

Dear Committee Secretary,

I want to firstly write that I strongly support the Marriage Equality Amendment Bill 2010. I believe that allowing same sex couples to marry is a fundamental human right; and I do not support the apartheid of civil unions.

This bill is not just important for providing legal equality; it goes further towards removing the stigma and discrimination that same-sex couples face by simply being in love with someone of the same gender. It is, in essence, about love.

Before I delve deeper into this issue, I also wanted to iterate my strong belief in religious freedom. And as such I feel that it is essential for there to be provisions in the bill that will allow a minister of religion to act in a manner that respects his religious beliefs to refuse to marry a same-sex couple. Ministers of religion already have the freedom to refuse to marry heterosexual couples that do not comply with their religious beliefs, and this should be no different for same-sex couples.

Some time ago I was contact by an old university friend, wanting to know my perspective on same-sex marriage. I was very touched by his candour and curiosity, because is he a very devout Christian, and rather than form his opinions based solely on the rhetoric of many vocal opponents to this issue, he reached out to ask someone from the other side of the fence, to enable him to form his own opinions, and for that I have the utmost respect.

One of the first questions that he asked was "Why, when over 50% of marriages end in divorce anyway, and as an institution which is completely religious in it's heritage, why anyone who is from an opposite or same sex relationship want to get married if they don't have any sort of religious belief?"

I would firstly like to disagree with the statement that “Marriage is completely religious in its heritage”. Marriage has taken many forms and definitions according to different cultures. Although the institution of marriage pre-dates reliable recorded history, the way in which a marriage is conducted; its rules and ramifications, has changed over time, as has the institution itself, depending on the culture or demographic of the time. In fact it is only a recent trend for marriage to be about love; there was a time when marriage was primarily about the inheritance of property, maintaining ethnic or religious purity and defining the parentage of children. This was shown through arranged marriages and women losing all their legal rights upon marriage. It is why rape was allowed within marriage but contraception banned. It is why interracial unions were barred and inter-faith unions frowned upon. As old ideas about the purpose of marriage changed, so have the laws governing it. Divorce was allowed so partners could escape abusive or unhappy marriages, equal rights were extended to unmarried de facto partners and their children, marital rape was prohibited, wives were given legal equality, and, barriers to interracial marriages were removed.

There is also a long recorded history of same-sex unions around the world. Various types of same-sex unions have existed, ranging from informal, unsanctioned relationships to highly ritualized unions. It is believed that same-sex unions were a socially recognized institution at times in Ancient Greece and Rome, some regions of China, and at certain times in ancient European history. These same-sex unions continued until Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. But without going into an in-depth debate on the history of marriage, I think that it is important to distinguish between “Marriage” (the union of two adults voluntarily entered into for life), and “Holy Matrimony” (a religious marriage ceremony). And this is what same-sex couples should have access to;

Civil Marriage. Australia is a democracy where there is a separation of church and state. Australians have the freedom to practice whatever religion they choose, and should be free from laws based on religion. This is why I strongly agree with Ministers of religion having the right to refuse to marry same-sex couples.

Despite always being attracted to women, I was always scared of being rejected by my friends, family and society, and for many years I was not true to myself. I did not come out till I was 29, when I was older, wiser, and more confident in who I was as a person. Yet before I came out, I was married. I married a man because he was my best friend, and I thought that it was the socially appropriate thing to do. When I married him, I did not have a religious ceremony of any kind, yet I was not prevented from getting married. In fact according to the ABS 2007 census, 62.9% of all marriages were performed by civil celebrants.

So in answer to the question, why would same-sex couples *want* to get married; for me the answer is love. Because I want to stand in front of my friends and family and commit to sharing my life with the woman I love. Because I want to be able to commit to her; to the exclusion of all others; because for me marriage is, and should be, about love. I married once for the wrong reasons, but that experience showed me the importance of being true to yourself and not being ashamed of who you are or who you love. And that my relationship is no less worthy or inferior to those of my heterosexual counterparts. It is also for this reason that I feel marriage equality will strengthen the sanctity of marriage, through valuing commitment and relationships. And I also want to know that if something should ever happen to me, then there is no legal doubt that she is my partner, my spouse, my wife.

