, amongst others, Andrew George, the then Liberal Democrat MP for St Ives, Dick Cole, the Mebyon Kernow Councillor, and Andrew Climo of language group Agan Tavas (Our Language).

The Convention’s supporting case was presented in the publication entitled ‘*Devolution for One and All: Governance for Cornwall in the 21st Century*’, and the subsequent document ‘*The Case for Cornwall, Cornwall’s response to the Government’s Devolution White Paper*’, which argues that:

Cornwall is unique: it is the only region where a fully-constituted constitutional convention has been established, springing from a grass roots desire to achieve a devolved settlement. This has only been possible because of the unique circumstances that apply in Cornwall: Cornwall is a unique region, with specific characteristics and needs. (p. 4)

The Cornish Constitutional Convention is still arguing its case today and its website notes that ‘*the Convention is a cross-party, cross-sector association with a strong consensus of support both in Cornwall and elsewhere. It is not campaigning for any form of separatism or independence.*’ That said, although the website is still live, the Convention has not produced any new publications since 2009.

Cornwall as a County



- ▶ Nearly all English counties have their own flags
- ▶ Only one other English county has its own political party
- ▶ No other English county has its own language

Of the 39 traditional historic counties in England, all but Leicestershire has a flag registered with the Flag Institute. There is therefore nothing particular about the fact that Cornwall has one. Nevertheless, of these, only three (Cornwall, Essex and Kent) precede the twentieth century, and 29 of them were not registered until after the year 2000. It could be argued then, that county flags have become a bit of a fad during the current millennium. In addition, Essex and Kent, of course, were not originally counties, but kingdoms of the Anglo-Saxon heptarchy. There is a case, then, for arguing that all those counties which had a flag before the last century had previously been 'more than counties'. The website 'British County Flags' <https://britishcountyflags.com/about-2/> goes so far as to make the following comment:

'Certain territories of the United Kingdom however, with differing historical, cultural and linguistic legacies have raised flags, to mark themselves out as distinct and different. A Cornish flag has existed since at least the nineteenth century for instance and is considered to be a "national" flag reflecting a status of the territory and its people as an assimilated Celtic land, rather than just one amongst many English counties.'

There are even fewer historic counties with their own political party. Apart from Mebyon Kernow there is only one, and that is the Yorkshire Party, established in 2014, a move welcomed by Mebyon Kernow. The Yorkshire Party campaigns for a devolved Yorkshire Assembly within the UK. Yorkshire is, by some margin, the largest of England's traditional counties, being about one and a half times the size of Wales with a population greater than that of Scotland. Some areas smaller than counties have political parties though, such as the Canvey Island Independent Party, which campaigns for the re-establishment of its own district council, still inside Essex but not sharing a district council with 'the mainland'.

In 2005, the Cornwall Commonwealth Games Association was established, campaign for the right to field a Cornish national team in the 2006 Commonwealth Games. Their application was met with the rather blunt response from the Commonwealth Games Federation that '*Cornwall is no more than an English county*'. No other 'English county', however, has, or ever did have, its own language.

Images: The Flag of Dorset, registered in 2008 and the logo of the Yorkshire Party, founded in 2014.

Cornwall as a Country



- ▶ Numerous parallels with the Isle of Man
- ▶ A 'cultural' country not a political one
- ▶ Member of certain 'international' bodies such as the Celtic Congress, Celtic League and Conifa

In origin, a county was a territory ruled by a count, just as a duchy was ruled by a duke, a principality by a prince, a kingdom by a king, and so on. There is a tendency in the UK to believe that only kingdoms can be independent countries, but this is not the case. Independent members of the United Nations include the principalities of Andorra, Liechtenstein and Monaco, not to mention the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. In theory, then, a county could also be a country, although none currently are.

