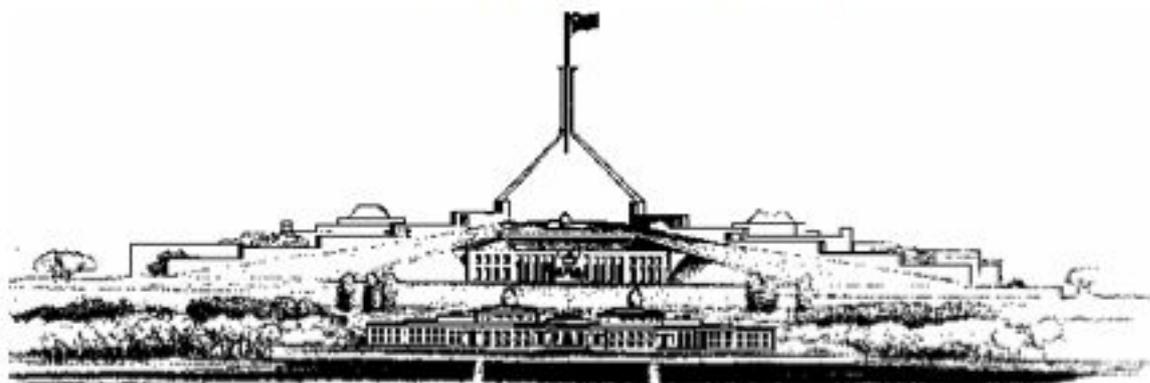




COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

BILLS

**Marriage Amendment (Definition
and Religious Freedoms) Bill 2017**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Tuesday, 5 December 2017

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

<p>Date Tuesday, 5 December 2017 Page 11 Questioner Speaker Ley, Sussan, MP</p>	<p>Source House Proof Yes Responder Question No.</p>
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Ms LEY (Farrer) (13:06): Following the recently concluded postal survey, I'm pleased to speak today on the Marriage Amendment (Definition and Religious Freedoms) Bill 2017. In keeping with the range of conversations I've had with people across Farrer over the last few months, I expected my electorate to vote yes on this issue. The local survey returned a 55 per cent 'yes' vote. This was very much average when compared to the rest of New South Wales, where 57.8 per cent voted yes, and the nation as a whole, where 61.6 per cent voted yes. The participation rate in Farrer was also similar to the national average, with 77.4 per cent in the electorate taking the opportunity to have their say compared to 79.5 per cent Australia-wide. So in my electorate there was a firm endorsement—not categorical but a reflection that this is an important cause whose time has come.

But, as historic as this moment is as an important moment in time for this parliament, this was not always the case. For many, and for many years, same-sex marriage laws were not a critical issue. 'Get on with what is important,' people might have said. But for a proportion of the community, for those who felt they were being excluded by the current definition of marriage, this is a vital issue. I remember Georgia Henderson from Deniliquin, who asked to meet with me in 2011. Arguing her case passionately, talking about her feeling of feeling excluded within her own country community, Georgia said, 'I don't want to be forced to move somewhere in Sydney just so I can feel normal.'

I have met several times with Hume Phoenix, based in Albury-Wodonga and led by Toni Johnson. Toni has organised a number of local events, meetings and marches over recent years, and I want to acknowledge her heartfelt and personal efforts on behalf of her local LGBTI community.

I must also recognise the advocacy of Archdeacon Peter Macleod Miller from Albury's St Matthew's Anglican Church. Father Peter is certainly a man of the cloth, but, much more importantly, he is a campaigner for social justice and equal rights—the rights of the homeless, the rights of refugees and the rights of marginalised members of society who deserve our compassion. Father Peter came to this place in August 2015 to hold a prayer breakfast on this very issue. He was just one of 106 members of the clergy who presented a letter of support for marriage equality. As one of the organisers said that day:

We are working to raise up the voices of Christian people and people of faith who believe that relationships ought to be strengthened and supported ... And we believe this because of our faith, not in spite of our faith.

While I am voting with my conscience and the sentiments of my community, the sentiments my community has endorsed, it is impossible for me to sum up in a few statements what the entire LGBTI community in Farrer must be feeling today. Perhaps the most appropriate reflection takes me to a small town in my electorate, Hay in the New South Wales Riverina, a town on the edge of the outback, home of the Shearer's Hall of Fame with, I think it's fair to say, an image that is blokey and rough and tumble. Next March, Hay will be host to the very first rural gay and lesbian Mardi Gras. This event, I'm told, is set to become the country alternative to the much higher profile Sydney event. The changing face and attitude of places like Hay is why we are here today. One of three local women who are organising the Hay Mardi Gras—which, by the way, would have gone ahead whether the vote result was yes or no—is Kerry Aldred. She said:

I personally am so relieved that the result was in favour of the yes! I have many friends that this survey has affected in far too many ways, so having this win is awesome.

As I stood at the Henty Machinery Field Days for three days in September, I learnt that people had mixed feelings about the postal survey plebiscite process. Some were annoyed that it had come to this, feeling that we as politicians had handballed the problem to the community to give us the answer. Many, however, were thankful to see us following our election commitment. They told me they looked forward to having their say and would be happy to abide by the result even if that result was not what they voted for.

