Written submission from the National Secular Society

Dear Member

The Funding of Religious Groups and Projects

*The National Secular Society challenges religious privilege and campaigns for the separation of church and state.*

On Tuesday 27 September at 2pm the Equal Opportunities Committee of the Scottish Parliament begins consideration (in private) of the draft budget of the Scottish Government for 2012/13.

The National Secular Society (NSS) would, firstly, request that the meeting should not be held in private given that there are considerable issues of public interest under review.

Secondly, NSS would like to draw the attention of the Committee to certain aspects of the draft budget that relate to the funding of religious groups which are, during the period 2008-2011, grouped under the Race, Religion and Refugee Integration Funding Scheme.

The following projects can be identified as funding for religious groups under the scheme:

- **Festival of Spirituality and Peace** – Church of St John the evangelist, Edinburgh, awarded £138,000 on 28 July 2008.
- **Inter-faith development project** – Edinburgh Inter-faith association was awarded £198,000 on 28/7/11
- **Connecting and Empowering communities** – Scottish Council of Jewish Communities (Glasgow) £100,000 awarded on 28/7/11.
- **Scottish Islamic Foundation (Glasgow): Empowering Future Leaders.** £190,000 awarded

The total funding involved in these projects is £626,000 out of a budget of £5.6 million for the overall scheme and total bids of £25 million.


The Scottish Inter-faith Council has also received grants of £836,000 since 2002.

The National Secular Society objects in principle to public funding for religious organisations and the privileging of certain faiths and denominations as a result of these decisions. A substantial section of the population is not religious in any way and is thus necessarily excluded from any benefits, if there are such, from the funded activities.

NSS suggests that the awarding of Scottish Government grants to religious groups should be discontinued, but if retained, should be subject to particularly close scrutiny by the committee.

The awarding of at least £1 million since 2002 to inter-faith organisations in Scotland would suggest that the religions and denominations involved ought, by now, to have developed a capacity to communicate and cooperate between themselves without further government funding.

While NSS can also sympathise with the desire for peace it can find no good reason for the Scottish Government to dispense taxpayer funds towards a 'Festival of Spirituality'.

NSS would also draw committee members’ attention to the new Public Sector Equality Duty which requires public bodies to have regard, inter alia, to the need to advance equality of opportunity with regard to religion and belief and the consequent need to bear in mind the interests of the substantial non-religious section of the population of Scotland.

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National Secular Society
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