January 2013

Dear Bruce

PROPOSED GOVERNMENT BILLS

Thank you for your letter of 17 January enclosing a copy of the Committee's proposed timetable for scrutinising the two Government Bills which will provide for a referendum on independence in 2014.

I am pleased to note that the Committee agreed the proposed timetable for the Franchise Bill on the basis that the Bill requires to be enacted in sufficient time for the collection of data on young voters to take place as part of the annual winter household canvass this year. I understand that you have already arranged to take pre-introduction oral evidence which will assist the Committee in its consideration of the Bill when it is introduced.

Before confirming the Committee's scrutiny timetable for the main Referendum Bill you have asked for further information as to why the Government is aiming for the Bill to be passed by around the end of October as I suggested in my letter to you of 14 December.

Your Scotland, Your Referendum contained a timetable which suggested that the Government was aiming to have the Referendum Bill passed after Stage 3 in the Scottish Parliament in October 2013 with Royal Assent following in November 2013. Once the Bill is passed it will provide campaigning organisations and other participants in the referendum (as well as electoral administrators and the Electoral Commission) with confirmation of the date of the referendum, the question to be asked and the rules under which the referendum will be run. It is now accepted as good practice that the rules governing how an election or referendum will be run should be in place at least six months before the event. However, we would still be comfortably within this timeframe if we were to plan on the Referendum Bill being passed by the Scottish Parliament in November with Royal Assent in December 2013. Subject to the views of the Committee the Government would therefore be content for the proposed deadline for Parliamentary approval of the Bill to be extended to November if necessary.
I hope that this is helpful to the Committee and I look forward to the Government introducing both Bills shortly. In the meantime, I have asked the Referendum Bill Team to keep in contact with the committee clerks to provide you with any other information which might be helpful.

Nicola Sturgeon