

THE LAW

ISTOCK



MARRIAGE SPLIT: *Differences of view over same-sex marriage bills*

SOCIAL POLICY

Divisions remain over marriage bills

MPs urged to consider committee's report.

Parliament still stands divided on two controversial bills which seek to legalise same-sex marriage in Australia. A report by the House of Representatives Social Policy and Legal Affairs Committee has prompted another round of passionate debate.

The Marriage Equality Amendment Bill and the Marriage Amendment Bill seek to legalise same-sex marriage in Australia and recognise same-sex marriages performed in foreign countries. Both bills uphold existing protections that ensure no obligation is placed on ministers of religion to perform any marriage, which would include same-sex marriages.

Tabling the report in parliament, committee chair Graham Perrett (Moreton, Qld), urged all MPs to read the committee's report before voting on the two marriage equality bills before the House.

"I appreciate that there are many differences of opinion among us, as there is across the country. However, we have the weighty responsibility of upholding the views of the constituents who elected us to this position," Mr Perrett said.

"We have a duty to lead, as well as to represent our constituents and to vote accordingly."

To assist parliament with the debate, the report outlined some amendments which emerged from the evidence

received by the inquiry. This includes rewording of the bills to define marriage as simply 'between two people' in order to achieve the intent of removing discrimination in the Marriage Act.

The inquiry also found that, for practical purposes, it may be desirable for the proponents of the two bills to discuss agreeing on the text of a single bill for the parliament to consider.

The committee chose not to recommend how MPs should vote on the bills, but committee members submitted additional remarks which reflect the diversity of views in the parliament and the community.

Some members of the committee argued that the overwhelming response to its public inquiry showed that the community is ready for change, stating that it is indefensible and unjust that two people who love each other are unable to marry each other because of their sexual orientation.

But other committee members disputed that Australian attitudes to marriage have changed, saying the limitation of marriage to people of the opposite sex was not to discriminate against people who wish to belong to same-sex relationships, but rather acknowledges the unique institution of marriage.

More debate on the bills is expected during parliament's Spring sittings. •

EMPLOYMENT

Wanted: life beyond work

Proposals aim for better balance.

The right to request flexible working arrangements would be extended to all long-term casual employees and those employed for over 12 months under proposed amendments to workplace legislation.

The Fair Work Amendment (Better Work/Life Balance) Bill 2012 seeks to expand the National Employment Standards to allow staff to request the number of hours they work, the scheduling of those hours and the location of the workplace.

Current legislation only allows similar requests to be made by people with caring responsibilities for children under school age, or dependants under 18 with disabilities.

However a review by the House Education and Employment Committee has cast doubt over whether the amendments will be adopted.

The majority report of the committee recommended that consideration of the amendments be delayed until after a current review of the Fair Work Act 2009 is completed.

Introducing the private member's bill into the House, Adam Bandt (Melbourne, Vic) said it will provide a better work/life balance for Australian families.

"Sixty per cent of women say that they feel consistently time pressured and nearly half of men also feel this way," Mr Bandt told the House.

"Almost half of all fathers in couple households work more than they would prefer, and one-third of women working full time would also prefer to work less, even taking into account the impact that this might have on their income."

Mr Bandt said the bill would help families to better spread working responsibilities.

Professor Anna Charlesworth of the Centre for Work + Life welcomed