

# **Lobbying Members of Federal Parliament**

## **in support of the**

### **Marriage (Equality) Amendment Bill**

On 29<sup>th</sup> September 2010, Greens Senator Sarah Hanson-Young reintroduced her Marriage (Equality) Amendment Bill into the Australian Senate. The Bill seeks to remove discrimination from the Marriage Act 1961 and give Australian same-sex couples the right to marry.

The following is a communications guide for those people who wish to take action in support of this bill.

The various options for lobbying your local federal Member of Parliament or Senator are ranked below from the most effective to the least effective:

- **Face to face meetings:**

Face to face meetings with your political representative are always the most effective. A meeting usually needs to be organised at least one week in advance and is best arranged for a day when Parliament is not sitting. Suggested discussion points for the meeting are included later in this document.

- **Letters:**

A handwritten, or typed and signed letter, is the most effective means of communication after the face to face meeting. This is far more effective than mass produced, photocopied, generic letters, postcards or emails. Most politicians also regard handwritten letters more highly than typewritten ones and you are strongly encouraged to adopt the handwritten format. (In this computerised world many believe a word processed letter was probably just cut and pasted from what someone else has written). Suggested discussion points for your letter follow later in this guide. Do not fax your letter but mail it in a hand addressed and stamped envelope to your local member's electorate office. Also mail a photocopy of your letter (marked "COPY") to: Hon Julia Gillard MP

Prime Minister of Australia

Parliament House

Canberra ACT 2600

- **Telephone Calls:**

A phone call to your representative's local electorate office when Parliament is not sitting is generally more effective than sending an email, but is less effective than writing and mailing a letter. When you call, first give your name and address and identify yourself as a constituent. Tell the support staff that you wish to speak to your representative personally about the Marriage (Equality) Amendment Bill and if they are not available right then, request

that they call you back at some later time to discuss the Bill with you further. Suggested discussion points for your telephone conversation follow later in this guide.

- **Email:**

Email is by far the least effective way of communicating your views to your local representative or Senator.

Unfortunately, some politicians regard email from constituents as little better than junk mail and do not even bother to read it. To be fair, politicians sometimes receive so much email that they and their staff have difficulty finding time to read and deal with it all. This is particularly true of generic emails that are automatically forwarded to all Members and Senators en mass.

However, as a last resort, if you are unable to find time to mail a letter or make a phone call, it is better to send an email rather than do nothing at all. Compose the email along the lines of the letter format suggested later.

- **Parliamentary Petition:**

A petition to both houses of the Federal parliament requesting that the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition grant their respective members a free conscience vote on the issue of same sex marriage can be found at:

[http://sarah-hanson-young.greensmps.org.au/webfm\\_send/457](http://sarah-hanson-young.greensmps.org.au/webfm_send/457)

You are strongly encouraged to download and printout this petition, then seek to have as many like-minded citizens sign it as possible. Given that around 60% of the Australian population now supports same-sex marriage, this should not be a difficult task. And at that 60% level of support, the greatest number of people likely to sign this petition will be heterosexual!

## **Tips for communicating with Members of Parliament**

- **Always include your name and address:** Identify yourself as a constituent by including your address when you write a letter to your elected representative. Generally, politicians are much more likely to pay attention to people who live in their electorate.
- **Keep it brief:** Your letter should be no longer than one page and should be about this one issue of same-sex marriage only. Be as concise as possible. Politicians are time poor and receive many letters on many topics every day.
- **Use your own words, not someone else's:** An original letter sent by one single person is much more effective than a generic form letter (or cut and pasted text) sent by dozens of people. Even if your writing skills are not the best, a letter written in your own words and in your own hand writing will carry much more weight than just regurgitating one more copy of what others have already said many times before.
- **State the topic clearly:** Include a subject line at the top of your letter e.g.  
Reference: Marriage (Equality) Amendment Bill

