



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

BILLS

Plebiscite (Same-Sex Marriage) Bill 2016

Second Reading

SPEECH

Thursday, 13 October 2016

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

Date Thursday, 13 October 2016
Page 1874
Questioner
Speaker Albanese, Anthony, MP

Source House
Proof No
Responder
Question No.

Mr ALBANESE (Grayndler) (11:29): I oppose the plebiscite because it is costly. I oppose the plebiscite because it is divisive. Most importantly, I oppose the plebiscite because it is ineffective. A plebiscite will, just as the previous speaker indicated, lead to a parliamentary bill and parliamentary motion. The previous speaker also indicated what we all know: a majority of the Australian people support marriage equality. We know that is the case. It is acknowledged that that is the case. It is overwhelming. And it is now the case that a majority of House of Representatives members and senators, including the current Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition, support marriage equality. We should get on with it and do our job.

The previous speaker also spoke about the conscience votes that we have had in parliament on this side of the House, even though no conscience vote was allowed by those opposite. A few years ago a majority of the parliament did not support marriage equality. When I was elected in 1996, the priority of same-sex couples was certainly not having the right to marry; there were a range of other reforms that had a practical impact on their lives that were much higher up the agenda. Those issues were dealt with by the former Labor government when we amended some 84 pieces of legislation—on superannuation, on health, on migration, on social security. All of those pieces of legislation passed this parliament without rancour, without opposition and without creating division in the community.

When they were first raised, they were controversial. When I first raised the Superannuation (Entitlements of Same Sex Couples) Bill in my first term of parliament, that was a controversial issue. There was not even unanimous support within my own party. When you spoke about sexuality in this place, people shifted uncomfortably in their seats. Now there is far greater total tolerance, and far greater respect for the fact that we are a diverse community. This campaign for marriage equality is about unfinished business. 'Equality' is a really important term here. That is why the plebiscite is so wrong. We decide in this House social security, taxation arrangements, infrastructure policy, health policy, education policy and defence policy. We determine that.

Why is this one issue being singled out? We know that it is all an attempt by the opponents of marriage equality, including former Prime Minister Tony Abbott, to stop marriage equality. That is why this was put up within the coalition party room. When it was put up, it was opposed within their party room by the current Prime Minister and many of those opposite. Are we on this side of the House supposed to be bound somehow by the fact that Malcolm Turnbull rolled over on his own principles in order to secure the prime ministership by guaranteeing that he would adopt the same policy as his predecessor, Tony Abbott? I actually thought Malcolm Turnbull was better than that. He has a proud record of marching in the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras in his electorate, and of standing up genuinely on these issues. I know that he is an opponent of discrimination on the basis of sexuality. It makes it even sadder that he is prepared to take the position that he has, knowing the consequences that it will have for division in the community, for same-sex couples and for their families. They know the consequences, which is why they are so strident in their opposition to this.

I believe very strongly that we should have a vote and a determination in this parliament, and we should do it sooner rather than later. Some of the best debates I have been involved with in parliament have been conscience votes on controversial issues like voluntary euthanasia and stem cell research. They have been respectful debates. They have been the parliament at its finest, where people have thought about each and every word that they were going to contribute to the debate. I have been in a minority—it must be said—in those debates, but they have been respectful. I actually think those debates taking place have raised the standing of this parliament as a result.

That is the way forward. In the 20 years I have had the honour of sitting as a member of the House of Representatives, extraordinary advances have been made towards removing discrimination on the basis of sexuality. Marriage equality will be not the final step, but a significant step. The debate about removing discrimination is not just about laws; it is about the way that people conduct themselves in our community. If you engage with young people now—certainly, the ones that I speak to—then they wonder what the big deal is

here. What is the issue? Marriage equality will not affect anyone's existing right; it simply extends an existing right to some people who have previously been denied that right.

It will not affect anyone's marriage; indeed, it will strengthen the institution of marriage by allowing more people to participate in it. It will not require churches to do anything against their will. It will simply provide equality for everyone before the law. And, when it is all over, just like as happened in most of the industrialised world now—in the United Kingdom under the conservatives, in New Zealand under the conservatives, in many of the states of United States, in Canada and in many of the countries of Europe—people will wonder what all the fuss was about and people will just get on with their lives. That is why the Prime Minister really should show leadership on this.

Marriage equality does come down to issues of tolerance and respect. I believe that tolerance and respect needs to be held by all people who participate in this debate, both the supporters and the opponents of marriage equality. I have been very much on the record for a very long time as a supporter of marriage equality but also as a supporter of the conscience vote. I understand that some people of faith who regard marriage not as a civil institution that is governed by laws and legislation but as something that is a sacred institution handed down from God have a different view, and I respect their right to hold their view. That is why any of the legislation that has been drawn up by people such as my colleague, the now member for Whitlam and then member for Throsby, Stephen Jones, included religious exemptions, and that is something that is supported by the gay and lesbian community. A conscience vote of this parliament would allow people who have religious convictions and do not want to choose between that position and the position of civil lawmaking to vote accordingly. It would ensure that the parliament is able to be respectful.

But it does go both ways. The truth is that the families that I have met with through organisations such as Rainbow Families are genuinely and legitimately concerned about the implications of a divisive debate. The member previously quoted the member for Barton in her contribution last night. Due to boundary changes by the Electoral Commission, I now live in the electorate of Barton. During the election campaign, in a marginal seat, I got material in my letterbox which can only be described as targeting Linda Burney because of her Aboriginality and her religion in a way that was offensive and divisive—and it backfired on those people who distributed that material. The concerns that those families have are absolutely legitimate concerns.

I am yet to have a same-sex family in my electorate—not one—ask me to vote for this legislation that is before the parliament. I have my own views that happen to accord with that view. My gut instinct was always to oppose the plebiscite, because we as parliamentarians have a job to do and we should do it. But we do have to be very cognisant of the fact that, as The Smiths said in that great song *What Difference Does it Make?*, 'Heavy words are so lightly thrown.' One of my concerns reflects the view of that great songwriter Morrissey when he said those words. Words are thrown around in a debate which we know, from some of the comments that have been made already in this debate, will be very hurtful and will create needless division. The fact that the government intends to publicly fund this debate is, I think, even more reason to oppose this legislation.

The fact is that we could knock this over this afternoon by having a vote of this parliament. It could go to the Senate tonight and they could deal with it. Then, next week, we could just get on with business. This is an enormous roadblock to the government getting on with other business. Its insistence on this divisive plebiscite is standing in the way of the promotion of harmony and unity, which this parliament has an obligation to pursue. We can see that there is a great deal of distrust of elected representatives playing out in areas such as the US presidential election. We need to lift standards of public discourse and lead the community in promoting respect and inclusion. Have marriage equality and have it through this parliament.