

Dear Senate Committee Members

*“If we join those who would intrude upon the choices of our hearts
then who among us shall be free?”*

The 2004 Marriage Legislation Amendment Bill, effectively denied civil rights to a particular group in our society, further endorsing and permitting discrimination against same-sex couples, with both major political parties sending a message to the Australian community that certain prejudices are acceptable. The passing of the 2004 amendment by Federal Parliament was not only a deeply shameful and bigoted act, that perpetuated the already embedded untruth that gay and lesbian relationships are not worthy of legal recognition, celebration or cultural acceptance, but it steered our nation away from the esteemed values of fairness & respect for all its citizens and it further ostracised same-sex families.

In 2009, there is now an opportunity to send a different message to the Australian community through the support & passing of the **“Marriage Equality Amendment Bill”**; a message that respects & values diversity, honours love, promotes equality and embraces family. This is the time for Australia to join with the many other countries in the world that are legally recognising same-sex couples through granting marriage rights and civil unions. This is the time to move beyond the out-dated, often vicious, ignorant prejudices against the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community to paving new ground for understanding, compassion and inclusion. This is the time to acknowledge that the beauty and sacredness of a relationship depends not upon the gender of the two people together but what is in their hearts. And this is the time for the government to finally step forward, to show the way with strength and unwavering commitment, and that way is one of justice and fairness for ALL Australians.

I struggle to comprehend the ferocity, ugliness and loathing that is loaded in the opposition to allowing same-sex couples to legally marry and sadly during this enquiry I have no doubt that it will take centre-stage again. I can only hope that there are more people who see the truth; see that our capacity to love and care for each other is not diminished in any way because we are gay or lesbian; see that we build lives together, families together that are so deeply precious to us; see that we are responsible for each other, even if we haven't been allowed a legal document that validates our commitment; and see that once you strip away the labels, our genders, underneath we are all human, and we too have unbreakable bonds of love & devotion with those we cherish. I hope that you see, because this is what we know, this is what we feel every day of our lives as we share it with our partner, our families.

There is no fair justification in which to deny same-sex couples the right to marry. After all the truth, the reality is that gay and lesbian couples nurture, support and encourage each other during difficult times, just as heterosexual couples do. We care, clothe and nurse each other in times of sickness, just like heterosexual couples do. We build our lives together, financially, emotionally and spiritually entwined, just as heterosexual couples do. We make life-long commitments and promises to each other, just as heterosexual couples do. We are devoted and adoring partners, just like heterosexual couples. We have children in our families, just like some heterosexual families. And we cherish & love each other with all our hearts, just like heterosexual couples. Yet we are denied the right to marry simply because of who we love. And remember we survive together in a hostile and homophobic world without any legal marriage protections; this alone demonstrates the enormity of our commitment to one another.

This isn't about parliamentarian's personal views. This isn't about what religious leaders preach from the pulpit. This isn't about the past, procreation or tradition. This is about what is equal and fair. This is about ensuring that no community in our society is excluded or denied legal rights afforded to others. I hope that those who ultimately have the final decision on whether or not to permit same-sex couples the right to marry think about the thousands of gay and lesbian couples who only want the opportunity to live in a country where they too have the choice whether or not to honour their love & commitment with a legal marriage ceremony. It is not acceptable that citizens of Australia have to fly half way across the world, to countries like Canada in which to marry, only to have that marriage invalidated once they step back onto Australian soil. This forced exodus also denies same-sex couples, their families and friends that wonderful joy of being witnesses to the ceremony. I won't ever understand why two people loving one another and raising a family is a national debate or moral disaster. But I do know this: the love that I share with my partner of 11 years should legally be recognised and it should never be treated as anything but EQUAL; it is a love that has filled every moment of our shared life, a love so beautiful that it is the sun & joy of our days; it should not be denigrated through exclusion or prejudice.

Until same-sex couples are afforded the right to marry we will remain second-class citizens and that is why the **"Marriage Equality Amendment Bill"** should be passed and the discrimination against couples based on gender or sexual identity eradicated. Marriage shouldn't be about gender; it shouldn't be judged worthy by the State; it should be about love, and only love; about all those joyful, beautiful, blessed things that fill two hearts, two lives, when souls come together.

Finally I long for the day when our government has the courage and leadership to move beyond the fear, beyond the prejudice, beyond the ignorance, to legally grant same-sex couples the right to marry. To quote the Prime Minister of Spain after legal marriage recognition was approved: ***"We are not the first but I am sure we will not be the last. After us will come many other countries, driven, ladies and gentleman, by two unstoppable forces: freedom and equality."*** I hope for my love, and the many other same-sex couples that the day is coming in Australia.

Yours Faithfully

Danielle Finlay