




Speech by
Bill Byrne

MEMBER FOR ROCKHAMPTON

Hansard Thursday, 21 June 2012

CIVIL PARTNERSHIPS AND OTHER LEGISLATION AMENDMENT BILL

 **Mr BYRNE** (Rockhampton—ALP) (8.24 pm): I rise to make a very brief and opposing contribution to the debate on the Civil Partnerships and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2012. Matthew Donovan is a member of the ALP who ran in the seat of Surfers Paradise in the last election, and he is doing his utmost to help rebuild the Labor Party in Queensland and I thank him for his efforts. He asked the member for Mulgrave to be the sponsoring MP for an e-petition defending civil unions and requesting the House to not consider any measures that seek the removal in any way of the equal rights achieved recently under the provisions of the Civil Partnerships Act 2011. After seeing the amazing rally last month outside Parliament House, how could the member for Mulgrave not support this? The member for Mulgrave intended to deliver this speech this evening but he has been recalled to his electorate for personal reasons.

Like many, Matthew was labouring under the illusion that if the Newman government were to make changes to the act there would be no sense of urgency about it and that any bill would be referred to a relevant committee for consideration and that at the same time this would provide an opportunity for people to voice their concerns and have their say. But as we have seen, this bill has been brought on in a hurry.

When the Attorney-General introduced the bill last night, it was clear that he wanted a political problem to just go away. When the Premier flagged the changes a few weeks ago, he said, 'We wanted to sort this out so it wouldn't be a distraction from important issues.' Essentially, he said that this issue is not important, that it is a distraction and something to move on from. He would allow people to have a ceremony, as long as they did it away from a registry office—which you could read as 'We don't want to see you people carrying on. Do it somewhere else.' The former member for Barron River, Steve Wettenhall, when recalling his wedding day, summed it up along these lines—

I recall my wedding day as one of the happiest days of my life. This was not especially because we looked forward to the legal consequences of marriage; it was because we wanted to publicly declare our love and commitment to each other and celebrate that relationship with our friends and families. In my view, no-one should be denied that opportunity, and it is that opportunity that this bill provides.

I know how hard Matthew Donovan has worked on this e-petition, and the way I see it my job is to give voice to the people of Queensland. To do just that, I will quote from the principal petitioner, Matthew Donovan, to give him the opportunity to get his words on the public record—words that he was denied because this bill has been declared urgent. I quote—

This matter before the House is of serious public interest and importance.

In late 2011 the Bligh Government took a great step forward by passing the long overdue Civil Partnerships Bill entitling gay couples to enter into a civil union officially recognised by the state.

This was a watershed moment for Queensland and represented one of the most important pieces of legislation ever passed by Labor in government.

We now sadly see this Newman Government wasting no time to cruelly strip back what the gay community fought for over so many years.

On the public record the Premier has stated he supports gay marriage. It is a confusing position he is yet to properly explain to those impacted by the wind back he is trying to achieve with this mean and tricky legislation.

He seeks to bypass proper parliamentary committee oversight procedures and ram the changes through as fast as he can, as he has done on every occasion possible with various pieces of legislation.

In his statement announcing the changes he indicated he doesn't see it as a big deal for this government. Thousands of Queenslanders all over our great state who feel like they are being treated like second class citizens not entitled to equal rights see it as a big deal. They see it as a very big deal.

I would like to remind the House that according to recent polls 50 per cent of Australians support equality for all, whether it be gay marriage or civil unions. Thirty-three per cent are against and 17 per cent are undecided.

It can only be assumed therefore that the same applies to Queenslanders and their thoughts on the subject in the 21st century.

I am further distressed by the fact that there are aspects of the legislation the Premier and Attorney-General chose to hide at the initial announcement.

Mainly that civil unions have now been watered down to being called 'registered relationships' under the changes. Why did they choose to deceive people on this issue?

Why are the concerns of some sectional interests being acknowledged and catered to at the expense of others especially when as stated earlier the equal rights movement is gaining support every day?

The many people in the gay community I talk to now feel they have been demoted to the level of a pet, car or boat whereby their rights have now been watered down to a cold and clinical registration process in the eyes of the state.

