

June 22, 2017

The First Legal Humanist Wedding Ceremony in Northern Ireland!

Richy Thompson, British Humanist Association

Humanists Laura Lacole and Eunan O’Kane have been granted legal authority by the Court of Appeal in Northern Ireland to have their Humanists UK-accredited humanist celebrant conduct a legal marriage ceremony for them.

The decision follows a hearing at the court today on an appeal by Northern Ireland’s Attorney General, General Register Office, and Department of Finance, against the landmark High Court ruling on June 9th, which gave legal recognition to humanist marriages.

Laura and Eunan’s wedding will be the first legal humanist ceremony in Northern Ireland and the first in the UK outside of Scotland.

Laura, a model and public speaker, and Eunan, a Leeds United and Republic of Ireland [soccer teams, *Ed.*] midfielder, have been supported in bringing their case by Humanists UK and its section Northern Ireland Humanists.

A humanist wedding is a non-religious ceremony that is deeply personal and conducted by a humanist celebrant. It differs from a civil wedding in that it is entirely hand-crafted and reflective of the humanist beliefs and values of the couple, conducted by a celebrant who shares their beliefs and values. Humanist weddings have been legally recognised as marriages in Scotland since 2005 and in Ireland since 2012, but to date couples in Northern Ireland, England, and Wales have been required to have an additional register office ceremony to make their humanist wedding legally binding.

Laura Lacole commented, “Eunan and I are relieved to now have legal recognition for our humanist ceremony on Thursday. All we’ve been asking for is to be able to get married in a form that reflects our deepest-held beliefs and values. Knowing that this can now happen is an amazing feeling. I’m so happy that we’ve taken such an important step forward.”

Andrew Copson, Chief Executive of Humanists UK, said, “We’re over the moon that Laura and Eunan will now be able to have the legal humanist ceremony that they want. The determination with which they took this case forward has been incredible to witness, and the fact that Northern Ireland will now have its first legal humanist ceremony is of historic significance. We very much look forward to celebrating their marriage with them in just a couple of days’ time.”

The wider question as to the future recognition of humanist marriages in Northern Ireland has been stayed until a further Court of Appeal hearing in September. The High Court found on June 9th that the ban on such marriages having recognition is discriminatory. This decision has not been overturned, but will be subject to the further hearing.

Mr. Copson commented, “It has been extremely frustrating for all of us to see the Northern Ireland Government and Attorney General squander public money to try to stop humanist couples from having the marriages they wish. While there has now been some de-



Humanist couple, model Laura Lacole and Eunan O’Kane, who plays football for Leeds United and the Republic of Ireland national team, are hoping to gain recognition for Humanist weddings in Northern Ireland. [Photo courtesy of the British Humanist Association]

lay to any decision on the wider principles at stake, we nonetheless very much hope that this appeal is unsuccessful, and the original High Court decision is allowed to stand.”

Ms. Lacole added, “Eunan and I are hopeful that after September, the right to a legal humanist ceremony that we will have enjoyed will be extended to other couples in Northern Ireland.”

The case is being taken on human rights grounds, targeting the discriminatory law that has meant that religious people are able to have legal marriage ceremonies in line with their beliefs, but humanists have, until now, not been able to do likewise.

Laura and Eunan’s wedding ceremony is taking place on Thursday [June 22]. The decision today means that they will now have a legal humanist ceremony, the first ever in Northern Ireland. However, this fact does not prejudice the wider outcome of the case, namely whether the current law discriminates against humanists, which is to be determined following a further hearing by the Court of Appeal in September.

Legal recognition has already had a transformative effect on Scottish and Irish society. In Scotland, humanist marriages gained legal recognition in 2005, and have risen in number from 85 in the first year to over 4,300 in 2015, overtaking the Church of Scotland in the process.

In the Republic of Ireland, humanist marriages gained legal recognition in 2012. In 2015, around six percent of legal marriages were humanist, more than three times as many as there were (Protestant) Church of Ireland marriages. •

Notes

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*The **British Humanist Association** is the national charity working on behalf of non-religious people who seek to live ethical and fulfilling lives on the basis of reason and humanity. It promotes a secular state and equal treatment in law and policy of everyone, regardless of religion or belief. **Northern Ireland Humanists** is a part of the British Humanist Association, working with the **Humanist Association of Ireland**.*