

Andrew Wilkie on marriage equality 24 Aug 11

Mr Speaker I'm pleased to ever so briefly summarise Denison's views on marriage equality.

Mr Speaker the motion of this House to gauge the views of the electorate I applauded and went to some trouble to comply with, including advertising in the Mercury newspaper and in my newsletter, as well as by meeting with all constituents interested in discussing the issue.

In total I've received over 1,300 emails and letters, mostly from people in the electorate. I've met personally with some 50 constituents and over 350 people packed into the main lecture theatre at the University of Tasmania to attend my public forum on the issue.

The one point both opponents, and supporters of same sex marriage agree on is the enduring value of marriage.

Both marriage equality advocate, Rodney Croome, and Presbyterian Minister and opponent of same sex marriage, Campbell Markham, described marriage as a 'bedrock' institution during their contribution to the forum.

However Mr Markham, and many others who share the view that the current definition of marriage as a union between man and woman should be maintained, do so based on the belief that marriage is intrinsically linked to bearing and raising children, arguing "the bedrock of society is family, and the bedrock of family is marriage between a man and a woman."

Many constituents expressed the view that marriage should not be about the emotional or sexual connectedness of adults but ultimately the needs of children. They pointed to a number of studies to argue the needs of children are best served if they are brought up by both biological parents.

Moreover there was strong support for the widespread Christian belief that same sex marriage "will undermine the very fabric of God-ordained marriage, and ultimately have a very negative influence upon families, children and therefore our society as a whole."

Some constituents said homosexuality is unnatural and therefore same sex marriage is unnatural. One gentleman quoted the English bishop and philosopher Joseph Butler to make his point, saying "everything is what it is, and not another thing."

Occasionally concern was raised at the consequences of loosening the definition of marriage, citing the risk of polygamy, paedophilia and even bestiality. Some constituents voiced concern about the possibility of legal action being taken against churches opting to exclude same sex marriages, even in the event safeguards are put in place to prevent such an eventuality.

That governments have removed discrimination of same sex couples in most legislation, and that Tasmania among other jurisdictions allows same sex unions, was cited frequently as going far enough.

On the other hand constituents supportive of same sex marriage believe that without the right to marry, same sex partners are unable to live as free and equal citizens.

They argued such a denial equates to discrimination and rejection of their most basic human rights. Mr Croome argued that “denying us the right to marry the person we love sends out the message that our love is not as good and our commitment is not as strong as it is for those couples who can marry. It says we are second-class citizens against whom it is okay to discriminate.”

This was illustrated by a mother who expressed disappointment that her heterosexual child was free to marry, while her child who was in a long term same sex relationship was not.

In many cases concerns were not with the churches, which are seen as having the right to decide who they marry, but with the inequity in the Marriage Act which is legislative discrimination.

Law expert Dr Olivia Rundle noted that while recent legislative changes in theory allow same sex couples to access certain legal rights, the ability to enforce these rights remains uncertain. She concluded that marriage remains the only universally recognised relationship that allows couples to formally commit to life long unions.

Some constituents were of the view that legalising same sex marriage would in fact strengthen the institution of marriage by reinforcing its value in modern society. Tasmanian Anti-Discrimination Commissioner, Robin Banks, even suggested that by challenging us to rethink traditional gender roles, same sex marriage has the potential to lead to greater equality of the sexes.

Mr Speaker, while many people in Denison feel strongly about marriage equality I dare not hazard a guess at the numbers for and against, not least because both camps claim a majority and have polling to prove it. What I do know is that the Government needs to find a way to address this matter which recognises fundamental principles and respects both sides of the debate.

Thank you Mr Speaker