

REDEFINING MARRIAGE

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The Government's consultation on marriage was launched with a ministerial statement from Lyn Featherstone that the outcome was already decided. The consultation is about how and not whether the definitions of marriage should be altered.

The document states the intention that *"Once a couple have got married either through religious or civil means, they will then be treated for legal purposes as being married. We are not proposing to create two separate legal regimes for civil and religious marriages. We are proposing that the law is*

*clear that marriages conducted through a civil ceremony would be open to all couples and marriages conducted through a religious ceremony and on religious premises can only be between a man and a woman".* The document also states that there will be no effective legal difference between a civil partnership and a marriage except that civil partnerships are only available to homosexual couples. So, legally, it is proposed that marriage is to be no different from a simple contract which is dissoluble at a time when a partner desires this.

But the Sacrament of permanent, committed and indissoluble marriage, open to children which has been the bed rock of British society for millennia is simply unrecognisable in that formula. Perhaps, more than anything else marriage is a duty which we voluntarily choose to accept when we become married. Duties of care, fidelity and loyalty to the spouse, as well as duties to the children that come from that marriage are central focuses of the effect of marriage and the remainder of people's lives. And as a result of that, marriage is not open to those who cannot meet, do not accept or cannot understand its requirements. Is marriage a right that should be opened out beyond its current remit? The European Court of Human Rights has ruled in March 2012 that homosexual 'marriage' is not a right under the European Convention on Human Rights [1]. Should marriage, with its central focus upon permanent sexual union of man and wife be extended to homosexuals? Many think not.

Is marriage as we know it special? Data does appear to suggest that abuse, for example, is particularly low in children living with both their biological parents [2]. There is good evidence from the U.S Center for Marriage and Family released a study in November 2005 that living with two married parents is good for children[3].

Beyond that, there are real issues about creating legalised homosexual relationships. It is right that homosexual people are seen as a special group which requires the protection of the law. The high incidence of discrimination, (strongly condemned by the Church [4]) along with high rates of depression, self harm, suicide and relationship breakdown are all issues that must concern practicing doctors and nurses [5]. As well as those challenges, high rates of sexual transmitted diseases [6] and multiple partners [7] are well documented. All those things will, at least sometimes (perhaps often) be significant in a relationship. All such people need our care and support, and health workers are

required to be adept at identifying risk factors for physical and mental health issues. Some have claimed that discrimination is the cause of increased suicidality etc [5]. But that claim is hard to verify and there is evidence which leads to doubting that claim [8]. For example, there are still substantial increases in symptoms of suicidality according to a study carried out in a more “tolerant” country (Odds ratio 2.58 to 10.23 , with higher odds ratios for more severe symptoms [8]. Many other discriminated groups, in contrast, do not show this set of difficulties. So it is absolutely right that homosexuals are especially protected as a group by law.

Should marriage be open to homosexuals? Our opinion is that it should not. In believing this we do not discriminate against homosexuals. Rather, we affirm the value of marriage properly constituted. Although marriage , as we know it, is already deeply broken in western society, it will not be healed by extending its definition in this way. And even if that issue is disregarded, we note that the effect of proposed legislation is simple. The attempt to level the playing field between marriage and civil partnership merely degrades marriage and in effect usurps the word marriage as a substitute for civil partnership and degrades marriage to that of a civil partnership.

So, above all else, we '*support the legal definition of marriage, which is the voluntary union for life of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others and oppose any attempt to redefine it*' [9]. We need to recognise that permanent sacramental marriage willingly entered into before God is not the same as a civil dissoluble contract. Then we should recognise that civil legislation is being modified to ensure that partnerships are just that, agreements to live together that can be ended in the same way as they are entered into. The Church’s vision for marriage is different. Perhaps we will see a new term in future such as “religious marriage” to define the 2000 year old relationship with which we are so familiar.

For now please go to [www.c4m.org.uk](http://www.c4m.org.uk) and lend your support to the petition on marriage.

*Editorial note*

*We urge all readers to express their views on a petition which is being conducted on the internet nationally. It comes from the Coalition for Marriage and has already been signed by many MP's and the former Archbishop of Canterbury.*

*It states 'I support the legal definition of marriage, which is the voluntary union for life of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others. I oppose any attempt to redefine it' you are invited to give your name address and Email number The latest count of supporters is 421,000 and growing daily.*

*It can be found on [www.c4m.org.uk](http://www.c4m.org.uk). You can also respond to the consultation at <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/about-us/consultations/equal-civil-marriage/consultation->*

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