

Tasmanian Young Labor
Labor House

1 April 2012

Committee Secretary
Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

Dear Madam Secretary,

RE: Senate Inquiry relating to ‘*Marriage Equality Amendment Bill 2010*’

Please find enclosed, for your consideration, the submission of the Tasmanian branch of Australian Young Labor, regarding the proposal to amend the *Marriage Act (1961)*.

Tasmanian Young Labor believes strongly that the Act should be amended, in line with the proposed *Marriage Equality Amendment Bill*, to provide access to marriage to all Australians, regardless of gender.

Tasmanian Young Labor is in a unique position, as a youth organisation, to speak to issues affecting young people in Tasmania, and to reflect the views of Australian youth more generally.

We wish to bring the Committee’s attention particularly to strong evidence that young gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Australians are at a greater risk of experiencing clinical depression and anxiety, and are more likely to contemplate or attempt suicide, than non-GLBTI youth.

We believe that the discrimination enshrined in the *Marriage Act*, as it stands, empowers the kind of bullying and victimisation currently devastating Australia’s gay and lesbian community, and we believe, for the reasons outlined below, that it must be amended.

Yours faithfully,

Stuart Benson

President
Tasmanian Young Labor

i. Support for Marriage Equality Among Young Australians:

i. Young Australians overwhelmingly support marriage equality;

Public polling regarding same-sex marriage has been undertaken regularly in Australia since early 2005. Subsequent polls since that time have shown that a majority of Australians now support the introduction of equal access to marriage in Australia, with most recent polls indicating “two-thirds of Australians support same-sex marriage”¹.

It should be noted that young people, or people aged between 16 and 24 years old for the purposes of opinion polling, have consistently reported the highest levels of support for marriage equality. Recently, polling commissioned by Australia’s major newspapers, as well as by interest groups, has shown that more than 80% of young Australians support amendments to the *Marriage Act* in line with those currently before the Senate.

ii. Young Australians were the first to support marriage equality;

Collected opinion polls, taken over a number of years, also show that young Australians were the first supporters of marriage equality, having shown strong levels of support for the reform even before a broader societal consensus emerged².

iii. Young Australians are opinion leaders on social issues;

The issue of same sex marriage is not the only issue on which young Australians have been opinion leaders. Historically, and indeed recently, youth organisations have lead the charge for social change.

The work done by Young Labor, as well as other youth empowerment organisations such as GetUp! have long contributed to the steady progress Australia has made toward social equality.

¹ Tovey, J., SMH, ‘New Poll Backs Same Sex Marriage’, 13 Feb 2012, <<http://www.smh.com.au/national/new-poll-backs-samesex-marriage-20120213>>

² Wilson, S. 2004, ‘Election 2004: Barely Registered: Is public opinion good enough for democracy?’, *Australian Review of Public Affairs*, October 2004, <<http://www.australianreview.net/digest/2004/10/wilson.html>>

2. Damaging Effects of Bullying, Harassment and Intimidation on GLBTI Youth:

A number of submissions to this inquiry have raised the issue of the effects of bullying, harassment and discrimination on the GLBTI community. It should firstly be understood that the *Marriage Act*, in its current form, empowers the

homophobic bullying, harassment and intimidation that up to 80% of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Australians have experienced³.

By specifying that marriage may only be between a man and a woman, the parliament of Australia, and through it, the Government of Australia, is sending the message that homosexual couples are *less than* or *not equal to* heterosexual couples. The legal prohibition on formal, legal, equal recognition of the relationships of same sex couples empowers and explicitly condones the attitude that homosexuals are to be treated differently, and specifically, that they are to be treated more poorly than heterosexual couples.

Keeping in mind this dynamic, it is unsurprising that members of the GLBTI community, and particularly same sex attracted young people, report much higher levels of self-harm and suicidal thought than the general population⁴.

A wealth of deeply concerning research has confirmed the finding that same sex attracted young people are three times more likely to attempt suicide than the general population⁵, and, most worryingly in the predominantly rural state of Tasmania, same sex attracted youth in rural and regional areas are six times more likely to contemplate suicide than the general population⁶. Furthermore, a full third of all homeless young people identify as gay or lesbian; homosexuals are overrepresented in young homeless populations by a factor of three⁷.

³ McNair, R., Thomacos, N., *Not Yet Equal: Report of the VGLRL Same Sex Relationships Survey*. 2005. Victorian Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby.)

⁴ Rivers, I., *The Bullying of Sexual Minorities At School: Its Nature and Long Term Correlates*. Educational and Child Psychology. 2001 Vol 18. p39)

⁵ Howard, J. et al, *Same Sex Attracted Youth in Mental Health Promotion and Young People: Concepts and Practice*. 2002. Eds Rowling, L, Martin, G., Walker, L. McGraw Hill, Australia)

⁶ (Quinn, K., *Rural Youth and Same Sex Attracted Youth: Issues, Interventions and Implications for Rural Counsellors*. Rural and Remote Health. 2003 Vol 3.)

⁷ *As long as I have my doona: A report on lesbian and gay youth homelessness* [1995]. 2010 Gay and Lesbian Youth Service and the Australian Centre for Lesbian and Gay Research.)

Young Labor Tasmanian is indebted to the work of Rainbow Tasmania for the statistics provided in this submission.

3. Concluding Recommendation of Young Labor Tasmania:

Tasmania was the last Australian state to decriminalise homosexuality, but the first to introduce a relationships register. Since the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Tasmania, rapid progress has been made towards equality.

In 2011, the Tasmanian parliament, with the support of the Australian Labor Party, passed a motion calling on the Federal Parliament to legalise same sex marriage, and to realise the dream of marriage equality.

The Tasmanian branch of the Australian Labor Party was the first of all Australian branches to include marriage equality in its official party platform, and now stands shoulder to shoulder with all Young Labor state branches, and all but one Labor state branch, in demanding equality for gay and lesbian Australians.

Tasmanian Young Labor joins with our interstate comrades in strongly and proudly supporting marriage equality for all, and accordingly recommends that the *Marriage Equality Amendment Bill 2010* be passed into law.