



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

ADJOURNMENT

Same-Sex Relationships

SPEECH

Wednesday, 21 September 2011

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

<p>Date Wednesday, 21 September 2011</p> <p>Page 6752</p> <p>Questioner</p> <p>Speaker Senator CAROL BROWN</p>	<p>Source Senate</p> <p>Proof No</p> <p>Responder</p> <p>Question No.</p>
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Senator CAROL BROWN (Tasmania—Deputy Government Whip in the Senate) (18:51): Madam Acting Deputy President:

At times I cry thinking about it, knowing that thousands of young Australians are growing up knowing that we are so different and that there are laws written against us.

Most days, I don't feel much different from my friends, but as I get older I think about what my life will look like in 10 years. I realise I will never be able to have the life my friends look forward to.

That is just one short, personal story amidst the many I have heard or read on the issue of marriage equality. The issue of marriage equality has evoked considerable debate around Australia. Marriage equality is always at the forefront of media commentary and has been a hot issue in both formal and informal debate in my home state of Tasmania. Even before the motion passed the federal House of Representatives on 18 November 2010 asking politicians to gauge their local community's views on same-sex marriage, I had been contacted by a number of Tasmanians and Australians keen to have their views heard.

Whilst I personally believe that an amendment to the Marriage Act will ensure that Australia remains a country which promotes equality, fairness and dignity for all citizens, I also wanted to give Tasmanians the opportunity to put forward their personal view on marriage equality. In addition to learning the views of constituents who phoned my office, wrote to me or met with me, I launched an online survey on my website on 27 April 2011. It had three parts. Question 1 asked: Do you believe that the federal government should legislate to deliver greater relationship recognition to same-sex couples? Question 2 then asked respondents to indicate whether they supported one or more of the following options: amending the Marriage Act so that same-sex couples can be married; a national civil unions scheme which is open to both same-sex couples and opposite-sex couples; a national civil unions scheme which is open to same-sex couples only. Question 3 gave respondents the opportunity to share their personal story or leave a comment.

I closed the online survey at 5 pm on Friday, 9 September. After scrutinising the survey data, I was able to remove responses from constituents who lived outside of Tasmania and others whose details were not able to be verified against the electoral roll. In total I can report that 509 constituents from across Tasmania completed the survey. I can also report that, in addition to the survey responses, I have had 584 other interactions with Tasmanian constituents on the issue of marriage equality, and the emails, letters and phone calls are still coming in every day.

Combining the survey responses and the constituent interactions, I had had 1,093 interactions on the issue of marriage equality as at 9 September. An analysis of those 1,093 interactions indicates that, state wide, 55.9 per cent of Tasmanians support marriage equality. Looking specifically at the data collated from the electorate of Denison, which is the electorate in which I live and in which my office is based, 167 of the constituents who contacted my office were from the electorate of Denison and 184 of the Tasmanian respondents to the survey were constituents living in the electorate of Denison. Out of those total 351 interactions, I can conclude that 78.6 per cent of Denison constituents support marriage equality. Given the sample size of my data, I believe this represents a statistically sound indication of the views held by the Denison electorate.

In Denison, out of the 184 respondents to the survey, 83.1 per cent said that they supported amending the Marriage Act so that same-sex couples can be married. Of that 83.1 per cent, 33.1 per cent said they would also support a civil unions scheme open to both same-sex and opposite-sex couples, 3.8 per cent said they supported a civil unions scheme open to both same-sex and opposite-sex couples, 1.08 per cent said they supported a civil unions scheme open to same-sex couples only and 11.9 per cent were against any legally recognised relationship.

Of the 167 constituents who contacted my office through emails, letters or phone calls, 73.65 per cent supported amending the Marriage Act to allow for same-sex marriage, which, as I mentioned earlier, means that, when both the survey responses and contacts are calculated, I can report that 78.6 per cent of Denison constituents contacting my office support

marriage equality. The data I have collected therefore suggests that the electors of Denison strongly support marriage equality and have a clear preference for amending the Marriage Act. The data also indicates that a number of people were happy to support both a civil unions scheme and an amendment to the Marriage Act, but a large proportion of respondents indicate marriage equality is the preferred way forward—a clear preference.

Whilst the data I have collected from the electorate of Denison, a socially progressive electorate, shows there is strong support for marriage equality, this support is not limited to Denison. The support for marriage equality is widespread. A recently released poll, conducted in February this year by Enterprise Marketing and Research Services, EMRS, shows that 59 per cent of Tasmanians surveyed believe same-sex couples should be allowed to legally marry. More support for marriage equality can be found in Newspoll figures from November 2010 which show that 65 per cent of Australians 'have no problem' with allowing same-sex marriage and in Nielsen polls from November 2010 and March 2011 which show 57 per cent of people support marriage equality nationally.

Whilst there have been a number of national polls on the issue, many parliamentarians have been reporting back on the results from their own community consultations. Throughout the reporting period, it has become apparent that there are very strongly held views on both sides of the marriage equality debate. It is worth highlighting that results I have collected supporting marriage equality come not just from friends and family of the gay and lesbian community but from throughout the Denison electorate and more broadly across Tasmania.

The data I am presenting today is a reflection of the constituent views which I received as part of my consultation period with the community. I note that, just today, the Tasmanian state parliament passed a motion supporting marriage equality and calling on the Commonwealth parliament to amend the Marriage Act to provide for marriage equality. I welcome the passage of this motion by the Tasmanian state parliament and congratulate the Premier of Tasmania, the Hon. Lara Giddings MP, for providing leadership on this issue. I look forward to the debate on this issue at the Labor Party's national conference in December.

Whilst we continue to debate the issue of marriage equality and pursue the end of legislated discrimination against same-sex couples, it is also important to recognise Labor's record on reform. We have a proud history of achievement in bringing equality and recognition for same-sex couples in Australia. In our first term of government, federal Labor

successfully amended up to 85 pieces of legislation to remove discrimination against same-sex couples. These reforms removed discrimination and equalised treatment for same-sex couples in the areas of taxation, social security, health, aged care, superannuation, immigration, child support and family law. In my home state of Tasmania, the Labor Party has also led the way in law reform for the recognition of same-sex relationships.

Across Australia, other states have legislated to recognise same-sex de facto couples, to ensure same-sex couples receive fair access to assisted reproductive technology such as IVF and to enable same-sex couples to adopt children. It follows that same-sex couples ought to have the right to define their relationship and should not be restricted in the way in which they celebrate their love for each other. Without amending the Marriage Act, we will perpetuate discrimination and inequality.

All Labor Party state conferences held this year, with the exception of NSW, who deferred their decision to the ALP national conference, have passed motions in support of marriage equality. In my home state of Tasmania, the state conference support for marriage equality significantly boosts our campaign to change the national platform.

Historically there have been many debates about marriage. There was a time when interracial couples were not allowed to marry, and there was also a time when a wife was 'property' of her husband. This is not the case anymore. That is why we need to legislate to represent the values of Australia today. The institution of marriage has evolved to reflect changing social attitudes in the past. Given the majority of Australians today are saying that they support marriage equality, it is incumbent upon us in the parliament to take this final step towards full equality and recognition for all Australians. We have the power to amend the Marriage Act to allow for marriage to be between two people who love each other and who want to make that commitment public and official. Amending the Marriage Act will remove this one last barrier to full legal equality for same-sex partners and protect Australia's reputation as a proud, multicultural, multifaith, vibrant and diverse country.

Same-sex couples can marry in Canada, Spain, South Africa, Portugal, Mexico, Argentina, Belgium, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland and the US states of Iowa, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York and the District of Columbia. I want to see Australia added to that list.