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Same sex marriage tops agenda

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Same-sex couples would be able to marry under new government proposals which intend to legalise gay marriage in the UK.

The proposals, announced by Maria Miller, Minister for Women and Equalities, allows registry offices, some religious organisations and other institutions with a marriage licence to conduct marriage ceremonies for gay couples.

However, the Church of England will be banned from conducting same-sex marriage ceremonies, in an effort to protect religious freedoms.

“In each century, parliament has acted sometimes radically to ensure that marriage reflects our society, to keep it relevant and meaningful,” Ms. Miller told the House of Commons on 11 December. “Extending marriage to same-sex couples will strengthen, not weaken the institution of marriage.”

She added: “But there should be complete respect for religious organisations and individual religious leaders who do not wish to marry same-sex couples. The government has to balance the importance of treating all couples equally and fairly, with respect for religious organisations’ rights.” Fairness, she said, was “at the heart” of her proposals.

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The recommendations feature a quadruple lock, intended to protect religious freedoms. These include amending discrimination law so religious organisations cannot be sued for refusing to conduct same-sex marriages, not forcing individual ministers to conduct same-sex marriages and requiring religious organisations who do want to carry out same-sex marriages to opt-in unanimously.

Same-sex marriage is currently legal in eight countries including The Netherlands, Norway, Belgium, Spain and Luxembourg. Following the 2012 US elections, several states have now legalised marriage for gay couples, too.

Under current UK legislation, brought in by the previous government, the Civil Partnership Act 2004 allows same-sex couples to enter into a civil partnership, although civil unions can only be conducted in a registry office.

Since the Civil Partnership Act, several high-profile politicians including Labour MP Chris Bryant, Conservative MP Nick Boles and former Liberal Democrat mayoral London candidate Brian Paddick have since entered into the legal unions.

“Civil partnerships were created to enable same-sex couples to have their relationship recognised in law and to provide them with equivalent rights and responsibilities as to marriage,” Helen Grant, Under-Secretary of State for Women and Equalities told *The Positive*.

“However, civil partnerships and marriage are two separate legal regimes. Some have argued that having two separate provisions for same-sex and opposite sex couples perpetuates misconceptions and discrimination.”

But Dr. Aidan McGarry, Senior Lecturer in Politics at the University of Brighton explained that for many gay people, legalising gay marriage was a symbolic issue rather than a literal one.

“In terms of rights and privileges, civil unions and marriage are exactly the same. It’s about the role of the state sanctioning gay marriage and saying ‘your partnership is legitimate in the eyes of the state.’ That’s something that has never been communicated before.”

Yet Dr. McGarry sees the proposals as a “missed opportunity” for true equality. Gay rights groups wanted marriage equality across the board rather than a “watered down” proposal because of issues with religious freedoms, he said.

“On the other hand, I found it really encouraging that when Cameron initially brought up the issue of gay marriage to test the waters, the consensus was, ‘why are we even talking about this? It’s not a big deal.’ I thought, ‘wow, that’s amazing that we can live in this society that it’s no longer an issue.’”

In fact, according to a recent poll carried out by market research company Ipsos MORI, nearly 75 percent of British adults think same-sex couples should be allowed to marry. Of that 75 percent, 45 percent agree with the government’s proposals to legalise gay marriage without forcing religious organisations to do so.

“Seventy-five percent is a really high level of support so certainly, attitudes seem to have shifted over decades. We are more likely to be in favour of gay marriage than before,” said Tom Mludzinski, Deputy Head of Political Research of Ipsos MORI.

“We asked people a series of questions, rather than a straight yes or no question. Did they agree with gay marriage or did they agree with civil partnerships instead? And did they believe that religious organisations should be banned from offering gay marriage or not? It meant that the results we got back told us a lot more about people’s attitudes towards same-sex marriage.”

Ms. Grant told *The Positive* that the government’s proposals are backed by a huge number of individuals and organisations including the National Union of Journalists, Ben and Jerry’s, Trade Union Congress and religious organisations such as the Quakers.

She said the government proposals will not only strengthen marriage, ensuring it remains a “modern and vibrant tradition” but will also help build a “fairer society” for all.

“Our priority is to provide equality for same-sex couples by removing the bar to them marrying,” Ms. Grant said.

If the UK’s proposals go ahead, the plans will become law by 2015.

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