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

29 March 2012

Dear Committee,

Re: Inquiry into the Marriage Equality Amendment Bill 2010

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission in support of Marriage Equality to the Inquiry.

I approach the Marriage Equality issue as somebody who grew up in regional NSW, and I reject the suggestion by some that Marriage Equality is an 'inner city issue', or an issue that is for the 'left' of politics.

Some of the submissions to the Inquiry have referred to, what are said to be, the potentially adverse effects of an amendment to the Marriage Act 1961, upon children. This argument ignores the devastating toll that violence, intolerance and discrimination continue to have upon GLBTI youth in Australia. I refer the Committee to the report Writing Themselves in 3, published by La Trobe University.

I encourage the Committee to consider the positive impact of Marriage Equality on young people, particularly those in regional and remote areas. The message of acceptance that Marriage Equality would send to these young people cannot be underestimated.

In an article entitled "On the right to marry," published in Dubbo's The Daily Liberal in November 2011, I advanced some of the arguments that support Marriage Equality as an issue that is relevant to regional Australia.

I attach a copy of the article for your consideration.

Regards,

William Griffiths
Homophobia widespread in regional Australia

On the right to marry

IN AUGUST this year the Member for Parkes, Mark Coulton, told the Federal Parliament the electorate was not ready for marriage equality at this time.

I disagree.

Mark is a good guy. He's smart, articulate and incredibly hard working. His electorate is one of the largest in the country, and he does an excellent job for the people he represents. I can only imagine his additional role as the Nationals Chief Whip in a hung Parliament would be challenging to say the least.

I voted for Mark, and I will continue to vote for him. I'm a member of the Nats, indeed, I'm a staffer to one.

But we differ on the issue of whether two women or two men should be allowed to marry one another.

I met with Mark in Canberra this week and questioned how he had formed his view on the issue.

Mark asked me when I realised that I was gay, to which I replied, "Probably at about the same time you realised you were straight."

He also asked me, "But why marriage, Will?"

My answer to Mark was this: if one of your children was gay and the other wasn't - and one could marry the person they love and the other couldn't - would you still feel the same way about this issue?

He conceded that his view might be different if that were the case. I think his answer to that question more accurately reflects the view of our electorate on this issue.

Marriage equality wouldn't affect most people directly so they either support it generally, or they just don't care. There are other issues - one pretty big tax spring to mind - that are more important to people out here.

In a political sense, this is neither a deal-maker nor a deal-breaker.

Despite this, marriage equality is not an issue that is confined to the latte-sipping suburbs of inner-city Sydney. It affects people out here too, and there is good reason for all regional MPs to take an interest in this issue. It's called the brain-drain.

I grew up in Dubbo and completed my final years of high school here. I saw many bright, young, lesbian and gay people leaving our city not because they didn't have job or education opportunities, but because it was easier for them to be themselves in places like Sydney or Melbourne.

When I came out at 17, I was fortunate to have the support of my family and my teachers at school (St John's College), but even then I knew that life was going to be easier for me in Sydney.

I was right. When I moved to Sydney I didn't have to explain to people that I was gay, not because they felt rude to ask, but because they really just didn't care.

I'm not suggesting that a heap of gay doctors, lawyers and architects would come swarming back to Dubbo if the Marriage Act was amended tomorrow. I do, however, believe it would play an important role in promoting the acceptance of lesbian and gay people more generally.

A teacher recently said to me, "It's hard for me to teach teenagers that being gay isn't an issue when there's one pretty important Act of Parliament that says it is". He was right. Article seven of the International Declaration of Human Rights reads, "All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law..."

If politicians are looking for an apolitical "out" on this issue, I think that is probably it. This is as much a matter of Civil Law as anything else. On the point of Civil Law, it is worth noting that there is no expectation for Churches or Ministers of Religion to be forced to marry lesbian and gay people. The Catholic Church for instance, is not required to marry divorced people and marriage equality would not be an exception.

Even Mark Coulton was bemused by the fact that young people seem to be running away from marriage on the whole, and yet other young people are fighting to have it.

My passion for this issue comes not from a desire to run out and get married tomorrow. It comes from a desire for things to be better for kids who are growing up gay in regional areas.

And if you happen to be reading this - it gets better.

Being teased because you’re gay isn’t fun.

It’s particularly hard because it’s not as if you can go home and tell your parents.

Various studies, including one by La Trobe University last year, have shown that one in three gay teens will commit or attempt suicide. This worries me, and it should worry MPs too.

But it isn't all bad, and our elected representatives can make a big difference. In 2008, Fifty-eight laws relating to work and personal finance were amended in the Federal Parliament, and last year an amendment to adoption laws passed through the NSW Parliament. All of these pieces of legislation required cross-party...
support, and I was encouraged by this.

Apart from the realities that these pieces of legislation addressed, I have no doubt that Marriage Equality would have a similar effect on other young gay people.

The issue now is realpolitik. The Greens want to "own" the issue, Labor wants it to go away because it's tearing them apart, and the Opposition is doing just that—opposing.

This matter is one of personal conscience, and I—like other members of my party—call on all sides of politics to treat it as such and allow their members to exercise their personal conscience.

If there is a case for regional MPs to examine this issue more carefully, and to argue for the right to exercise their personal conscience, it is summarised in an article written by the now NSW Education Minister, The Nationals' Adrian Piccoli, entitled "Ultimate price paid for my ignorant prejudice."

Piccoli wrote in the Daily Telegraph following the death of a gay friend in 2005: "I killed my friend through my failure to accept difference, and through the lack of understanding from other country blokes, just like me, who made him hate being gay. It is not overt prejudice or open vilification. It's the more dangerous, subtle, constant things we do that must have gnawed away at his soul. It was people such as me who give gay people a funny look, who make gay men ashamed in country Australia.

And I haven't just killed him. I have killed many. Killed them at the end of a rope in the back shed or at the barrel of their father's gun or next to an empty bottle of grog. It's a tough realisation to come to." There comes a time when politicians need to step away from the polls, the newspapers, the advisors and the hacks—and sometimes even their party—and think, "I'm doing this because it's the right thing to do."

Will Griffiths is an advisor in the NSW Parliament and a member of the NSW National Party.

One in three gay teens will commit or attempt suicide.
Protestors in favour of gay marriage rights hold a rally on Swanston Street on November 22, 2008 in Melbourne, Australia.

Photo: GETTY IMAGES