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T3.40  
Scottish Parliament

In 2014 Scotland Welcomes the World



13 March 2014

Dear Dave

## CONSIDERATION OF PETITION [PE1500](#)

Thank you for your letter of 31 January. I apologise for the delay in replying.

Your letter asks two questions:

- What are the Scottish Government's views on what the petition seeks and the discussions that took place at the meeting on 28 January?
- In considering the merits of a national bird, would the Scottish Government consider undertaking a public consultation and debate on this issue, similar to that for the national tree?

I will address these in turn.

First, on the question of whether the Scottish Government supports the proposal that the golden eagle should be declared Scotland's national bird, I would like to say how much I personally agree that this bird is a magnificent creature that is strongly associated with Scotland's wild places. The fact that it has long been a bird that people have noted and remarked upon is clear from the very many old Scottish or Gaelic place names that are associated with eagles. I have no doubt that for very many people spotting a golden eagle is a thrilling experience that is the high point of a visit to the mountains or islands.

I also agree with the comments that were made in the evidence session about the need to conserve and protect the golden eagle (and other raptor species) from the unacceptable criminal persecution that is still too frequent in some parts of Scotland.

Having made the points above, I am not yet convinced that there are compelling arguments in support of having a national bird, but I am grateful for the opportunity to explain why that is the case. Wildlife crime, and raptor persecution in particular, needs to be addressed by

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effective and targeted law enforcement measures. I am absolutely committed to achieving an end to raptor persecution, and I would like to note, in passing, that we do have a strong legislative framework in place, and last summer I announced a package of three further measures to tackle the problem. I do believe that we need to allow a period for these measures to have an impact, but I have also been clear that if further measures prove to be required, we will have no hesitation in doing what is necessary.

If steps were to be taken to consider nominating a national bird, it strikes me that the Scottish Government, the Scottish Parliament and others would want to give the idea more thought – about what such an approach would say about Scotland as a place and about its people and their values and aspirations. Also, just as importantly, what the species chosen means to all the people of Scotland. I am in no doubt that the golden eagle would potentially be a front-runner in any such consideration, but I think it would be somewhat presumptuous of the Scottish Government to put it forward as the only candidate for national bird status on the basis of a newspaper poll in 2004, an SNH poll last year which asked a different question, and was not presented as leading to anything as official as a declaration and the recent petition.

This brings me to your second question. To answer it simply, there is in place a process that was used to proclaim the Scots Pine as Scotland's national tree and to seek Parliament's endorsement of the declaration. If we were to decide that we wanted to have a national bird also, we would expect to replicate that process. In the meantime, I suggest that it might be helpful to widen the debate on the value and implications of further national symbols. I think this is probably more than just an ecological or environmental issue. There may, for example, be value in taking the views of the Economy, Energy and Tourism Committee, the Education and Culture Committee, as well as from your Committee and the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee.

In conclusion, I am not opposed to the idea of the golden eagle as a national bird. I do think, however, that, if we were to designate the golden eagle as Scotland's national bird, we would be in danger of pre-judging the view of the people of Scotland, and that the Scottish Parliament might wish to reflect on the value, purpose and means of choosing further national symbols.

Kindest regards



**PAUL WHEELHOUSE**