There are many stereotypes about the GLBTI community, and one in particular is that we are promiscuous and have a propensity for a polygamist approach to relationships. For me personally I find this stereotype extremely offensive and couldn't be further from the truth. I believe in commitment, monogamy and fidelity, and I know that there are many of my friends who feel the same way. There are always going to be people that fit into the above stereotype, but these people are not exclusively from the GLBTI community. Yet this is still not a reason to prevent marriage equality. If commitment, monogamy, fidelity and stable relationships are socially acceptable traits, then allowing marriage equality will further strengthen these ideals in society.

I have read many articles on this topic and I am continually heartened by the support from varied members of the community and one recent article in particular stood out for me by a married, heterosexual, evangelical Christian pastor and theologian, Mr Nathan Nettleton, titled: "Why I changed my mind about same-sex marriage". In his article he wrote "there is no threat from same-sex marriage. What we have here is a group who are recognising the value of marriage, of faithful lifelong vowed relationships, and asking for the right to participate in the benefits of that."

I would now like to address the "slippery slope" argument that I often hear from vocal opponents of marriage equality. They believe that marriage equality will lead to the legitimization of a range of socially unacceptable relationships, including incest, paedophilia, polygamy and marriages between people and their pets or household items. Firstly the fictitious link between homosexuality and paedophilia is completely offensive and absolutely outrageous propaganda. Paedophilia and incest are abusive, exploitative practices rightly held in almost

universal contempt. Marriage is a legal contract and neither animals nor inanimate objects have legal standing to sign contracts. It is interesting to note that none of the countries which allow same-sex marriage allow polygamous marriages to be officially solemnised, even though some of them, like Spain and the Netherlands, have large religious minorities that traditionally allow it. In places that allow polygamy, like Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan and Nigeria, homosexuals are not only unable to marry, they are put to death.

Finally I would like to talk about parenting and children. As identified by the Australian Psychological Society, since the late 1990's in Australia, the notion that all children 'need' or 'do better' with both a mother and a father has repeatedly been used as justification for retaining or even extending discrimination in the area of family-related laws and policies, such as who should have access to fertility services and who should be able to get married. However it has been shown that discrimination based on this assertion is not supported by the family studies research, and in fact, the promotion of this notion, and the laws and public policies that embody it, are clearly counter to the well-being of children.

The American Psychological Association report that "there is no evidence to suggest that lesbian women or gay men are unfit to be parents or that psychosocial development among children of lesbian women or gay men is compromised relative to that among offspring of heterosexual parents. Not a single study has found children of lesbian or gay parents to be disadvantaged in any significant respect relative to children of heterosexual parents. Indeed, the evidence to date suggests that home environments provided by lesbian and gay parents are as likely as those provided by heterosexual parents to support and enable children's psychosocial growth." In fact the research indicates that

parenting practices and children's outcomes in families parented by lesbian and gay parents are likely to be at least as favourable as those in families of heterosexual parents, despite the reality that considerable legal discrimination and inequity remain significant challenges for these families. The research also shows that the sexuality of a child's parents has absolutely no bearing on their development or well being. It is the care and love put into a child's upbringing that is of utmost importance, and lesbians and gay men demonstrate just as good capabilities at loving and caring for their children as their heterosexual counterparts.

Laws often shape people's understanding of what is real and acceptable, and discriminatory laws directly and indirectly perpetuate prejudice and negative attitudes and behaviours towards children and parents in same-sex parented families. Being part of a family which is recognised in the law can assist children, along with their parents, to feel more at ease, respected, accepted, and acceptable. In short, children raised in same-sex families will benefit from marriage equality.

Speaking personally, my partner and I intend to have a family one day, and we are both very conscious of ensuring that our children will be brought up in a stable loving relationship, surrounded by positive role models, both male and female. We would not want to deprive our children the right to know their biological father. These are conscious decisions that my partner and I have made, and we hope that when we do have children, they are brought into a world where their parents are able to have their relationship recognised. That they are not disadvantaged by legislated discrimination, and they enjoy the full benefits of equality.

In summary, I feel that the arguments against marriage equality are based on fear and ignorance. As humans our instinct is to fear what we do not understand. It is my hope that through this consultative process we are able to see the human side of this debate. That this discrimination affects real people with real lives; we are upstanding members of the community. We work, pay taxes, form committed relationships and raise families. This is already happening, and this will not change. What can change are laws in this country, to allow marriage equality, and provide the same rights to all its citizens. And in the end when marriage equality is a reality, the sky will not fall, civilization will not perish; love will prevail.

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