- **Begin with a clear statement of purpose e.g.:**  
 "I am writing to seek your support for the Marriage (Equality) Amendment Bill introduced into the Senate on 29<sup>th</sup> September 2010."
- **Focus on three important points:** Choose the three points that you think are most likely to resonate with the particular politician you are communicating with and then flesh them out. This is more effective than attempting to address numerous points in one letter.
- **Ask your representative to take concrete action:** Ask them to raise the matter of the Marriage (Equality) Amendment Bill at their next Canberra party room meeting and seek to win their colleagues' support for the Bill. Point out that you think this issue is important enough for the representative to cross the floor and vote for the Bill if their party will not support it.
- **Ask for a response to your letter:** While the response will probably be a form letter, written and authorised by the politician's support staff, you will at least know you have had an impact on their office. Party politics in Australia are such that few elected politicians are likely to tell you honestly whether or not they personally share your views on same-sex marriage. However, a well-written letter could possibly be instrumental in prompting them to privately take action behind the public scenes to persuade and potentially change their colleagues' minds and their party's position.
- **Personalise your letter:** Where possible, include a personal story or information about how this same-sex marriage issue affects you, your partner and your family directly. This can help your representative understand your position and can be very persuasive. The more personalised is your letter, the more impact it is likely to have on the recipient.
- **Personalise your relationship with the recipient:** If you have ever voted for the politician, or contributed time or money to their election campaign, or have met them, etc, say so. The closer he/she feels to you, the more effective your letter is likely to be.
- **Be polite:** Be courteous, but don't be afraid to take a firm position. While your politician's job is to represent you, remember that politicians and their staff are people too. Threats, hostile remarks and rude or offensive language are among the fastest ways to alienate people who could otherwise decide to support your position in light of rational and reasoned argument.
- **Thanks are as important as criticism:** Politicians need to be able to tell the 'other side' that they have been inundated with calls and letters supporting their position. Write thank you letters or phone politicians that you know support same-sex marriage particularly when they say something in the media or parliament in favour of same sex marriage.. This will encourage them to stand firm on their position.
- **Keep the anger factor low:** Play it cool. Avoid accusing, criticising or threatening any particular politician or party. Irritating the politician you are trying to lobby does not advance the cause of same-sex marriage. Avoid creating enemies.

## **Discussion points in favour of same sex marriage**

Whichever communications method you choose to lobby your local representative, consider using some of the following discussion points to make your case for same-sex marriage, modifying the language to suit your own style and thereby increasing its authenticity as truly representing your own carefully considered thoughts and beliefs on this matter.

1. Same-sex marriage is not just a gay and lesbian issue. It's also a human rights issue. Refusing same-sex marriage is a form of minority discrimination that denies particular people the right to marry the person they love. It is discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Australian same-sex couples deserve exactly the same benefits, protections and obligations under the Marriage Act 1961 as everyone else.
2. The only thing that really matters in determining the suitability of any marriage is love.
3. Same-sex marriage will not hurt Australian society in general or any person in particular.
4. Same-sex marriage does not undermine the institution of marriage any more than extending the voting right to women undermined the institution of democracy in Australia early last century.
5. Same-sex marriage encourages lesbian and gay people to forge strong relationship commitments and to avoid high-risk lifestyles. It reinforces a stable bond between the two individuals who then work to create a loving household and a sturdy social and economic partnership. Their same-sex marriage in turn forms one of the basic building blocks of our Australian society.
6. The institution of marriage will convey dignity and respect to same-sex couples who choose to make a lifetime commitment to support each other.
7. Opinion polls consistently show at least 60% of all adult Australians now support same-sex marriage.
8. Same sex-marriage is now legal in Canada, the Netherlands, Sweden, Belgium, Norway, Spain, South Africa, Mexico and many states of the USA. The sky has not fallen in on any of these countries, nor is it likely to in Australia.
9. Same-sex marriage is not a religious matter, it is a civil matter. Moreover, over 65% of Australian heterosexual couples now choose to have a civil wedding ceremony rather than a religious one and that number is increasing. By choice, marriage for most modern day

Australians lies very much within the civil jurisdiction. Gays and lesbians do not seek access to religious marriage but seek to join the majority of their fellow Australians who prefer to take part in civil marriages.

