



Submission from Engage Celebrants

My name is Sarah Cummings. I am a Civil Celebrant appointed by the Attorney General's Department to solemnise civil marriages in Australia. I represent Engage Celebrants, a network for young, professional celebrants in NSW and Qld. My submission is made on behalf of all Engage Celebrants. We strongly support the Marriage Equality Amendment Bill 2012 and the Marriage Amendment Bill 2012.

Why we care about these Bills

As celebrants we are very lucky. We get to spend our days celebrating the love people share, in particular couples. Our celebrants have together performed more than 2,000 marriages. We have seen love expressed in all manner of ways between all different types of people. We have solemnised first marriages between people who haven't yet lived together, those who already have children together, blended families and older couples where there is no possibility for children to be born into the marriage. We've even officiated over marriages that, due to medical reasons, will never be consummated. In every instance these marriages are allowed and encouraged by society... because they are between a man and a woman.

The arguments against same sex marriage do not stack up for us. Marriage in Australia does not always mean that a couple plan to bring children into the world and it's certainly not a question that celebrants ask before we agree to perform a ceremony. Same sex marriage does not diminish the love that a man and a woman share through marriage because we all have differing views on what we expect out of marriage. I meet grooms who I would definitely not want to marry because of their views on a wife's role but that does not matter. Their future bride is happy with their expected family dynamic. My role as a celebrant is simply to make sure that they are both willing participants in the marriage and that they are entering into it with the expectation that it will last a lifetime. My role is not to judge how they will make that relationship work.

As celebrants, we are regularly asked by couples if we can remove the words of our Monitum which expressly declare that marriage is between a man and a woman. Of course this is not possible and couples understand that in getting married under the current laws they must accept the requirements of those laws. However it does go to show that it isn't just homosexuals who believe that everyone has a right to marry - heterosexual couples feel very strongly about this as well. In fact one of our celebrants had a couple who changed their wedding to a commitment ceremony because they felt so strongly about the issue. They will only marry when there is marriage equality in Australia.

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What's in a name? The importance of the title 'Marriage'

Whether we like it or not in Australia, as in the majority of countries around the world, marriage is a badge which says to the world that your relationship is serious. I know from my own experience, when my now husband and I declared to our family and friends that we were engaged their perception of us changed. We had known for a long time that we would be together forever but until there was a ring on that finger others weren't so sure, particularly the older generation.

We believe that allowing same sex couples to publicly declare their intentions, in the recognised cultural ceremony of marriage, would go a long way to changing attitudes towards homosexuals. In particular it would raise awareness and understanding of just how many same-sex couples actually do believe in long term commitment and loving relationships. In doing so it would dispel the myth held by some that homosexuals are only interested in short term flings. It would make people realise that the goals of homosexuals are the same as everyone else's - to surround themselves with people who love and support them and hopefully one day find that amazing, special person to spend the rest of their life with.

For these reasons we also believe that offering Civil Unions is not an acceptable alternative. Commitment ceremonies already exist for same-sex and heterosexual couples who cannot for various reasons marry legally. In recent years there have been significant changes made to various Acts such as those relating to superannuation and Government benefits to ensure that those in de facto and interdependent relationships have equal rights to married couples. Yes there are still areas where there are gaping holes and some of these would be resolved through Civil Unions but it would be sending a very sad message to Australians and the rest of the world - that in the eyes of the Government homosexuals should not expect the same human rights as heterosexuals; that their love is in some way different to that between a man and a woman.

Marriage is not an institution owned by the Church, it is a word used around the world to describe the act of two people declaring before their loved ones that they choose each other, above all others, to live together forever. This applies as equally to same-sex couples as it does to heterosexual couples and to try to say otherwise is to create a two class society.

It makes business sense too

In Australia in 2010 almost 70% of all marriages were performed by a civil celebrant, an increase of 12% since 2003^{*}. In the same period the number of civil celebrants has increased by more than 300%[#]. Based on the figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Attorney General the average celebrant performs around 11 weddings a year. Given the ongoing fixed expenses of insurance, professional development and general running costs this number does not encourage good celebrants to stay in the business or new celebrants to start. Whilst the number of weddings is increasing from year to year, there is no likelihood of a significant jump in the numbers any time soon, unless marriage equality is realised.

Whilst we believe that marriage equality should exist purely on the basis of human rights, there would definitely be economic benefits through its introduction. University studies have shown that 54% of same-sex couples would marry if they could[†]. Based on the current views of mainstream churches, the percentage of these that would be civil ceremonies would be even higher than the proportion of heterosexual weddings today.

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This would lead to more work for civil celebrants as well as the wedding industry as a whole. It would also encourage younger celebrants to join a thriving industry. The current celebrant age is said to be 62 so where does that leave us in the next decade if new celebrants do not see any reason to join? We want Australians to be able to celebrate their marriage with a ceremony that is personal in its content, professional in its delivery, considerate of cultural and religious requirements and of course legally prepared and lodged with the relevant authorities. To do this we need to continue to attract intelligent, caring and professional people from diverse backgrounds. As much as we all love what we do as celebrants, this calibre of people will only be attracted to an industry which can offer them a secure financial future.

Give celebrants the option to opt-out

We also believe that celebrants should have a choice as to who they marry. When people ask me how to choose their celebrant I always say you should choose someone you connect with because the wedding ceremony is the heart and soul of every wedding day. Through their vows the couple is publicly declaring the promises they make to each other as they head into marriage. Their wedding day should be one of the happiest of their lives and to make this possible it is imperative that the celebrant is fully supportive of the couple.

In the same way that religious ministers are able to deny ceremonies to those who don't fit all the requirements of their church, celebrants should be able to choose not to offer their services to couples if they feel they cannot fully support that couple. In reality it is unlikely to ever be an issue as couples will choose a celebrant who they get along with and who can deliver their vision of their day. However it is important that legislation is enacted to protect celebrants so that we don't end up with nuisance complaints which are purely attention-seeking and which could cause damage to the celebrant industry.

A final thought

As celebrants we are duty-bound to protect and encourage the sanctity of marriage in our society. Engage Celebrants believe that the best way to do that is to open it up to our society equally and include same-sex couples. We have seen first-hand that the love shared in same-sex commitment ceremonies is no different to that shared by couples on their wedding days. Apart from the legal aspects of a wedding the ceremonies are virtually identical. The commitment to a lifetime of love and care between the couple is identical. The love and support shown by the families and friends involved is identical. In fact the only real difference is the type of certificate and the legal rights inferred through the ceremony.

Introducing Marriage Equality in Australia would be good for our communities and it would be good for our industry. As such Engage Celebrants are fully in support of the Marriage Equality Amendment Bill 2012 and the Marriage Amendment Bill 2012.

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Sources:

* <http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/3306.0.55.001Main+Features12003?OpenDocument> and <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Products/452523FA6B272D27CA257958001E930C?opendocument>

<http://www.ag.gov.au/Marriage/Pages/MarriageCelebrantsProgramReforms.aspx#reasons>

† Dane, Sharon K., Masser, Barbara M., MacDonald, Geoff and Duck, Julie M. (2010) *Not so private lives: National findings on the relationships and well-being of same-sex attracted Australians*(version 1.1). The University of Queensland, Australia:

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