

Submission: Marriage Equality Amendment Bill 2010 (Cth)—Senate Inquiry

Ben Mee

I do not believe in 'gay marriage'. I do not write this submission under any belief that marriage constitutes a human right or entitlement. Nor do I consider marriage to be a privilege. I write this submission in support of the Marriage Equality Amendment Bill 2010 (Cth) because the discriminatory exclusion of same-sex relationships from the highest legal and societal form of relationship recognition entrenches a damaging notion of public judgement, actual or apparent, that a same-sex relationship is less worthy of recognition and inherently less valuable than a heterosexual relationship.

Accepting that marriage is both a legal and societal institution, marriage equality cannot simply be achieved by permitting 'registration' of same-sex relationships and seeking to put the parties to those relationships in an equivalent legal position (to the extent possible) to married couples. The social dimension of marriage is a sense of community acceptance and recognition of a relationship between two people. And whilst 'marriage' as a word, or an institution, carries no particular magic in itself aside from historical significance, it is nonetheless the ultimate prevailing community measure of a relationship's worth, of which any heterosexual couple can choose to avail itself. It is unacceptable that in a proud, developed, tolerant and progressive country, our leaders in Parliament have not had the courage to redress this imbalance for the sake of same-sex couples.

Beyond the discriminatory impact on same-sex couples, the exclusion of same-sex relationships from marriage has a far more insidious and damaging impact on the mental health and wellbeing of many young gay Australians. Knowing that same-sex couples are unable to celebrate, and have their community recognise, the love underlying their relationships engenders a sense of internal turmoil and darkness, of distrust, in those coming to grips with their sexuality. It leads them to question whether those closest to them, as members of the broader community, will look at them and their relationships as inferior, as unworthy, as unequal. It leads them to distrust and conceal things from those in whom they would, in all other respects and circumstances, repose absolute trust and confidence. It leads countless Australians, both public figures and 'ordinary citizens', to suppress aspects of their identity, of themselves, in different professional and social circles. And it can lead to tragic outcomes when this sense of disconnection, of constantly questioning one's own worth and social identity, becomes too much to bear.

It may be argued that the statutory prohibition on same-sex marriage cannot be assumed, or proved, to be the cause of all of these problems. Perhaps it does go deeper. And perhaps community attitudes are not equally progressive or understanding across all parts of our country. But those advocating the 'No' argument are, at least in my opinion, yet to put forward a single compelling reason as to how or why allowing marriage equality could really cause any harm, let alone harm outweighing the damage described above. Put simply, there's no harm in trying. Maintaining the status quo, to appease conservative or religious interests (which may or may not be concentrated in marginal seats) for the sake of political self-interest is both reprehensible and weak. Now is not the time for rhetoric about 'tough decisions in the national interest'. It is time for change.

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