

Dear Committee Secretary,

I'm an Australian, studying abroad in Tokyo for one year. (Most recently I lived in Carnegie, Melbourne.) I'm writing in support of the Marriage Equality Amendment Bill 2010.

Among other things, I study Japanese history, and I have a keen interest in history generally. I'm sure you've had a lot of people writing in, insisting that marriage must only be between one man and one woman, because that's the way it has always been, all over the world, etc.

It's frustrating that the people invoking History so loudly are, it seems, the people who have not studied it. The concept of marriage has varied tremendously, in different cultures and in different times: its form; its purpose; its meaning. The examples I could give, because of their variety, would only illustrate that they are irrelevant.

What's relevant is what 'marriage' means in Australia, in the present.

Even now, even just in Australia, people get married for different reasons, and their marriages take many different shapes. Some might marry for money; others marry for love. (For some practically-minded people it might be a bit of both.) Religious people might consider their marriage a holy institution; secular types are not so obligated. (Nor indeed are individual religious people; not at least by Australian law.) Some marry to have children; some marry to adopt children; some married couples choose not to have children. Some want to have children but can't. (And as an aside, it turns out you can have and raise children without getting married at all.)

Some married couples enjoy regular sex with each other. Some married couples enjoy regular sex with other people. And for some, it's a little from column A; a little from column B. Some sleep together without sex, in a loving, companionate fashion. Some sleep together without sex because they hate each other. Some sleep in separate beds but love each other dearly. Some live in separate houses but love each other dearly. Or maybe they hate each other -- it doesn't matter; they're still married.

Some husbands beat their wives; some wives beat their husbands. Some husbands and wives beat their children. These people are still married too, until they choose not to be. A guy could be a convicted serial murderer, in jail, and still have a wife. That's kind of amazing!

But the right to marry and be married -- that's not a reward Australians get when they behave a certain way. It's a right they have, as human beings.

From the examples above, it's clear that marriage, in Australia, is a legal status that two adults can voluntarily enter into together, and no more. It can be more than that, to the individuals involved, but it doesn't have to be. Marriage is simply a legal right.

The only other thing that the above examples have in common is that each marriage is between a man and a woman. It shouldn't be that way. Homosexual adults want to get married, too, and so long as they can't, a legal right is being withheld from them, on the basis of their sexual orientation. This is clearly appalling.

"Ah, but," a smart-arse might say, "homosexuals can get married." And in a way, he would be right: homosexual men can marry women, and homosexual women can marry men. But this

is silly. Marriage is a right -- it is voluntary, and it involves a free choice of partner. 'Rights' and 'freedom' go hand-in-hand. What's more, since marriage involves two people, it is not simply about the individual's right to marry. It is fundamentally about the couple's right to marry each other.

An Australian adult should be free to marry any adult he or she chooses. The idea that men may only marry women and vice versa emerged from the values of a certain society at a certain time -- values that had changed before and that have changed since. The Marriage Amendment Act 2004 did not make concrete a modern concept of marriage shared by all Australians. The concept was in flux. The Act forced marriage back into an old mould; its only function was to discriminate against homosexuals.

But the architects of the Act were wishful thinkers. Society has changed anyway, and the law must and will change with it. In every other respect, the law protects the rights and freedoms of homosexual people -- an expression of the nation's will. I know homosexual couples who have had marriage ceremonies, or who live together; each refers to the other as his husband. I refer to them as each other's husband, too. So do our friends. So do people who've never met them, if they happen to come up in conversation. This is the Australian community I know. (Though I suppose it's true that I avoid bigots.)

"Isn't that enough?" some might say. "If homosexuals can live together, and have a civil union, and call each other 'husband' if they like, what's the difference between that, and legal marriage?"

For one thing, that sounds as much like an argument for homosexual marriage, as an argument against. But let me tell you "what's the difference," as I see it.

Personally, I'd be happy to do away with marriage, in a legal sense, altogether. Scrap 'em; just have civil unions across the board, if need be. I don't even need that. People can live together or not live together; I don't care. But that's just me.

The fact is, marriage exists, as a legal right, and it's important to a lot of people. (Why it's important is different for each person, but damned if they don't all think it's important.) And it's a horrible, horrible thing to be denied something like that. Even if you don't want to get married, just knowing it's not an option is depressing, frustrating and disempowering. Walking around all day knowing that you're not quite equal; not quite human. Those who have rights and privileges tend to forget about them, but for those who are denied them, it's a burden. It messes with your head. This isn't a secret; science knows this. Suicide statistics know this.

That's the difference.

And as a straight guy, how can I get married, when gay people can't? I don't even mean, "I'm gonna boycott marriage until there's equality!" -- I'm just talking about politeness. I'd have gay friends I'd want to invite, but how could I do that to them? Rub their noses in my privilege over them? What sort of friend do you think I am!

For goodness' sake, if we must legally define marriage, let's broaden that definition; let's make it more inclusive. It would hurt no-one, and make so many people happy. Happiness is such a rare thing; why would we deny it to people, when to let them have it would cost us

nothing? I mean, it's so simple. There is no actual problem here.

How I'm going to wince and blush when I'm old, and I have to explain to the young ones that in my day, homosexuals weren't allowed to marry. I wince even now, imagining it -- the pathetic explanations I'll stammer in reflexive defence of my generation.

Society is better for everyone, the more happy people there are. It's as simple as that. For me, personally, the legal definition of marriage is just a tool we can use to make people happy, who aren't happy yet. That's why I support the Marriage Equality Amendment Bill 2010, and why I oppose civil unions as a substitute for full equality in marriage for same-sex partners.

While writing this letter, I was interrupted by a friend of mine from the dorm room across the hall, bringing me some mid-week groceries, because I broke my ankle hiking and can't get around. He's the best friend I've made in this dorm. He happens to be gay. I don't appreciate the law of my country insisting that I'm better than this guy. I don't like that at all.

Thank you for reading.

Yours sincerely,

Patrick Alexander