The decision the parliament will take this week is about the future. If there is one powerful reason to vote yes, it is that in every high school, in every university, in every venue where young people gather, whilst there are a range of different views on so many things, on the subject of marriage equality there is almost always only one view.

We have not yet fully resolved discrimination against the LGBTI community, but we have come a long way in this generation. In 1978, I was completing my ACT year 12 certificate at Dickson College in Canberra. The same year, police arrested 53 people at the first Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parade. The Mardi Gras was a planned street festival calling for an end for discrimination against homosexuals in employment and housing, and an end to police harassment. *The Sydney Morning Herald* published the names of those who were arrested. As a result, many of them lost their friends and lost their jobs. The Mardi Gras was seen by my contemporaries as somewhere between a confused celebration of immorality and an exotic curiosity.

In 1982, I was working as a public servant in Canberra. I made friends with a co-worker who disclosed to me that he was gay. This was highly unusual. I was fortunate because his friendship gave me the gift of understanding the irrelevance of a person's sexual orientation to the intrinsic quality of who they are. That year, Australia saw its first case of AIDS, and gay people, gay men, were most unfairly targeted as being somehow responsible or, indeed, only having themselves to blame if they were stricken with this awful disease.

In 1984, I was an air traffic controller at Melbourne and Sydney airports. I would have confidently stated that none of my circle of colleagues or friends were LGBTI. In fact, several were. Tragically, the case of a couple who became sick and died meant that their final months were spent hidden and alone without friends. I wished I could have had the opportunity to reach out a non-judgmental hand of friendship. Society judged—that was the problem—even if as individuals we did not. In that year, my home state of New South Wales finally decriminalised homosexuality.

In 1987, I was working as a shearers' cook in western Queensland when the grim reaper advertisements first hit our screens. The campaign was not meant to fuel negativity towards gay men, but it did. Young people became terrified of AIDS; stories circulated about how easy it was to catch and how rapidly it would spread. The rumour mill was out of control. In rural Australia, gay people went underground.

The unique circumstances of people growing up gay, lesbian and transgender in rural Australia have defined my approach to marriage equality. I have heard too many stories of loneliness, misunderstanding, rejection and, ultimately, tragedy not to know that this legislation will do much to heal the anguish. As every provider of mental health services and support will tell you, acceptance of you and who you are—and your sexuality is a huge part of this—does much to prevent adolescent anxiety and self-harm. As so many young people in regional Australia have described to me, it is just so hard to be LGBTI growing up in a small town where everyone knows everyone and there is no-one to turn to for understanding and support. In future, I know this angst and distress will be calmed by the sheer ordinariness of same-sex marriages in a person's community, in their extended family and in society at large.

What has been very clear to me throughout this debate is that those of us who are heterosexual should listen to those of us who are not. Anders Furze is a journalist with *The Citizen*. He comes from my home town of Albury. He expressed his feelings thus:

I'm privileged enough to move in social circles where overt homophobia is rare, although it does happen. But the thing about coming out in a heterosexual culture is that you don't just say "I'm gay", magically click your gay fingers and suddenly erase the overwhelming shame that comes from living in the closet. The effects of hiding an essential part of who you are can and do flow well into adulthood.

When the High Court ruled that the same sex marriage survey could go ahead that shame, which I now realise I had displaced onto other aspects of my life, came rushing back. It's hard to avoid it when every time you turn on the TV or switch on the radio or log onto Twitter or check Facebook or walk past an outdoor billboard or stand on a tram or exist in the world people are debating your sexuality in the background.

Initially I played the game. I entertained semi-sober arguments made by straight acquaintances at the pub. I respectfully argued in Facebook threads for my right to be an equal citizen. I took a deep breath and earnestly braced myself for every conservative think-piece on the issue.

The realisation gnawed at me for days before I eventually let it come racing in: I'd been playing this game my whole life. I'd been deferring to others on the subject of who I was, respectfully segregating my sexuality in order to more easily navigate heterosexual spaces. Why? So I wouldn't offend people. So I wouldn't offend myself. It was a way of being, I realised, that was slowly eating away at me.

To the people in my electorate who identify as LGBTI, may I say that you have been heard. To the people in my electorate who voted no: I respect your vote. I appreciate that you have expressed deeply held, often religious, convictions that have nothing to do with the discrimination against or marginalising of same-sex couples. I note that the Prime Minister has appointed Philip Ruddock to examine whether Australian law adequately protects the human rights to religious freedom. This review will report in March next year. I assure all of my constituents who have voted no that I will continue to listen to your genuinely expressed concerns.

In conclusion, many Australians have had a personal journey when it comes to marriage equality and accepting same-sex marriage. I'm not sure that I would have voted yes 10 years ago. I probably wouldn't have. Five years ago, I might have been ambivalent. Today, for me, a 'yes' vote is the only possibility.

I want to thank the many individuals across this country who have patiently, carefully worked so hard for so long to bring about this result. The generosity, acceptance and sense of a fair go that have always been at the heart of the Australian character have been and will continue to be well and truly on display.