

SUBMISSION: Inquiry into the Marriage Equality Amendment Bill 2009  
Senate Legal and Constitutional Committee  
FROM: Matthew Dylan Anderson

I am an Australian citizen living with my same-sex partner in Norway. I would like to express my support for the Marriage Equality Amendment Bill 2009. I am writing this submission in my personal capacity.

My partner and I have been together for 5 years. He is a Norwegian citizen. We met while both living in the United Kingdom. When the time came for me to leave the UK we decided we wanted to remain together and had to decide where we should move.

We compared opportunities for us to remain together provided by both Norway and Australia. My partner was to start a business and I was to continue my studies and this factored into our decision-making. Another major influence on our decision was the legal recognition of our relationship in both countries and the level of acceptance our relationship would receive in each community.

At the time Norway legally recognised partnerships between two people of the same-sex. The Australian parliament had just moved to redefine marriage as being between man and woman only, and to ban recognition of overseas same-sex marriages. We decided that we would move to Norway, despite my desire to live close to my family and my home in Australia.

I moved to Norway in 2006 and gained residency based on my relationship with my partner. We entered into a civil union at the end of 2006 with our friends and family present. The Norwegian parliament has since amended the law to allow equal marriage rights to straight and same-sex couples and to remove all forms of discrimination within the law based on a person's sex, sexuality or gender identity. Had we had the option of marriage at the time we would have taken it. We have started to build our lives together here in Norway. We have bought an apartment, my partner is running a successful media post-production company and I am working as a freelance designer while taking a masters degree in architecture. I partly attribute our initial success in setting ourselves up to the legal and social acceptance of our relationship, and the ease with which this has allowed us to establish ourselves here in Norway.

Norway has a fairly lengthy history of legally recognising same-sex relationships and this is reflected in the society as more than tolerance, but acceptance. In professional situations and at university there is no question that my relationship with my partner is accepted and recognised, as a heterosexual relationship would be. In Australia I have been exposed to prejudice in the workplace, at university and in social settings. I can honestly say that after three years living in Norway I have never been exposed to prejudice or felt threatened because of my relationship or sexuality.

We discuss moving to Australia some time in the future however for us to do this means giving up the standing we have in Norway as fully equal citizens. As the law stands in

Australia today the relationship we have built here in Norway would not be recognised. We would be moving to a place where, despite living as two contributing members of the community in a relationship as committed and faithful as any, we would not be recognised as such by the law. We have chosen for now to remain in a place where our contribution to the community as individuals and as a couple is recognised and respected, and in turn we are treated in the eyes of the law equally to everyone else in this society.

Based on my experiences in different communities, I feel that the legal recognition of same-sex partnerships has a lot to do with community acceptance. In places with a longer history of legal equality there is a greater tolerance/acceptance. In places like Australia where the issue is still under debate, social prejudices (if not legal) remain in most situations. The only time I have felt under physical threat because of my sexuality was in Australia and this is partly because of the lack of understanding and acceptance within the community. I never want my partner to be subject to such a threat and this is something I have in mind when it comes to planning our lives together. I feel that equal legal recognition for all partnerships promotes acceptance within the community.

With regards to religious discussions surrounding this issue I would like to express my respect for peoples' freedom to choose their religion and the beliefs they follow, however I feel that it is irrelevant to discuss marriage equality from a religious standpoint as it is a legal and social issue. Marriage is not and has never been exclusively a religious institution. Australia is officially a secular state. In Norway, where the institution of the State Church still exists, they have recognised the distinction between religious, and legal and social discussion. Despite having a fundamentally Christian government, Norway has recognised the social importance of marriage equality within the law. The freedom to express religious positions surrounding the issue is then left to individual groups.

I hope that Australia will change with regards to this issue. It is hard for me to live away from my home and my family, but it is heart breaking to know that for me to live in Australia I would have to give up what I see as a fundamental human right, to be free to chose my partner and have that choice respected within my community. I fully support the Marriage Equality Amendment Bill 2009.