PART 3 - THE BSL RECOGNITION CAMPAIGN

GAVIN LILLEY
We demand that the British Government recognise British Sign Language (BSL) as a bona fide language in its own right. It has its own linguistic values, grammar and syntax. There are 70,000 people who use it as their first and/or preferred language.

Deaf organisations and the Deaf community had been struggling to achieve this for years, to no avail. Hundreds of letters were written, thousands of meetings were held with MP’s, but nothing happened.

The first steps:
National BSL Marches
Hearing people are the majority. They run the government, the courts, the authorities and fill the corridors of power. We need their support.

Therefore publicity is the best way to get our message across.

What is the best way to achieve this?

**MEDIA ATTENTION!**

There had been 17 BSL marches all over the UK, four of these were national marches in London. The media coverage was next to nothing. Therefore an alternative method was initiated:
ACTIVISM

But what is it?
Public Demonstrations
The British Deaf Association’s controversial media / public campaigns.
Deaf Empowerment – placing Deaf people in key positions.
Vigils
Road Blocks
Many Deaf people & BSL users were arrested during the BSL recognition campaign.
“THE WOLVES SIX”

“WOLVES SIX” ARRESTED FOR BLOCKING ROAD
Five Deaf people and one hearing woman have been charged with obstructing the highway after they blocked a road to get media attention on BSL recognition.

Known as the 'Wolves Six', they blocked off the Prince's Square traffic island in Wolverhampton after an official Rally for BSL Recognition on April 7.

An estimated 30 demonstrators acted after the 300-strong Rally, and the six were arrested after a pub door supervisor phoned the police. Their demonstration apparently brought the city to a standstill for over an hour.

Community Pages 650 Environment 148
Many of these demonstrations were organised by the Deaf Liberation Front. Their website can be seen at:

www.deafpowernow.org
The 400-strong road block at Trafalgar Square, London
British Sign Language was finally recognised on March 18th 2003.

PRESS RELEASE Tuesday 18 March 2003

Deaf organisations today welcomed the government's recognition of British Sign Language.

"BSL recognition "historic step forward"…

"We have been waiting 162 years for this"…

"This is the most important event in the history of Britain’s second largest indigenous minority language"…

"The recognition of British Sign Language (BSL) by the Government has enormous significance. It means the recognition of a language first recorded in 1575 and the first or preferred language of one of the UK’s largest indigenous linguistic minorities: some 70,000 deaf sign language users. The self confidence this will give deaf people will lay a basis for greater participation in the economic and cultural life of the country, and for greater equality of citizenship.

Recognition by itself is only a beginning. It opens the door to establishing the teaching of BSL as a language in mainstream schools, both for deaf and for hearing school students. It paves the way to greater access to justice in the legal system. It lays a foundation for better diagnosis and treatment in the health services, and more effective delivery to deaf people of the information they need to live healthy lives and will enhance opportunities for research involving the British Deaf community and their language.

Recognition is a challenge, but a most welcome challenge. We congratulate the Government on taking this historic step forward."
However, there is still controversy over the actual status of BSL recognition.

Deaf leaders argue that this was simply a form of ‘tokenism’, that the government only recognised BSL as a language verbally – nothing is written down, no laws have been made concerning the rights of BSL users.

£1.5 million was funded by the Government for further research and development of BSL resources. This was divided between a number of Deaf organisations, BSL projects, etc.

This is not enough money. Though this is a step in the right direction, why has the campaign slowed down? The fight for BSL legalisation continues.