

British cautiously welcome proposal to end ban on Catholic monarchs

LONDON – British Catholics have welcomed cautiously government proposals to abolish a law that has banned Catholics from the throne for more than three centuries.

Prime Minister Gordon Brown has ordered a review of the British Constitution that would involve scrapping the anti-Catholic provisions of the Act of Settlement of 1701, said The Guardian, a London-based daily newspaper.

The law prevents a monarch, the constitutional head of state, from either becoming or marrying a Catholic, and those that do must either abdicate or renounce their claim on the throne. The prohibitions apply exclusively to Catholics.

According to The Guardian reports in late September, the Labor government, which has been in power since May 1997, will quickly introduce the reforms if elected for a fourth term within the next 18 months.

Lord Alton of Liverpool, a Catholic member of the House of Lords, told Catholic News Service in an early October e-mail that the proposal to abolish the act was “a welcome decision that puts right a long-standing anomaly in the law.”

But he said it is “mildly ironic” that it came at a time when other “arms of government have been promoting measures and imposing laws that are deeply offensive to Catholics.”

“Rather more people will be adversely affected by those measures,” he said. “Very few will feel discriminated against because of a law preventing Catholics from marrying the monarch.”

Britain has enacted gay rights laws that have led to Catholic adoption agencies leaving the control of the church, and the government is pushing through the Human Fertilization and Embryology Bill that will allow scientists greater freedom in the manipulation and destruction of human life in its early stages.

A spokesman for Scottish Cardinal Keith O'Brien of St. Andrews and Edinburgh told The Catholic Herald, a London-based weekly newspaper, in early October that the government would be "upholding the principle of fairness" by abolishing the legislation.

"Sadly, however, talk of repeal has hit the headlines many times, and it has yet to be followed with action," he added.

A spokesman for Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor of Westminster told the paper that the law was unjust.

"The cardinal is sure it will be repealed in the future, but it is not something that he's actively pushing for," he said.

The act says that to be a British monarch a person must be an Anglo-German Protestant descendant of Princess Sophia of Hanover, a relative of King James I. The law also requires the monarch, as supreme governor of the Church of England, to pronounce upon accession a declaration before Parliament to uphold the established "Protestant religion."

Any change in legislation would require the consent of member nations of the British Commonwealth.

A number of British royals have in the past given up their claim on the throne to become Catholics. In May Autumn Kelly, a Canadian, converted to Anglicanism before she married Peter Phillips, the Queen's grandson.