SUBMISSION FROM THE NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

Note by the clerk: Please note that this submission is in the form of a letter previously sent to the First Minister.

Alex Salmond MSP
First Minister
Scottish Government

1 September 2011

Dear First Minister

Consideration of the UK Parliament’s Scotland Bill in the Scottish Parliament

The current consideration by the Scottish Parliament of the Scotland Bill that is currently in progress through the Westminster UK Parliament provides an historic opportunity for the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament to promote major changes in the UK constitution that will remove the religious discrimination against Roman Catholics in the succession to the throne as expressed in the Act of Settlement of 1701 and the Act of Union of 1707.

In 1999 the Scottish Parliament unanimously passed motion S1M-117 proposed by Mr Michael Russell MSP, currently a minister in the Scottish Government, expressing the view that discriminatory aspects of the Act of Settlement of 1701, reaffirmed by the Act of Union of 1707, that disqualified Roman Catholics or people married to them from the line of succession to the throne, should be removed.

On 19 December 2001 you seconded the legislation proposed by Kevin MacNamara MP in the UK Parliament to remove this discriminatory legislation. On numerous other occasions, including during the last Scottish Parliament elections in May this year, you have expressed support for such measures.

The removal of religious discrimination in the line of the succession to the throne is not just about creating a fairer society but it is also about creating a social environment that will moderate some of the occasional eruptions of unacceptable religious sectarianism that surround disorder at football matches in Scotland – another matter that the National Secular Society knows deeply concerns you and your government.

In this connection we need only cite the following report concerning remarks of the current Deputy First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon MSP, on 12 December 2006;
‘Speaking ...following the ‘Sectarian Summit’ held in Glasgow, the SNP’s Depute Leader Nicola Sturgeon MSP called for politicians to commit to the repeal of the Act of Settlement, which discriminates against Roman Catholics, as part of the ongoing efforts to root out sectarian behaviour in Scotland\textsuperscript{1}.

The repeal of the discriminatory aspects of the Act of Settlement and the Act of Union relating to the succession to the crown has now been on the agenda of the Scottish Parliament for almost eleven years. For more than four years there has been a Scottish National Party administration in Scotland and now, since May 2011, it has been the majority party in the Scottish Parliament. We would recommend that the Scottish Government now act decisively and use the opportunity of the consideration of the Scotland Bill, which changes the constitutional relationship of Scotland with the United Kingdom, to promote changes in the law to bring about the removal of the discriminatory aspects of the rules to the succession to the crown which the Scottish Parliament favours. Such action would not only assist in removing the last elements of discrimination against Roman Catholics in UK law but would also contribute to creating an environment less supportive of some aspects of the unacceptable religious sectarianism that is occasionally evident among players, managers and supporters of some Scottish football teams and in some other contexts.

The National Secular Society is also suggesting to the special Scotland Bill Committee in the Scottish Parliament that it might want to consider promoting the course of action recommended in this letter but Scottish Government backing for the measure would greatly facilitate its passage through the Scottish Parliament and, subsequently, its progress at Westminster.

The NSS looks forward to your support for this and other measures to remove discrimination on grounds of religion or belief in our society.

Yours sincerely,

Norman Bonney
National Secular Society Council Member for Scotland
1 September 2011

\textsuperscript{1} \url{www.glasgowsnp.org/MSPs/Nicola_Sturgeon_MSP/Sectarianism_-_we_must_abolish_Act_of_Settlement}