The Premier says the registration process is primarily for 'medical and financial purposes.'

Mr Newman you just don't get it. You have nailed your colours to the flag. You support inequality and not even the status quo, you are dragging Queensland backwards kicking and screaming.

Do you think a heterosexual couple get married for 'medical and financial purposes?'

What an offensive proposition. They get married to show love and commitment to each other and gay couples are no different. Why should they be treated as such?

They are looking for more than an ability to register on a database. They are looking to be treated as equals. This Newman Government clearly does not see them as such. A point which distresses many people greatly.

This is one big slap in the face and, far from getting us 'Back on Track', it is taking us off track and backwards.

Why does this government use the terminology 'bringing us into line with other states?' Wouldn't it be preferred to lead rather than follow?

Civil unions are not a threat to marriage. That is a fallacy.

In today's secular society policy at the government level should not be driven by religious considerations.

I am proud to have lodged a petition with parliament that calls for no changes whatsoever to be made to the Civil Partnerships Act 2011. It has received strong support with over 5,000 people standing up for equal rights.

This cannot be ignored. We will not be ignored.

I call on this government to respect the rights of all Queenslanders. It must stand up for every Queenslanders irrespective of who they voted for, as Premier Newman said on election night. He also said he would govern with 'humility, dignity and grace.'

I'm yet to see any of those traits in this government. I wait in hope.

Premier Newman must follow proper procedure and allow this legislation to be scrutinised in depth. Simply calling every piece of legislation 'urgent' that you want to ram through doesn't make it necessarily so. In fact as stated earlier it was said that in this government's opinion it wasn't a priority. These two statements don't reconcile with each other.

The mere nature of the victory does not entitle him to ride roughshod over process and assume he has a mandate for every aspect of his agenda.

I have been proudly Labor and actively involved for many years making sure that Gold Coast Labor is strengthened allowing all those who share progressive forward thinking ideas to be represented and heard. This massive majority government will not deter our efforts.

In fact it has ramped them up. Democracy thrives effectively when opposition and the ferment of ideas and debate occur.

This government has shown no willingness in its actions to enter into normal accepted process. Something I think they should think long and hard about.

The issue of equality is so crucial in our modern society. People are screaming for change and for Queensland to turn back at this stage is a worrying sign of what this government is all about.

I stand side by side with the gay community because I know how much it means to them and how much is at stake.

I am still awaiting the Attorney-General's response to my e-mail regarding my concerns on this issue.

I will quote from Sir Robert Menzies, who spoke of the Liberal creed as follows—

As the etymology of our name 'Liberal' indicates, we have stood for freedom. We have realised that men and women are not just ciphers in a calculation, but are individual human beings whose individual welfare and development must be the main concern of government.

We have learned that the right answer is to set the individual free, to aim at equality of opportunity, to protect the individual against oppression, to create a society in which rights and duties are recognised and made effective.

Whatever happened to the Liberals in the Liberal National Party? Obviously Labor is not happy the government has sought to change the act at all but, to be frank, it is far less of a change than I and many others thought it would be. Did the Attorney-General, who would have been delighted to repeal the entire act, get rolled in the party room because there were people who stood up for equality, people who still remember that there are a range of people who make up our communities? Ironically, the Premier and the Attorney-General largely sat on the fence with their original announcement, in the process upsetting stakeholders on both sides.

To sum up, I will give the last word to a former member of this place, the previous member for Mount Coot-tha, Andrew Fraser, who introduced the current act. He said—

This bill merely, but not meekly, seeks to formally recognise relationships which have existed in Queensland for centuries. It does not, will not and cannot infringe upon or diminish marriage, and it will not provide any additional rights than are otherwise already available to couples who can prove a de facto relationship. But what this bill does is important. What it does is provide access upfront to the formal recognition of a relationship to couples who have been hitherto unable or do not wish to enter into a marriage. Further, it provides them with an opportunity to celebrate their commitment and their love for one another in a ceremony in front of friends and family; perhaps this is its most important feature.

We will oppose this bill.