It is as one of the six 'Celtic nations', however, that Cornwall is most readily acknowledged as a country rather than a county, despite the fact that none of these six are independent nation-states over all of their territory. Cornwall was eventually accepted into the Pan-Celtic Congress in 1904 after postponement of its original application in 1901 due to concerns about the status of the Cornish language at that time. It is also a member of the more political Celtic League. Although linguistically closer to both Brittany and Wales, it is with the Isle of Man that Cornwall shares the most parallels. Both of these are the smallest countries in their relative Brittonic (Cornish) and Goidelic (Manx) halves, and both have lost their indigenous languages at community level, although Manx ceased to be a living language in the twentieth rather than the nineteenth century. The Isle of Man is considerably smaller than Cornwall in terms of both territory and population, but has the 'benefit' of being an island, rather than a peninsula, which makes separate treatment easier. A self-governing Crown dependency which is not even part of the UK, it sends its own team, unlike Cornwall, to the Commonwealth Games.

Cornwall is, though, like the Isle of Man, a member of Conifa (the Confederation of Independent Football Associations), a body which exists for territories which are not fully independent sovereign states but who perhaps have a primary identity other than their official nationality. Zanzibar, Northern Cyprus and Abkhazia are all members, as are four teams from the British Isles, the Isle of Man, Jersey, Cornwall (Kernow FA) – and Yorkshire! The word 'country' has various interpretations in English, and it is perhaps as a distinct territory with its own features and identity that Cornwall can most easily be considered a country. It is not a nation-state.

Image: car sticker showing the flags of the six Celtic nations.

The Cornish Tick-box Campaign

out your benefit, but it may help us improve our service in the future.

and Asian	☐	British/African Black/Black	☐
	☐	British/Black/Any other	☐
ther Asian/Asian	☐	British: Any other Chinese, any other	☐
n Asian/Asian	☐	claimant declined Cornish British	☐
ani Asian/Asian	☐	British/African Black/Black	☐
adeshi Asian/Asian	☐	Gypsy/Traveller/Cornish	☐
ther Black/Black	☐		
ean Black/Black	☐		

- ▶ Seeks recognition for Cornish as an 'identity' option
- ▶ 'Write-in' option allowed for 2001
- ▶ Tick-box refused for both 2011 and 2021 censuses

'Ethnicity' is a difficult term to define, and a sensitive issue, with some equating it to 'race', others to 'national identity' and yet others to 'shared cultural characteristics' such as language or religion. This results in a complex and complicated list of ethnicities which can be very controversial. There are some official forms which have offered Cornish as an option, such as the housing benefits form (lower image above) provided by Cornwall Council itself, which included 'Cornish' in the same tick-box as 'Gypsy' and 'Traveller', causing something of a furore. The Council later issued an apology.

The primary target for campaigners, however, is the census form used to collate information on the population of the UK every ten years. Questions on ethnicity have been asked on UK census forms since 1991, and in 2011, Question 15 asked 'What is your national identity?' with options for English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish, British and 'Other' which had to be written in. Respondents could choose as many as they felt applied. Question 16 asked 'What is your ethnic group?' with English/Welsh/Scottish/Northern Irish/British all listed together as one option under the 'White' heading.

Some campaigners want 'Cornish' to be added to these options (as per the top image above). In 2001, 'Cornish' was allowed for the first time as a 'write-in option', but with no 'tick-box'. A House of Commons motion in favour of registering Cornish as a nationality for the 2011 census was defeated, but Liberal Democrat MP for Newquay and St Austell, Stephen Gilbert, encouraged people to describe themselves as Cornish anyway, wherever questions on identity were raised, including those related to country of birth, ethnic group and national identity.

In 2018, a UK government white paper announced that Cornish would not be available as a tick-box option on the 2021 census form either, with the Office of National Statistics describing it as 'too localised' an issue to warrant being on a national census. This is despite the UK government recognising the distinct identity of the Cornish people in 2014.

