Briefing for the Public Petitions Committee

Petition Number: PE01810

Main Petitioner: Philip Smith

Subject:

Calls on the Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to fly the Commonwealth Flag in place of the European Union flag at Scottish Government buildings.

Background

The petitioner is seeking for the Commonwealth flag to be flown in place of the European flag at Scottish Government buildings. Current Scottish Government policy on flag flying on Scottish Government buildings can be found in its Flag flying guidance 2020. The guidance states:

“The only flags that should be flown from Scottish Government buildings in Scotland are the Saltire, the European flag (Europe Day only), the Red Ensign (Merchant Navy Day only), the Commonwealth flag (Commonwealth Day only), The Armed Forces Day flag (Armed Forces Day only), the Royal Standard at St Andrew's House (by Special Command or Royal Assent), the Rainbow flag from St Andrew's House and Victoria Quay, the Union flag (Remembrance Day only) from St Andrew's House and Victoria Quay and the Autistic Pride Day flag (Autistic Pride Day) from St Andrew's House. Other flags, including those of other nations, should not normally be flown from Scottish Government buildings.”

On 29 January 2020 the Scottish Government took the decision to routinely fly the European Flag from St Andrew’s House and Victoria Quay as part of the overall flag flying arrangements.

This guidance does not apply to the flying of flags outside the Scottish Parliament. The Scottish Parliament Corporate Body (SPCB) is responsible for taking such decisions for the Parliament.

Flying the European flag at the Scottish Parliament

On 16 January 2020, the SPCB agreed to no longer fly the European flag daily. The SPCB stated:
“In reaching this decision, the SPCB took account of its responsibility to maintain and protect the neutrality of the Scottish Parliament as an institution.”

The SPCB agreed that the European flag could be flown on Europe Day as a mark of the UK’s continued ties with that body.

On 29 January 2020, this decision was reversed after the Parliament agreed (by 9 votes) a Scottish Government motion, moved by Fiona Hyslop MSP, which stated:

“That the Parliament notes that the European flag has been flown at Holyrood since 2004 as a symbol of membership of the family of European nations; recognises that Scotland and the UK will continue to be represented within the Council of Europe, and that the UK’s exit from the European Union will not change this; notes that the European flag was originally the flag of the Council of Europe and affirms Scotland’s commitment to the aims of the Council of Europe to build peace and prosperity together, while respecting common values of democracy, human rights, the rule of law and diversity; recognises the importance of continuing to fly the European flag as a sign of support and solidarity with those EU nationals who have made Scotland their home, and directs the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body to ensure that the European flag continues to fly daily at the Parliament building.”

The Scottish Parliament’s current flag flying policy is to fly the Saltire, Union flag and European flag daily. The Commonwealth flag is flown on Commonwealth Day (usually the second Monday of March).

The European flag

An azure blue flag bearing twelve gold stars.

The Council of Europe website states that on 25 October 1955 the Parliamentary Assembly unanimously approved the emblem of a circle of gold stars on a blue background. On 9 December 1955 the organisation’s Committee of Ministers adopted the star-studded flag, which was launched officially on 13 December 1955 in Paris.

In 1983 the European Parliament in turn adopted the flag devised by the Council of Europe and recommended that it become the European Communities’ emblem. The European Council gave its approval in June 1985. The European Union’s institutions began to use the flag in 1986.

The flag of the Commonwealth of Nations

The flag of the Commonwealth of Nations is the official flag used by and representing the Commonwealth of Nations. The flag consists of the Commonwealth symbol in gold on a blue field.
The symbol centres on a globe, representing the global nature of the Commonwealth and the breadth of its membership. Its current design dates to 2013, a modification of a design adopted in 1976.

Damon Davies
Researcher
[04/06/2020]

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