10. Marriage is not exclusively about procreation. It is primarily about two people, of the opposite or same sex entering into a life-long commitment to the exclusion of all others.
11. Legalising same-sex marriage would be an endorsement of the core Australian value of "A Fair Go" for everyone, and would represent the culmination of our nation's long standing commitment to equal rights for all its citizens.
12. The Australian constitution makes it clear that equality under the law extends to persons of all races, religions, and places of origin. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, surely this principle must now also be made to apply to marriage for loyal Australian men and women who differ from others only by their sexual orientation.
13. The pursuit of same-sex marriage is an expression of the desire by gay and lesbian Australians to create long term, monogamous social partnerships, to live and share life's joys and burdens with the person they love and to form lasting bonds with social identity and dignity. Same-sex marriage will help define these men and women and their rightful, equal place in Australian society.
14. Marriage in Australia is a relationship currently recognized by government as providing a privileged and respected status, entitled to the state's support and benefits. It is a union unreservedly approved of and favoured by the wider community as a whole as it is also favoured by members of the gay and lesbian community who similarly wish to be entitled to enjoy its privileges, benefits and responsibilities.
15. Preventing lesbians and gays from marrying does not cause more heterosexuals to marry and conceive more children. Likewise, allowing gays and lesbians to marry someone of the same sex will not discourage heterosexuals from marrying a person of the opposite sex and conceiving children with them.
16. No matter what you (the politician) might personally think of homosexuals, it is a fact that gays and lesbians constitute something like 7% of Australian society. We are doctors, teachers, journalists, soldiers, (dare we even suggest politicians) and quite possibly some of your friends. We yearn for acceptance, stable relationships, and success in our lives, just like everybody else. And that includes the right to enjoy marriage; a same-sex marriage.

17. Surely all Australians, no matter what their political persuasion, can agree on the value of strong families, lasting domestic relationships, and communities populated by persons with recognized and sanctioned bonds to one another. Confining some of our neighbors and friends who share these same values to an outlaw or second-class citizen status just because they are gay deeply undermines their sense of belonging to, and weakens their ties with, the rest of Australian society.
  
18. Without same-sex marriage, society is effectively telling lesbian and gay Australians, plus those who love them, and the community in general that same-sex relationships are less worthy, less legitimate, less permanent, and less valued than straight relationships. This demeans same-sex relationships and it demeans these people as individuals. It is also an extremely damaging and hurtful message for young teenage gays and lesbians to receive in their sensitive, formative years and which sometimes can lead to very tragic consequences. It is hard to imagine how this state of affairs can be of any benefit or advantage to those individuals, their families and friends or the broader Australian society as a whole. The inclusive message from the Federal Government must surely be that all Australians, gay and straight, are equally valuable. They should all be entitled to get married if they wish to.
  
19. Many gay and lesbian Australians can testify from personal experience how lonely and personally destructive it is to be treated as an outcast and as a second class citizen. And how meaningful and uplifting it will be to them as individuals to one day be respected by the inclusion of same-sex marriage provisions in our legal framework. Such inclusion will enable them to become an Australian gay or lesbian citizen empowered with real equality and dignity within the institution of marriage.
  
20. Same-sex marriage is good for gay or lesbian couples for all the same reasons that opposite-sex marriage is good for straight couples. If you ask straight people who are married or hope to get married to imagine life without marriage, it is very hard for most of them to do so. That's because it is a much lonelier and much more vulnerable life than they can easily visualise. Lesbian and gay Australians need all the same safety, the same support, the same lifelong companionship, sharing and care giving that everybody else does. Lesbians and gays and are now asking the Parliament of Australia to be included in this social contract called marriage - to be able to love and care for each other all the rest of their lives - so that Australian society never needs to.

Of course the discussion points listed above are in no way exhaustive and are intended simply to stimulate your own thought processes in structuring the messages you wish to deliver to a politician. Please feel free to expand on or alter any of these points as you wish.

The name and postal address of your local federal member or senator can be found at:

<http://www.aph.gov.au/house/members/mi-state.asp>

<http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/senators/contacts/los.htm>

Please forward this guide on to as many of your like-minded friends, family and work colleagues as you possibly can. The more people who take action on this same-sex marriage issue, the more powerful and positive will be its impact on our politicians in Canberra. With 60% of voters now in favour of same-sex marriage, the biggest number of people likely to support this initiative will be found among our fellow straight Australians.

Thank you,

**Paul Griffin**

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