

Dear Committee Secretary,

I am writing to you to voice my full support for the Marriage Equality Amendment Bill 2010 and put forth my opposition to civil unions as a substitute for full equality in marriage for same-sex partners.

I want to live in an Australia where as a gay man I have the right and equal choice as my mother, father, sister and brother in-law have had to marry a partner who I deeply love, are committed to and want to spend the rest of my life with. It is unacceptable that my sexual orientation should deny me the equality and status that the rest of my family members and friends are able to enjoy by simply being heterosexuals.

What must be understood in the entirety of this inquiry is the very deep and personal impact that the same-sex marriage debate is having on gay and lesbian people in Australia. For many of us, this feels like a moment of really finding out if Australia truly is the 'fair go' for all country where equality for all prevails or if we are a country that is stifled in its ability to be a modern, inclusive and progressive society.

Having recently returned from 20 months of living in Toronto, Canada, I cannot explain the culture shock in returning to my home country where we are still figuring out if everyone really does have the right to be equal and whether same-sex partners should be able to marry. Many of my Canadian colleagues and friends were always shocked to hear that Australia was so behind on coming to grips with the reality that same-sex marriage is right, if we supposedly deem ourselves to be a country that truly understands and believes in the rights of all citizens to have equal status.

Given my experiences abroad, I encourage the Committee to closely look at what has taken place in other jurisdictions, especially Canada. The reality is the sky has not fallen in over Canada by recognizing and allowing same-sex marriages in that country. Instead it has bolstered Canada as a world leader and example to other developed countries, of how a country can truly accept and embrace diversity, and sincerely ensure every citizen has equal standing regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation or ability. Canada has done an outstanding job and so too could Australia on this issue.

My greatest fear is that if this Bill is not passed what does this say about our country to the international community? Further, I simply cannot imagine how badly this will damage if not destroy the ongoing journey in the Australian community to change its perceptions and stereotypes about gay and lesbian people -to accept us, instead of practising the less than satisfactory mode of 'tolerance'. We must be accepted, it is not a crime to be gay or lesbian and it is not odd that we expect an equal right to marry the partner that we love.

Another fear I have is that defeat of the Bill will give an enormous platform for the continued homophobia and bigotry that comes from some fundamentalist churches and religious organizations in Australia. For example, while I was living in Toronto I was absolutely disgusted when my friend in Adelaide called me around the time of the Adelaide Feast Festival (gay and lesbian festival) to let me know that he and many others had been verbally abused by Christian fundamentalists, as they walked to the festival. These so-called Christians were shouting at my friends saying "your going to die of AIDS". This disgraceful behaviour, will to me, be only ever more encouraged if this Bill is defeated. Such a circumstance will send the message to the entire Australian community that gay and lesbian

people are 'still' different, 'still' have less standing than heterosexuals and I can only imagine the force this will give to homophobia and intolerance in this country. It will become a place that I will barely be proud to call home.

So please, from amongst all these submissions, note that it is so important for the Australian community that we support this Bill as a message that in Australia -we are all equal, we all should have the right to marry a partner we love, regardless of gender or sexual orientation. This notion that 'marriage is between a man and a woman' is narrow and must be changed. Marriage is about love, equality, two people -its as simple as that, and everyone, including same-sex couples should have the right to enjoy a marriage in their lives.

I thank you for the opportunity to offer you my personal views in this submission and ask again that you carefully consider the importance of giving full support to this historic Bill.

Yours Sincerely,  
Greg Smitheram