

Public support for Marriage Equality in Australia currently sits at 62%, more than half the population. Historically, support for this measure has done nothing but grow. The majority of Australians believe that the discrimination should end and members of same-sex couples should be given the right to marry.

Currently, the way legislation stands, same-sex couples are denied a number of rights and privileges that are available to married couples, yet our government readily recognises same-sex couples for issues where it is convenient and beneficial for the government to do so - such as determining the rate of payment for Centrelink benefits based on an individual's partnered status. If the government can recognise that a same-sex couple is the same as an opposite-sex couple for the purposes of reducing the amount of pension, disability support or jobsearch allowances, surely they can recognise the equivalence in the relationships at all other levels.

Many who oppose same-sex marriage cite religious objections to the concept of same-sex marriage. However, Australia has a thriving civil celebrant industry, meaning there is absolutely no reason why a church or other religious organisation would be forced to perform a same-sex marriage if they truly object. Additionally, there are many Christians and even churches and religious organisations who support same-sex marriage and recognise and understand that there is no real difference between same-sex and opposite-sex couples when it comes to their capacity to love each other or their desire to share their lives together in a union which provides them with all the same benefits and societal recognition. Religious objections have no relevance to anyone other than the objectors, when the overwhelming majority of Christians actually support the measure, it makes the arguments of the churches ring hollow given that many of those to whom they minister are in favour of marriage equality. Additionally, marriage in this country is a civil matter, a matter of law and registration of the union in exchange for access to benefits and entitlements offered to those who are married. Many couples choose to have a church wedding with a priest or a minister in order to add a degree of religious sanction to the union that is only required as a consequence of their faith, there is no civil or legal requirement for this. This is evidenced by the fact that 67% of weddings in Australia are performed by civil celebrants. Civil, not religious. In fact, a religious wedding is only possible at law because the priest or minister performing the marriage is registered by the State to conduct marriages. The religious element is purely periphery to the civil aspect of the union and is purely for the benefit of the religious beliefs and sensibilities of the couple being wed or their family. It is not, in itself, essential for the wedding to be solemnised and should play no part in the decision as to whether to permit same-sex weddings to be carried out by a celebrant, religious or civil. Supporters of same-sex marriage do not expect religious personages to perform same-sex weddings if it is against their beliefs and sensibilities, we are perfectly happy with civil celebrants performing the marriage. As such, religious groups really have no grounds to argue against extending the right to marriage to same-sex couples - in reality, we don't particularly care if a religious personage is not prepared to perform the wedding if we have the option of a civil service.

Another objection cited by the opponents of marriage equality is the welfare and well-being of children. Currently, children of same-sex couples are in a worse position than those of opposite-sex couples due to the discrimination in relationship recognition. In terms of how children of same-sex couples "turn out", there is no documented evidence to indicate that the children of same-sex couples are any worse off, in fact, the evidence shows that children of same-sex couples are at least as well off and well adjusted as those of opposite-sex couples.

Evidence strongly suggests that the inability to marry has a direct connection with psychological harm through confirmation of underlying negative beliefs, adding to 'minority stress', adding another layer of challenge for those in long term committed relationships through a lack of validation. Most people are not aware of the causes and existence of the significant mental/physical health problems of those who are same sex attracted. These problems are strongly linked to issues including: 1) Deeply held beliefs about same sex relationships not being valid; 2) Being excluded from social institutions which normalize same-sex relationships such as marriage; 3)'Internalized Homophobia'- negative beliefs including GLBTI are disordered, sick, evil etc. Granting marriage equality will go a long way to alleviating these problems and providing healthy understanding and development - simply saying "it's OK for you to marry" will, to many people battling with depression and anxiety due to social pressures centring on relationship recognition, a significant reduction in stress, anxiety and emotional isolation that is currently experienced.

Many have suggested civil unions as an alternative for same-sex marriage. I do not, in any way, shape or form, support civil unions. The concept is, if anything, insulting to the same-sex attracted community. It essentially institutionalises discrimination and inequality. It amounts to an "equal but different" status where many (if not all) of the rights of marriage are conveyed to the couple, but they are denied the dignity and social recognition of being able to call the union a marriage. Even if the rights conferred in the civil union legislation are the same as those provided to a married couple, such legislation effectively says "OK, you can form a recognised relationship and get all the goodies, but no, sorry, you can't call it a relationship, you're not good enough for that." In legislatures around the world (particularly in the US) where the issue of marriage equality has been debated and discussed for some years, the panacea of civil unions has been offered instead of marriage, as a sort of sop to the same-sex attracted community to say "sorry, you're not as good as us, but we'll give you this instead". Indeed, in New Jersey, when Governor Christie conditionally vetoed the same-sex marriage legislation that has been passed by both Houses (unfortunately, not by enough to override his veto, yet), Governor Christie's condition was to investigate the civil union legislation already in effect and appoint a civil union Ombudsman. The reason? Civil unions in New Jersey are not working. The up-take has been dismal, though many couples have chosen to take what they can get, and the application of the civil union law has been patchy and problematic. Civil unions (whether same-sex or opposite-sex) are not being recognised by organisations with even a slight religious affiliation, and many government departments and even local businesses have taken a "pick and choose" approach as to when to apply the legislation and for whom. The perception in the general community, the business community and the same-sex attracted community is that it is essentially "equal, but different" and the "different" part is what is causing the problems. Queensland's civil union law is too new to make any calls as to its effectiveness, and, even were it not too new, the LNP party has vowed to repeal the legislation. Same-sex relationships in my home state of Tasmania may be registered in a civil register. It means nothing. While I appreciate the sentiments and efforts of the Tasmanian government in enacting the legislation, it does not provide a marriage, or even anything close to it. It's better than nothing, for now, but the real decision has to be made by the Federal Government - the Marriage Act amendment restricting marriage to a man and a woman must, in conscience, be repealed and language explicit to providing marriage equality must be put in its place. Protections for religious organisations must be included in order to help those groups opposed to understand that, realistically, most same-sex couples don't *want* a religious marriage and, for those that do, there *are* religious organisations and ministers or priests who are perfectly willing to perform the ceremonies.

The Federal government needs to act, and it needs to act soon. When the Marriage Act was amended, an unintended consequence arose, under the law as it stands now, States are perfectly and legally entitled to enact their own marriage legislation and fly in the face of the Federal government. Such a move by the States, in the event that the Federal government will not act, would be welcome, but it will create a patch-work of marriage legislation similar to that seen in the US, and we already know that system is far from ideal. Marriage legislation should be uniform, it should be equal, and it should be at the Federal level. However, should the Federal government choose not to act, and should the States choose to proceed (an approach that has already come under consideration in Tasmania in 2005, 2008, and 2010), then I would support the States. However, this type of patch-work approach, aside from being less than ideal, will send a message to the community that the States believed that the Federal government got it wrong, and that is never a wise message to send to the electorate.

I urge the Federal government to act and to permit all Senators and Members of Parliament to vote according to the expressed will of their electorate, and not on party lines or purely conscience vote as many who vote with their conscience may be countermmanding the wishes of their electorate. Other nations have instituted same-sex marriage laws at their highest level of government, and experience in those nations has been nothing but good. In all reality, there are no conclusive, definitive, supportable arguments against marriage equality, and the Federal government need to act to undo the discrimination that was enacted when the Marriage Act was summarily amended. Thank you for the opportunity to express my support for same-sex marriage, an issue close to my heart and an entitlement I hope to have some day soon. Please give consideration to my arguments and take action to amend the legislation in Australia to allow marriage equality to truly exist in this, the Lucky Country.