



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Main Committee

CONSTITUENCY STATEMENTS

Same-Sex Relationships

SPEECH

Wednesday, 24 August 2011

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker King, Catherine, MP

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Ms KING (Ballarat—Parliamentary Secretary for Infrastructure and Transport and Parliamentary Secretary for Health and Ageing) (11:51): On Thursday, 18 November 2010 the House of Representatives passed a motion that called on all parliamentarians to gauge their constituents' views on ways to achieve equal treatment for same-sex couples, including marriage. Labor supported the motion, but many of us thought it was a somewhat odd suggestion given that the very job of a local member of parliament is to talk through issues with those who voted for us, weigh the often competing views and advocate for change both within our own party processes and within this parliament. That being said, out of respect for the people who have taken the time to contact me about these issues, I want to share some of the views that have been put to me not just over the past six months but over the course of many years. I also want to put on record the action Labor has already taken in its relatively short time in office to address the inequality directed at same-sex couples across a raft of policy areas.

On the passing of the motion by the House I put up a survey on my website and have had contacts via phone, letter and email as well as petitions. I have also had personal representations from same-sex couples as well as church organisations based in my electorate. It would be fair to say of the 1,800 contacts—and I emphasise that they are contacts; some of them are double, triple and in some instances quadruple contacts from the same person, so the statistical significance of any of those figures would be highly questionable if you were going to analyse them—the views are divided. On the one hand, there are those that deeply believe that the Marriage Act should be changed to reflect the broad diversity of family structures including marriage between same-sex couples. Those of this view believe firmly that the definition of marriage contained in the act discriminates against same-sex couples and is a significant barrier to achieving full equity.

On the other hand, there are those that have a firm conviction that marriage as defined in the Marriage Act can only ever be between a man and a woman and that any change undermines the tradition of marriage and the values that they hold about it. Many of these views, but not all, have come from those who have a religious base. Related to this, some church groups have also raised with me a concern that, should there be any change to the definition of marriage, they could face legal action should they refuse according to their beliefs to marry a same-sex couple.

The views on both sides are passionately and strongly held, and I respect that. I respect that for those with firm religious beliefs the existing definition of marriage is fundamental to those beliefs and they cannot under any circumstances countenance a change. But equally I respect the views of those who firmly believe that just because they are in a same-sex relationship they should not be precluded from having that relationship legally recognised as a marriage under the Marriage Act.

Whilst I have had representations from same-sex couples about this issue, there are two I particularly want to reflect on. The first couple I have known for many years. They have supported me through election campaigns, including attending many fundraisers and even on one case making a frock for me in a campaign. They have been together for many years, raised children together, been through illness together and survived work and family stresses together. They are a couple who, if you ever wanted to point to a loving, successful and deeply supportive relationship, would be it.

The second couple I met more recently and they have been together for some time and were very new, proud parents when they came to see me. Their daughter is now almost three. It was hard as a parent of a child just a little bit older than their daughter not to compare notes on our children's milestones, the constant nagging anxiety you feel about whether you are doing a good job and just how different the world now was and looked with the care of a small child in our hands. I could not help reflecting on what extraordinarily beautiful parents they were and how lucky their little girl was at having such strong, caring, engaged and loving parents. Both of these couples would like to marry but are precluded from doing so under the law.

The issue of same-sex marriage has been raised at successive national conferences and will be the subject of debate at our upcoming national conference. I have been a delegate at the national conference for the past three

ALP conferences. I will not be at the upcoming conference. I am acutely aware of the significant work and efforts of the left of the party and Rainbow Labor in particular to progress this issue through our party processes.

Given the time I will just briefly conclude that the constituency statements here are just that. Despite some of the emails we have been getting over the last couple of days, it is just that: an opportunity to place on record the views of our constituencies. It is not a vote on changes to amend the Marriage Act itself. I want to thank those constituents who have contacted me about this issue. From my own point of view I recognise that there are divided views in the community I represent on the issue. I have tried to outline that I have not as yet formed a view on this issue. I am on the public record as supporting the current definition of marriage, but I have to say that belief has been fundamentally challenged by the representations I have had by same-sex couples. Despite not being a delegate at the national conference, I will watch with great interest the debate. *(Time expired)*