SCOTTISH INDEPENDENCE REFERENDUM BILL

WRITTEN SUBMISSION FROM THE SCOTTISH TRADES UNION CONGRESS (STUC)

To support oral evidence to the Referendum (Scotland) Bill Committee on 23 May 2013

STUC is pleased to have the opportunity to give oral evidence to the committee and will provide further written evidence if, following the evidence session, that is appropriate.

STUC’s established position has been to support the use of Section 30 to enable the Scottish Parliament to legislate for a referendum at a time of its choosing; to extend the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds and to provide for an agreed role in the process for the Electoral Commission. STUC opposed the view that limitations should be placed on the Scottish Parliament’s right to pose multiple questions in the referendum but recognises that the wording of the question presented is clear and fair. STUC is also disappointed that a more open approach to prisoner voting has apparently not been adopted.

Scottish trade unions have traditionally played an active role in Scottish and UK elections either through direct funding relationships with political parties, predominantly the Labour Party, through supporting the campaigns of individual candidates and through non-party election initiatives designed to influence candidates and political parties in pursuit of various policy positions. Around half of trade union members in Scotland are members of unions which pay a political levy to a political party, the other half are members of unions which have traditionally remained neutral in respect of recommending votes for one party or another.

STUC is satisfied that the rules laid down for campaigning and third party campaigning, along with associated spending limits, broadly meet the purpose of allowing fair and free campaigning during the referendum period. Campaigning prior to this period is clearly less well controlled and there is an obvious potential for any inequality of arms in relation to the funding of campaigns to be manifested in the lead up to rather than during that period.

For its part, STUC decided at its Congress 2013, that the earliest point at which it would take a final view on the referendum vote would be in April 2014. This does not preclude individual unions from adopting positions before that date and at a time of their choosing, however a large majority of our affiliated unions have taken a view similar to that of STUC as a whole and seem likely to use the majority of the period running up to the referendum in discussion and consultation rather than campaigning for one outcome or the other. This approach does not reflect neutrality. Rather it
reflects STUC’s view that its members along with all other voters deserve the opportunity to consider the facts in as informed an environment as can be created.

STUC has previously voiced its concern that ‘election style’ campaigning at too early a stage has, and will continue to, make it more difficult to create the appropriate environment for debate. STUC is a participant in the Future of Scotland initiative which has consistently made the case for promoting an informed and rational debate. STUC’s own contribution to this has been the publication of ‘A Just Scotland – an interim report’ in November 2012 and this document has been used to promote discussion within unions in an atmosphere generally free of rancour.

STUC continues to take a positive view of the 2014 referendum as an opportunity to discuss the ‘kind of Scotland we want to see’ and believes that the next period could provide an opportunity to promote democratic participation and active citizenship. It is particularly important that the referendum is used to ensure maximum voter registration and that the first voting experience for many young people is a positive one.

There will be understandable tendency amongst the two main campaigns to build local campaign groups and to engage in voter registration amongst those communities of interest who each deem to be likely supporters of their respective positions. There is also a natural tendency amongst political parties to concentrate efforts on those deemed most likely to vote. The Parliament, and the respective governments, should do everything reasonable to militate against a situation in which the referendum result is decided by campaign messaging and organisation at the expense of full democratic participation.

STUC recently met with a range of interested parties to consider the issue of participation and active citizenship in the context of the independence referendum. The participants agreed the following statement which will be reflected in the evidence which the committee receives.

“Recently a number of representatives from the third sector, academia, and other interested parties discussed the need to increase voter participation in the run-up to the independence referendum in September 2014.

With low turnout in Scotland (2012’s local authority elections having a turnout of just 39%), and the Electoral Commission’s research showing that young, urban, mobile and BME people regularly fail to register to vote, more needs to be done to engage the whole of Scotland in the debate and process for the upcoming referendum.

We believe it is essential that all communities of geography, interest and background are given the relevant resources to hold informed discussions about the referendum in a bottom-up, participatory manner. The establishment, funding and resourcing of
community champions (local people who can facilitate dialogue in a neutral way) is essential.

Academics also require the space to facilitate the sharing of evidence-based knowledge across Scotland for all, and media – especially local media – must be properly resourced to enable an informed debate to take place.

Overall, the group believes that the Scottish and UK Governments should act to ensure:

1. a well-resourced voter registration campaign, aimed at ensuring that those who traditionally don’t vote are able to do so at the referendum.
2. the widespread availability of objective information on what will happen post-referendum, suitable for all voters to understand, so that all parts of Scottish society understand what a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’ vote will mean for them in practical terms.
3. concerted effort to reach ‘hard-to-reach’ groups by resourcing communities, schools, academia and relevant media to raise and debate the issues relating to the referendum, so that all parts of Scottish society feel informed and engaged.

The referendum will see the people of Scotland make one of the most important decisions that Scotland has seen in recent years. We all have a moral duty to ensure that as many people as possible participate in it in an informed way – building democracy for now and the future, and ensuring that the fate of Scotland is truly decided by all who live here.”

STUC May 2013