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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

BILLS

Plebiscite (Same-Sex Marriage) Bill 2016

Second Reading

SPEECH

Wednesday, 19 October 2016

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Speaker Littleproud, David, MP	Question No.

Mr LITTLEPROUD (Maranoa) (19:05): I am proud to stand today to speak in support of this government's Plebiscite (Same-Sex Marriage) Bill 2016, prepared by the Attorney-General, Senator the Hon. George Brandis. The introduction of this bill is a historic moment for our nation and our parliament, because never before in its history has a federal government introduced legislation of this nature. No bill on same-sex marriage has ever progressed past the second reading stage and, consequently, no bill has been debated by the second chamber. All 22 bills have been private members' bills, introduced by members of parliament from across the political spectrum.

More importantly, the bill fulfils the government's commitment, as part of its re-election platform, to offer the Australian people a plebiscite to determine this important question. As politicians, we are often criticised for ignoring the solemn commitments we make during the process of getting ourselves elected, and it is for this reason that I am proud to support this bill and fulfil this commitment to the Australian people.

This parliament, as with all those that have come before it, is made up of people who have a diverse range of backgrounds, professions and values.

It is for that reason I appeal to those of all political persuasions both here and in the Senate to look deep inside themselves and to deliver what is just and fair to those we represent on this important issue. Above all, we as elected representatives of this country must lead. We must lead our nation and ensure that, no matter the difference in our opinions, we demonstrate that this debate can be conducted in a respectful and dignified manner. We should look within our own conscience and vote on what would be the best for this nation, not our parties.

I believe the determination of this bill should not be predicated on whether you support the concept of same-sex marriage or not but rather what is the best mechanism that will ultimately deliver and reflect the values of the Australian people. The institution of marriage is one that has been in existence for hundreds of years and has been the bedrock of Australia's fabric since Australia's existence. It has therefore been an integral and important part of the way our nation society has been shaped and grown for over 200 years. It is one that has lasted the test of time and it is one that no doubt will continue for generations to come.

Therefore, the decision we will make on this bill is one that should be undertaken with care and respect. For this reason, it is my strong belief that to make such a significant change to our society's social structure is one that should be determined by the Australian people and by not the individual consciences of our nation's 226 politicians. If we as a nation revere the institution of marriage, no matter our sexuality, then surely any change to the fundamentals of this institution should be left to the ultimate democratic body in this country to determine its course, the Australian people.

The bill will establish the legislative framework for a vote in a national plebiscite that would ask Australians: should the law be changed to allow same-sex couples to marry? It is a simple question that is unequivocal in its meaning, and it is one that provides clarity to every Australian about what they are determining.

I acknowledge the cost of this plebiscite and acknowledge the financial constraints we as a nation find ourselves in currently. But our democracy, like the institution of marriage, is something we should fiercely protect and rightfully refer to, to provide the Australian people with the power to make the ultimate determination on something that would be a significant change to the social make-up of this nation.

I also want to acknowledge the inherent concerns recently identified by Professor Patrick McGorry in regard to a plebiscite and the mental health of the LGBTI community. He fears they may endure mental health concerns during this process. Professor McGorry is truly a great Australian, whose work with this country's young is something this nation continues to, and will forever be grateful for. His concern about the detrimental effects a plebiscite could cause to the LGBTI community from his own professional perspective is acknowledged. But what Professor McGorry has failed to take into account in determining his professional assessment on this

matter is the maturity of the Australian people. He assumes, in determining his opinion, that, effectively, he does not believe the Australian people can have a respectful and informed debate in a dignified manner on such an important issue, which I believe is an assumption no academic could accurately determine.

I believe we live in a country that is tolerant and mature and one that can be entrusted with determining its own future. To say that the extremes from both sides of this debate will not try to bring vitriol into it, I understand would be naive, but it is incumbent on each one of us, as this country's representatives, to lead our nation through this important discussion and to bring our nation with us, with dignity and respect, and to destroy any social licence of extremities of this debate as they appear.

We have been entrusted to lead our nation, and now is our time to repay that trust in our actions and our words, to galvanise the nation and reinforce that it is okay to disagree. I believe in the Australian people and I believe in each and every one of us as our nation's representatives to lead our nation in being able to make this determination without harm.

In my electorate of Maranoa I get to witness this every day. The acceptance and inclusion of those across the electorate from the LGBTI community is one that exemplifies a truly tolerant society and, I think, reflects the Australian people's maturity and ability to undertake a decision through a plebiscite in a fair and respectful manner.

LGBTI people in my electorate often live in small communities of only a couple hundred people and are, therefore, prominent in their minority in those communities. However, the acceptance of LGBTI members in Maranoa as respected and valued contributors to their communities—has achieved acceptance and tolerance that our nation should be proud of.

And, while my electorate has recently been marginalised because of a 2013 'Vote Compass' survey, as being the only electorate in the country to have a clear majority to vote against same-sex marriage, I have never witnessed nor been advised of any vitriol or disrespect towards the LGBTI community in Maranoa. This is because they are accepted for who they are, and for the contribution to their communities, and not by their sexuality.

While this survey indicates that the people of Maranoa's view may not be in line with current polling on this issue, I still believe the voices of Maranoa are just as precious as those of any other parts of this country, and each one of them should be heard. The people of Maranoa are not loud or pretentious in expressing their views, but instead prefer to express their views and their consciences through the privacy of the ballot box. It is for this reason that I believe the best mechanism for the voices of Australia to be heard in a respectful and dignified way is through a plebiscite. In Maranoa we have proved you can have a contrary view and still treat those around you with dignity and respect and I believe our country can deliver that too.

There is also a valuable precedent to the effective use of a plebiscite, in taking the community along together on this important issue. Ireland proved to themselves and the world that a respectful and dignified debate could be achieved and a nation could move forward on what the nation determined. Australia and Ireland share similarities. Both countries have deep religious and traditional perspectives on the institution of marriage. There was no reported breakdown in its society or any widespread individual harm caused to members of the LGBTI community by this process and for academics to determine that the Australian people could not conduct themselves with the same dignity is condescending and flawed.

I am not standing here today challenging the validity of any same-sex couples' love for one another, but I am standing here saying that their desire to have that recognised through the institution of marriage is one that the nation should make collectively. Allowing the Australian people to make this determination above all will provide the validity any result deserves. Allowing 226 politicians to determine this matter based on their own conscience will only open up to conjecture the way members and senators voted, rather than provide the entire nation with clarity so that they can live their lives with the knowledge that the Australian people support this decision.

I fear that, no matter what impassioned plea any of us make in this chamber or the other, partisan politics will prevail, and the leadership this country so richly deserves and yearns for will not materialise. For this reason, I fear that, instead of each of us leading our nation and bringing our nation with us on this journey, we will only serve to marginalise and divide our nation, and a great opportunity for each and every one of us to prove that we can lead this country will be lost.