

Sir Andrew Dilnot  
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority  
Via email.

Thursday, 03 October, 2013

Dear Sir Andrew,

### **Official Statistics and the Scottish referendum**

I was pleased to learn that the National Statistics Authority is taking a keen interest in the use of national statistics in the independence referendum. The decision that we take in next year's vote is of enormous significance. The valuable resource of national statistics should be used to inform the debate, rather than to mislead voters. Trustworthy statistical information, presented in a balanced and not a selective way, is essential if voters are to be properly informed in making their choice.

This responsibility, of course, falls on all of us involved in the debate. However, it places particular obligations on Ministers, who have the full resources of government behind them, and of course the professional advice of statisticians in the Government Statistical Service.

It is in that context that I feel obliged to draw to your attention the publication on 23rd September by the Scottish Government of the paper "Pensions in an Independent Scotland". The paper deals with the prospects for both state and occupational pensions if Scotland were to become independent. It contains data and arguments about the affordability of state pensions in particular, based on National Statistics demographic projections. This data is used to assert that pensions will be more affordable in an independent Scotland and to support a proposition that the retirement age in Scotland need not be increased in the same way that the UK government is currently planning.

We are all used to governments marshaling arguments and statistics to present their case in the most convincing way. The use of statistical data in this paper goes well beyond that. You will want to look at the whole document, but here are two specific examples that I believe are worthy of highlighting. Both relate to the demographic projections made by government statisticians. These are of course vital for pension policy, but are complex and difficult to understand for those who do not deal with them regularly.

The differences between the population structures of Scotland and the UK as a whole are well known, and set out in many UK Government, Scottish Government and ONS publications.

Scotland has an ageing population, and its structure is ageing rather more than in the UK as a whole. In the paper on pensions and dependence, however, Scottish Ministers simply compare the growth in the number of pensioners in Scotland with that in the rest of the UK, without acknowledging that the UK's working age population is projected to grow in a way that Scotland's is not.

This gives the misleading impression that Scotland's demographic challenge is less demanding than that of the UK.

Secondly, the paper quotes a "dependency ratio" to imply that an independent Scotland would be better able to pay pensions. However the ratio quoted includes under 16s, obviously not relevant to this debate.

It is hard to come to any conclusion other than that this paper uses national statistics in a selective and misleading way.

This is not a view confined to those of us who are campaigning against the Scottish Government's independence project. In a recent newspaper article one of Scotland's leading demographers, Professor Robert Wright of Strathclyde University, described the use of statistics by the Scottish Government in this paper as 'shocking'.

I will be very grateful to have your views on this matter.

Rt Hon Alistair Darling, MP  
Chair of the Better Together Campaign