

SCOTTISH INDEPENDENCE REFERENDUM BILL

WRITTEN SUBMISSION FROM ARTHUR CORMACK

I am aware of you call for evidence in relation to the above Bill to be submitted by 6 June. I shall endeavour to submit more fully, but would like to offer this interim submission to the Committee.

It is my position that the ballot paper for the referendum on Scottish independence should be available in Gaelic as well as in English. A bilingual version of the ballot paper would be best for reasons of cost-effectiveness as well as ensuring Gaelic is seen by all who participate in the vote.

My position would give the referendum a uniquely Scottish flavour, would support legal requirements and the implementation of the *National Gaelic Language Plan*. Not to include Gaelic in a historical process such as the referendum, to pass up an opportunity such as this, calls into question why there are measures in place to promote Gaelic.

The Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 confirms Gaelic's status as an official language of Scotland and calls for equal respect for Gaelic with English. Raising the status of the language is one of the key things that needs to happen if Gaelic is to be revitalised in Scotland. Visibility of the language is also extremely important and its exclusion from the ballot paper may lead some to question whether the ballot promotes equal respect for Gaelic with English.

Nevertheless, it is the Scottish Government's position that it proposes to follow 'normal practice' for elections and print the ballot paper in English only. The referendum is not like a normal election where there may be multiple candidates standing in a constituency. In those circumstances I could see the burden of translating all the names, party names etc might be onerous and expensive. In the referendum everyone will be asked the same question, which should make Gaelic's inclusion much more straightforward.

It is the Scottish Government's position that it proposes to make public information and other explanatory materials available in other languages, including Gaelic. This position fails to acknowledge the status enjoyed by Gaelic in Scotland. Gaelic should not be treated like "other languages". Unlike "other languages", Gaelic is an official language of Scotland and should be used as widely as possible in official documents and in national events, of which the forthcoming referendum is certainly an example.

In correspondence on these matters, the Deputy First Minister's officials have cited the precedent of the 1997 devolution referendum. In 1997, Gaelic was not an official language of Scotland, there was no *National Gaelic Language Plan* in place, nor a Scottish Government that had a Gaelic Language Plan of its own outlining the measures it would take to ensure Gaelic is promoted.

The Scottish Government's current position follows the Electoral Commission's conclusion that, in tests, people who speak Gaelic as a first language could understand the question easily and experienced no difficulties in completing the ballot paper and voting the way they intended. Using this conclusion as evidence to support Gaelic's exclusion from the ballot paper misses the point somewhat. The Electoral Commission acknowledged it had not been asked by the Scottish Government to test a bilingual version of the ballot paper. That it was not asked can only be down to a lack of knowledge, on the part of the officials involved, as to Gaelic's status.

I am a Gaelic speaker and, of course, I could understand the question if it were posed in English only. But this is less about ability in Gaelic or English, or any other language, and more about ensuring Gaelic is used as widely as possible in Scottish public life. It is about acknowledging Gaelic's status in Scotland and promoting its use, acting within the spirit of the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 as well as delivering the outcomes called for in the latest *National Gaelic*

Language Plan. It about the ability to choose to use one of Scotland's official languages, my language of choice and that of many others, in voting on Scotland's future.

Now that the referendum question has been set I can see no reason at all as to why a bilingual version of the question should cause anyone any difficulty. It could look like this:

	YES <i>BU CHÒIR</i>	NO <i>CHA BU CHÒIR</i>
Should Scotland be an independent country? <i>Am bu chòir do dh'Alba a bhith na dùthaich neo-eisimeileach?</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

I believe Bòrd na Gàidhlig has suggested the version on the following page. There are many ways in which Gaelic and English can co-exist on a piece of paper whatever design ends up being used.

The important point, however, is about the principle of the use of Gaelic. Strengthened policy on Gaelic over recent years should have a positive bearing on how Gaelic is treated in 2013, as opposed to the way it was treated in 1997. If an Act of Parliament and various plans is not going to change the way Gaelic is treated and promoted, why have them?

- Perhaps the Committee could ask Ministers to reconsider proposals to follow an outdated precedent and to, instead, follow the lead provided by the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 and the *National Gaelic Language Plan*.
- Perhaps the Committee could look to the experience of other countries, such as Wales, where I am quite certain a referendum on any issue would not take place without the inclusion of the Welsh language.
- Perhaps the Committee could suggest that the Electoral Commission be asked to test a bilingual version of the referendum question.

I shall, hopefully, be in a position to put forward a fuller submission but would be grateful if you could acknowledge receipt of this interim submission, which I am content to be made public.

Leis gach deagh dhùrachd

7 May 2013

BALLOT PAPER
PÀIPEAR BAILEIT

Vote (X) ONLY ONCE
Bhòt (X) AON UAIR A-MHÀIN

Should Scotland be an independent country?
Am bu chòir do dh'Alba a bhith na dùthaich neo-eisimeileach?

YES
BU CHÒIR

NO
CHA BU CHÒIR