



A conscience vote on marriage equality?

Why a conscience vote on marriage equality?

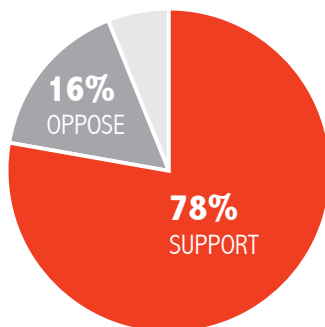
A conscience vote is where individual politicians are allowed to vote on a law any way they feel is appropriate, and are not bound by the policy of their party. Sometimes it is called a free vote.

Polls show **62% of Australians support marriage equality**. So do a large number of politicians in both major parties. However, Labor and the Coalition have outdated policies opposing marriage equality.

This means all politicians in these parties must vote against marriage equality, even though this is against the wishes of the majority of Australians, and, for many politicians, against their own conscience.

Is there support for a conscience vote?

Yes. A national poll conducted by Galaxy research in October 2010 found that **78% of Australians believe there should be a conscience vote on marriage equality**.



During the last election it was also openly advocated, for the first time, by several Labor and Coalition candidates including Cath Bowtell, ALP candidate in the seat of Melbourne, and Cameron Simpkins, Liberal candidate in the Hobart seat of Denison.

Supporters of a conscience vote

- **Clover Moore**, Lord Mayor of Sydney
- **Shelley Argent**, National Spokesperson for Parents & Friends of Lesbians & Gays
- **Andrew Wilkie**, Independent federal MP for the Tasmanian seat of Denison
- **Dr Kerry Phelps**, former President of the Australian Medical Association
- **Senator Sarah Hanson-Young**, Greens Senator for South Australia

Shouldn't the parties just change their policies?

Yes, but this takes a long time and is not a guarantee marriage equality will be achieved. For example, the next chance the Labor Party has to review its opposition to marriage equality is at its next National Conference in 2012, and there is no certainty it will overturn the current policy.

Even if it did, there would be no obligation on Labor politicians to act on a policy allowing marriage equality.

There are conservative religious elements in both major parties intractably opposed to marriage equality, who, in the event their party moved towards supporting reform, would probably force a conscience vote anyway.

Won't it provoke a hateful campaign by opponents?

Those opposed to marriage equality will campaign strongly against it regardless of whether there is a conscience vote.

Important gay law reforms have been subject to conscience votes in the past, including the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Tasmania and allowing same-sex adoption in NSW.

In both cases a well-resourced and sometimes hateful campaign against reform was defeated thanks to the commitment to equality of people from all walks of life.

Won't the cause be set back if a free vote is lost?

The achievement of marriage equality will be delayed. But it will be moved forward if a conscience vote campaign prompts an informed national discussion about the need for reform.

We know that whenever people discuss gay law reform, support for reform always increases. This is because the spell of silence that too often surrounds homosexuality is broken.

With a strong campaign that mobilises the supporters of reform, a conscience vote will move the issue forward even if the vote is lost.

The stark choice is whether we trust political parties to achieve marriage equality on our behalf — something they have thus far been loath to do. Or whether, as ordinary citizens, we have sufficient faith in ourselves and each other to make marriage equality a reality.

How can I show my support for a free vote?

Australian Marriage Equality has established a website to help you send your letter of support for a conscience vote to your local member of parliament and to the leaders of the major parties. Visit www.freevote.org.au