National Minority Recognition



- ▶ UK ratification of two European treaties
- ▶ Cornish language officially recognised in 2002
- ▶ Cornish people officially recognised in 2014

On 24 April 2014, Danny Alexander, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, announced that the UK government had added the Cornish people to its officially recognised national minorities under the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. This is a treaty of the Council of Europe (a very different body to the European Union) which was ratified by the UK in 1998. The press release on the government's own website noted that:

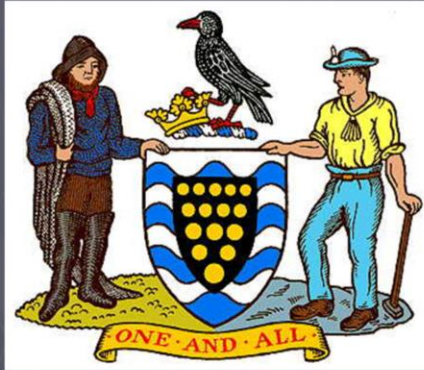
'The decision to recognise the unique identity of the Cornish, now affords them the same status under the European Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities as the UK's other Celtic people, the Scots, the Welsh and the Irish. For the first time the government has recognised the distinctive culture and history of the Cornish.'

In similar fashion, the UK government had previously, in 2002, added the Cornish language to another of the Council of Europe's treaties, namely the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages. This meant that the UK government 'recognised' the Cornish language, alongside Welsh, Scottish Gaelic, Irish, Scots and Ulster Scots, as official minority languages of the UK.

These two treaties, then, supposedly gave both the Cornish language and the Cornish people official acknowledgement as minorities by the UK government. The purpose of these treaties is, of course, to offer these minorities some level of protection. However, as we have seen, this new status was insufficient to ensure that Cornish would be added to the 2021 census form as one of the 'national identities' available to respondents. As Scottish, Welsh and (northern) Irish can all be chosen, the UK government's claim that ratification of the treaty affords the Cornish the same status as these other peoples must be called into question, given that allowing a people the right to acknowledge their membership of such a minority must surely be one of the most fundamental ways in which a member state can respect its ratification of this treaty.

In the 2001 census, 37,500 people identified themselves as being of Cornish ethnicity, rising to 84,000 in 2011, with 10,000 of these being outside of Cornwall. This is despite having to write it in under the 'Other' option rather selecting it from a list. That said, it still represents a minority of the population.

Cornwall without Cornish?



- ▶ Kingdom
- ▶ Principality
- ▶ Duchy
- ▶ Earldom
- ▶ Where next for Cornwall without, or perhaps with, Cornish?

Despite undergoing revival attempts more or less ever since, Cornish died as a community language at the turn of the nineteenth century. Its loss also seems to have influenced the way outsiders looked at Cornwall, with fewer people treating it as ‘one of the four divisions of Britain’ as Polydore Vergil had done in the sixteenth century. Two hundred years after the demise of the language, at the turn of the new millennium, that other bastion of Cornish identity, the mining of metals, also came to an end with the closure of South Crofty Mine in 1998.

Nevertheless, the current century has seen both the Cornish language and the Cornish people receive official recognition by the UK government, and an increasing number of people self-identifying as being of Cornish ethnicity. Added to this, visual symbols of Cornwall, such as the flying of St Piran’s flag are very much on the increase. The desire to retain a distinct Cornish identity, therefore, appears to be strong. However, in the opposite direction, centralising forces are also at work, and English identity in Cornwall is at least as strong.

Richard Carew, in his *Survey of Cornwall*, noted that ‘*Cornwall, as an entire state, hath at diuers times enioyed sundry titles, of a Kingdome, Principality, Duchy, and Earledome;*’ (p. 77) and we have here briefly considered Cornwall both as a county and a country. We can now only wait and see what status the future will hold for Cornwall without, or perhaps with, Cornish.

Image: Arms of Cornwall Council, showing a fisherman, a tin miner and a Cornish chough holding a ducal crown above the standard of the Duke of Cornwall. One and all (*Onen hag oll* in Cornish) is the Cornish motto.