

Welsh will fight to keep Sundays wet

by Andrew Don

Welsh licensees are getting ready for battle in a bid to keep their pubs open on Sundays.

Licensing reforms, announced last month, propose to bring an end to the Welsh Sunday opening polls – a system that allows people to vote on whether they want pubs to open or stay closed on Sundays.

In Wales' only "dry" region, Dwyfor, publicans already fear they'll be trapped in the Dark Ages if they lose what's proposed to be the last "poll" in 1996.

Dwyfor is a region in North Wales that stretches about 30 miles from West of Caernarfon to Pwllheli, and is thought to be the only place in Western Europe where alcohol is still banned on Sundays.

Five polls have been held since 1961 and Dwyfor is now the only district remaining dry in Wales.

But it is not only the estimated 200-odd licensed

premises in Dwyfor which are at risk of losing out. Licensees in other regions fear their wet status could be reversed to dry if the anti-alcohol lobbies get going.

The main danger comes from the apathy of voters. In the 1989 polls, the turn-out was less than nine per cent, according to the Welsh Office, and the cost to local authorities was £500,000.

Wet to become dry?

The Welsh Office says the poll system is hard to keep when it comes down to a small group of electors, who may not represent the views of the district. Businesses too suffer under the poll system which creates uncertainty and discourages long-term investment.

Clive Schofield of the Phoenix, in "wet" Camarthen in South West Wales, says licensees' own apathy in drumming up support from local voters, could mean his "wet" status may be reversed.

Licensed Victuallers Wales'

executive officer Clive Coles agrees. Licensees must encourage their customers to vote by whatever means including "knocking on doors".

Such apathy in voting has caused "narrow scrapes" in the past.

● In 1989 Ceredigion escaped "dry" status by the skin of its teeth – a mere 848 votes

● And "dry" Dwyfor only missed "wet" status at the last poll by 1,389 votes a mere 6.3 per cent of the electoral register

Coles said: "People can't be complacent." And the Welsh Office agreed. "Even areas that have gone wet, could change to dry," a spokesman warned.

This could result in a "patchwork" effect of dry and wet areas and in these circumstances Welsh Minister of State Sir Wyn Roberts would have to consider separate legislation to reverse the situation.

Under the Government's proposed reforms final polls will be held in 1996. Then they will be

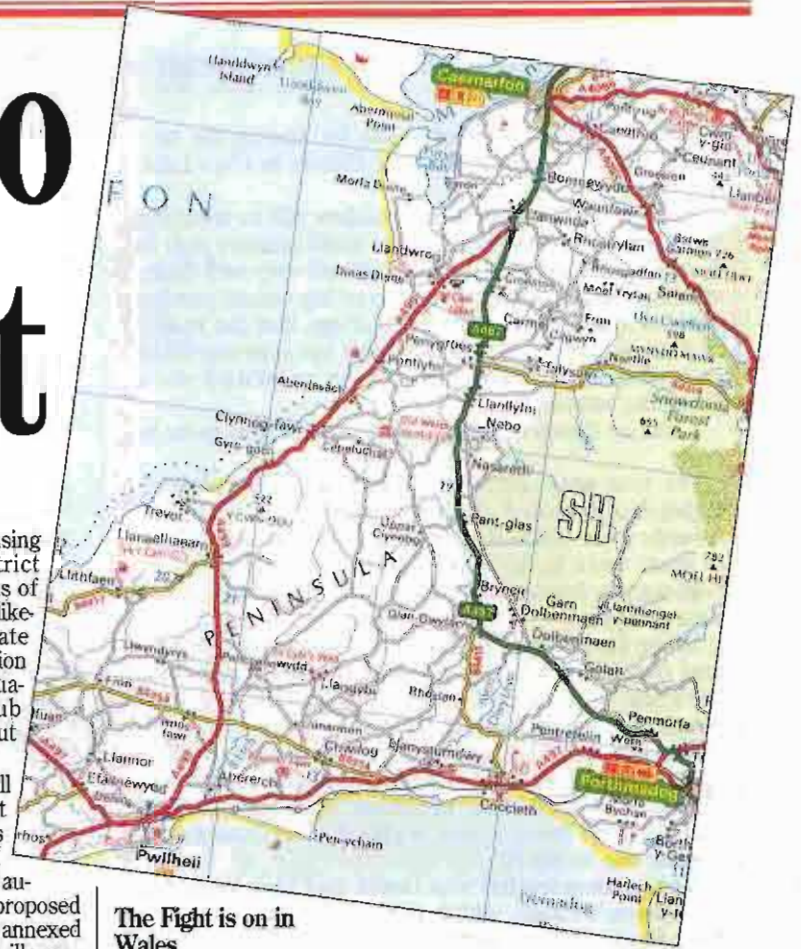
abolished and the licensing position for each district would remain fixed as of that date. Only the "unlikely" prospect of separate Welsh licensing legislation could reverse that situation and Dwyfor's pub doors could remain shut forever.

Dwyfor's situation will also depend on support from their neighbours in Meirionnydd and Arfon. For under local authority reorganisation proposed for 1994, Dwyfor will be annexed to these two areas, and will cease to exist in its own right.

And Dwyfor's licensees plan to campaign "like crazy" to change their dry status to wet.

Last chance

While it will remain dry until 1996, its annexation will bode well for its chances for wet status. But Coles said: "The wet campaign can't afford to relax. The dry campaign will be a powerful force because this is



The Fight is on in Wales

its final chance."

Keith Ross of the Sportsman in Nefyn, Dwyfor, said it was "a highly emotive issue ... I lose a year's trading every seven years."

And Clive Schofield of the Phoenix said he was going to "campaign like mad" to make sure he stayed "wet".

"The campaign this time will be tougher than ever. We have to get people to realise this will be the last

poll and if they don't vote their pubs could close for good," he said.

The omens are optimistic. Since the polls began a wet district has never reverted to being dry and there has been a steady trend to wet areas.

Gwyn Jones of the Penlan-fawr, Pwllheli, Dwyfor, plans to campaign hard. But he was confident that with the change in council boundaries, Dwyfor would become wet.