

Dear members of the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee,

This is my submission to your inquiry into the Marriage Equality Amendment Bill 2009.

Two months ago I attended my sister's registry office wedding in Brisbane. The ceremony was very quick and no-fuss; and when I later asked to have a copy of the text, I was told that the marriage ceremony used at the Registry Office was "the minimum that can be said by law in a marriage ceremony in Australia." Thus, I consider what was said in that government-scripted civil ceremony, conducted by a government employee, to be a statement of the heart of the matter.

This is what I heard:

*"At this moment, the future stretches before you rich in its possibilities – for there is little that contains greater promise of happiness than the linking of lives by marriage."*

To me, these words are an affirmation that marriage is regarded in our society as a 'gold standard' of interpersonal relationships, and that although many couples may choose not to marry, the concepts of 'marriage' and 'family' are the standards against which all other unions and all networks of affection are measured.

But, thirty seconds further into the ceremony I heard:

*"Marriage, according to law in Australia, is the union of a man and a woman"*

These words are a slap in the face to all queer people who hear them. (And we do attend weddings just like everyone else.)

On the basis of a pre-judgment (read prejudice), marriage is deemed a benefit same-sex couples automatically can never deserve or enjoy. For the legislature to declare that some people can never be allowed to marry their chosen mate, is to guarantee that any other union formed by a such a couple will always be second-rate in the eyes of many, because there is never even the outside possibility of achieving that gold standard.

It does make a difference when a couple are not married because they cannot do so, as opposed to having a choice whether to marry. I can see the merits of a system for registering significant personal relationships other than marriage. I welcome the enactment of such a register or registers. But to speak of 'proper marriage' for ordinary people only, and 'registered partnerships' for the queers and non-conformists, can only perpetuate a poisonous sense of them and us.

Segregation does not work. Separate-but-equal does not work.

This may be the twenty-first century, but I know from the experiences of several pairs of my friends that same-sex couples continue to experience prejudice, ignorance and inequitable treatment in a variety of ways, ranging from petty to horrendous. I believe that queer Australians, and our unions and kinship networks, can only become properly and rightfully bedded down in the general social perception of what is normal for Australia, when all Australian laws accord straight and queer Australians identical legal status in all the core social structures of our nation.

I support any move to remove the current prohibition on recognising same-sex marriages in Australia.