

Briefing for the Public Petitions Committee

Petition Number: [PE1826](#)

Main Petitioner: Catherine Cooper

Subject:

Calls on the Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to facilitate a national conversation to identify, and adopt, an additional official emblem for Scotland.

Background

The petitioner is interested in identifying a new national emblem for Scotland through a public consultation process. They believe that by facilitating conversations about different ways to represent modern Scottish society, people and communities can be brought together.

Current Emblems

There are many images commonly used to represent Scotland, including flags, heraldry, flora and fauna. Many of these symbols are historic, although some have been selected more recently. The most recent addition to this group of emblems is the Scots Pine, which became the national tree of Scotland in 2014. The two emblems discussed by the petitioner, the unicorn and the thistle, both have historic roots.

The Unicorn

The unicorn is Scotland's national animal and was introduced to the royal coat of arms in Scotland in the mid-1500s. There were originally two unicorns, one on either side of the shield, however one was replaced by a lion in 1603 when James VI of Scotland united the Scottish and English crowns. The unicorns on the royal coat of arms have always been shown with gold chains wrapped around them. There is no record of why this was originally chosen, but historians believe it may have been to show the power of the Scottish kings to tame the untameable. Unicorns in mythology are characterised as proud, independent and difficult to capture. They have also been used to symbolise purity and power.

The Thistle

There are a number of different varieties of thistle growing wild in Scotland, with no single variety being the national flower. The Spear Thistle (*Cirsium vulgare*) is the one most often found on heraldic symbols. The first use of the

thistle as a royal emblem was in 1470 when it was used on coins issued by King James III. The reason it was selected as a national emblem is not recorded. One legend suggests it dates to a 1263 battle in Largs, Ayrshire. A group of Scottish soldiers was said to be sleeping when an invading Norse army came ashore. The Scottish soldiers were warned of their approach when one of the Norsemen stood on a thistle and cried out. The warning meant they were able to wake up in time to successfully fight off the invasion.

The Mace

The petitioner also suggests that any new national emblem should embody the words found on the Scottish Parliament [Mace](#). The mace was designed and crafted by Michael Lloyd. It is made from silver and gold panned from Scottish rivers. The words engraved on it are 'Wisdom, Justice, Compassion and Integrity.' The mace was presented by Her Majesty The Queen at the opening ceremony of the Scottish Parliament, 1 July 1999.

Scottish Parliament Action

The Public Petitions Committee have discussed petitions in the past which have promoted adopting national emblems for Scotland. In 2013 the committee discussed [PE1457](#) on the topic of designating a national tree. This work led to a [Member's debate](#) on the topic. The Scottish Government then committed to undertake a public consultation on the designation of a national tree.

The committee have also previously discussed [PE1500](#), on designating a national bird and [PE1541](#) on recognising a national anthem. Both petitions were eventually closed by the committee with no further action to be taken. They determined that the case had not been made that either a national bird or a national anthem should be designated by the Scottish Government.

Scottish Government Action

In 2014, the Scots Pine was announced as the national tree of Scotland after a Scottish Government [consultation](#) attracted the views of over 4,500 people. The consultation was as a result of PE1457.

Later in 2014, the Minister for Environment and Climate Change, Paul Wheelhouse MSP, stated the following in a [letter](#) to the Petitions Committee on [PE1500](#):

“There is also a wider discussion to be had about national symbols generally – what do we want of them, and what other types of national symbols might we want to consider. I recognise that we now have a national tree, the Scots Pine, however I feel that choosing these symbols is more than just an environmental or ecological question.

It was for this reason that I expressed the hope that we might get a more rounded picture by asking other Parliamentary committees for their views. I appreciate that you have done this and received some

responses, but I would still prefer that we find a way of getting a considered view from the Parliament about the value and purpose of national symbols and hopefully avoid the potential for ending up with national symbols proposed and designated on what is essentially an ad hoc basis.

As far as the process for designating a symbol is concerned, you will be aware of the procedure that was devised for the Scots Pine designation. That process did involve some public consultation and I believe that involving the public would be a vital part of any future procedure, and indeed I hope that we could find a way to encourage a wider public engagement in the issue than has been the case so far.”

The views of the Minister were discussed by the Petitions Committee at a [meeting](#) in September 2014, but no further action appears to have been taken.

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Researcher

5 October 2020

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