



Briefing for the Public Petitions Committee

Petition Number: [PE01483](#)

Main Petitioner: Iain Macleoid

Subject: Dreach da-chananach de cheist an refreinn air neo-eisimeileachd
Bilingual version of the independence referendum question

Calls on the Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to review its intention not to provide a bilingual (English/Gaelic) version of the ballot paper for the independence referendum

[A' gairm air Pàrlamaid na h-Alba ìmpidh a chuir air Riaghaltas na h-Alba ath-bheachdachadh a dhèanamh air an rùn aca gun dreach dà-chànanach (Beurla/Gàidhlig) de phàipear baileit an refreinn air neo-eisimeileachd a sholarachadh.]

Background

The [Scottish Independence Referendum Bill](#) was introduced in the Parliament by the Scottish Government on 21 March 2013. The provisions of the Bill set out the details of the Referendum to be held on 18 September 2014, including the wording of the question and the ballot paper to be used.

The [Gaelic Language \(Scotland\) Act 2005](#) was passed by the Scottish Parliament with a view to securing the status of the Gaelic language as an official language of Scotland commanding equal respect to the English language.

The ballot paper for the Welsh referendum on extending the powers of the Welsh Assembly, held in March 2011, was a bilingual ballot paper ([SI 2010/2837](#)).

Scottish Government Action

Under the terms of the Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 the Scottish Government prepared its first [Gaelic Language Plan](#) in 2010. The plan set out how the Government would use Gaelic in carrying out its business and how it would enable the use of Gaelic when people interact with the Government.

Under section 2 of the 2005 Act Bòrd na Gàidhlig produced a National Plan for Gaelic.

The Bòrd's guidance states that giving Gaelic equal respect does not automatically mean identical treatment for Gaelic and English, or that a particular level of Gaelic provision must be made available in all circumstances.

The [Scottish Independence Referendum Bill: Equality Impact Assessment](#) produced by the Government to accompany the Bill did address the issue of minority languages, including Gaelic.

In February 2013, Angus MacDonald MSP lodged a parliamentary question (PQ) which asked the Scottish Government whether it planned to provide a Gaelic language version of the independence referendum ballot paper.

In her response to the PQ the Deputy First Minister (DFM) confirmed that the Scottish Government did not plan to provide a Gaelic language version of the ballot paper.

She pointed out that, as part of the question assessment process, the Electoral Commission had tested the proposed referendum question with voters who speak Gaelic as their first language. The Commission found, and [reported](#), that those participants could understand the question easily and experienced no difficulties in completing the ballot paper.

The DFM also confirmed that, on request, voter information will be available in other languages, including Gaelic. In addition, following standard practice for all elections, if they consider it appropriate, counting officers may also choose to display a translation of the ballot paper at polling stations.

Scottish Parliament Action

The Referendum (Scotland) Bill Committee has recently completed its Stage 1 evidence gathering on the general principles of the Scottish Independence Referendum Bill. The Committee received four written responses which concentrated on the absence of Gaelic on the ballot paper.

In its submission [Bòrd na Gàidhlig](#) expressed its disappointment at the content of the DFM's response to the PQ and the fact that the Electoral Commission had not consulted the Bòrd.

The Bòrd's submission included a draft version of what a bilingual Independence Referendum ballot paper might look like.

The other submissions from [Arthur Cormack](#), [Jamie Wallace](#) and [John Macleod](#) (the sponsor of this petition) also concentrated on the lack of a bilingual ballot paper. These individuals were concerned that Gaelic was not being given the respect due to its statutory status as an 'official' language in Scotland.

The Referendum (Scotland) Bill Committee published its [Stage 1 report](#) on 26 August. In responding to the evidence it had received on the issue of Gaelic the Committee acknowledged the views of those who would like to see the

question set out in Gaelic as well as English on the ballot paper but, decided that:

“We don’t consider that a persuasive case has been made for a bilingual ballot paper. One of the great virtues of the ballot paper set out in the Bill is that it is simple and clear. As witnesses have pointed out, a Gaelic translation will be available to those who wish to refer to it.”

The Stage 1 debate is expected to take place in the Chamber on 12 September 2013.

Francesca McGrath
Senior Research Specialist
29 August 2013

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