

Statement on Redefinition of Marriage Proposal

Looking at the media reaction to the Government's announcement of plans to redefine marriage you would be forgiven for thinking it was an internal Conservative Party debate. Pollsters and journalists are looking for new angles on how many Conservative voters, chairmen, and MPs are for or against the plans. I am in no doubt about the significant impact on the Party but the debate needs to rise above party politics. Conservatives were first to be given a free vote on this issue of conscience and the other parties have now followed suit. Unlike the Republicans, thankfully, we Conservatives do not do culture wars and should not start now. We should stop internalising the debate which only damages the Party and devalues the issue. That is why the Parliamentary campaign which I am leading against the proposals is supported by a coalition of Parliamentarians across the political spectrum.

We are concerned that no one in the country has had an opportunity to vote on the Government's plans. None of the main political parties put it in their manifestos. The nearest the Conservatives got was to a little known equalities paper rushed out at the beginning of campaign, after Peter Tatchell made some noise on the steps of CCHQ, which committed to consult on the merits of gay marriage. It did not come from the main gay rights campaigners, Stonewall. Their CEO Ben Summerskill told me soon after the 2010 election that gay marriage did not feature on survey responses from members. His fear which has become something of a reality was that the debate would put us into our respective trenches and not advance gay rights. Conservatives need to avoid just being in those trenches.

Whatever side of the debate you are on the consultation response last week does not instill confidence. It has not provided a mandate for change. It does not help when the head of the Government's Equalities Office reneges on a promise to count a petition of half a million named UK citizens but rather counts 132,000 web forms from completely anonymous sources who could have filled out the form from anywhere in the world. And now the public has not had the chance to respond to the latest rushed plan to allow churches to carry out same sex wedding ceremonies.

The other danger of the current debate is that it is seen as just a debate between the State and the Church. Certainly, the proposals are divisive by separating definitions of marriage and not removing the threat to religious freedom. But it is the impact beyond church and religious ceremonies which needs attention. The word marriage appears more than 3,200 times in current legislation dating back to 1285 and the Second Statute of Westminster. The laws cover almost every aspect of our lives, what is taught in schools, inheritance, pensions, divorce, property and even the royal succession. Any change in the meaning of marriage will have consequences way beyond the wedding day.

Changing the current definition of marriage will affect millions of people who work in the public sector, because of the Public Sector Equality Duty. The case of Adrian Smith, the Trafford housing manager in Manchester, could soon become the norm. He was demoted and had his pay docked by 40 per cent for posting a message on his personal Facebook page that said gay marriage was "an equality too far". Despite an expensive legal battle, which he won in the High Court last month, because of complex legal rules he was awarded less than £100 in compensation while his employer Trafford Housing Trust have refused to reinstate him to his previous position. If gay marriage becomes the State orthodoxy, people could well find themselves in trouble for holding traditional views on marriage. I have been called a bigot and even received death threats for my support of traditional marriage. But I am in no doubt that I will be free to continue to express my views as an MP without fear of discipline or dismissal but I fear for the liberty of conscience of my constituents.

And then there is the impact on schools. Last month the Education Minister wrote to me saying the department still did not know how the plans would affect schools and no firm guarantee could be given that a teacher's freedom of conscience would be protected.

At the beginning of the consultation I expressed my hopes and fears. A key hope continues to be that the hate-filled voices would be left to the fringes of social media. As far I am concerned the opposition to the proposals is based on a commitment to the equal value of people whatever their sexuality but also a commitment to the value of marriage for being a distinctive institution for a man and woman.

So let's get on and have the debate about redefining marriage over the next months away from the party political arena and get on as Conservatives with the key tasks facing our country - sorting out the economy, welfare and the EU.

Home Office Consultation: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/about-us/consultations/equal-c...>

Coalition for Marriage (C4M): <http://c4m.org.uk/>

My articles on the issue:

<http://conservativehome.blogs.com/platform/2012/12/david-burrowes-mp-let...>

<http://conservativehome.blogs.com/platform/2012/03/from-davidburrowesmp-...>

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/9144586/I-can-handle-death-threat...>

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[I Daily Mail, Cameron warned he has 'no mandate' to redefine marriage by legalising gay weddings](#)

[I Telegraph, Letters, The Government has no mandate to redefine the meaning of marriage](#)

[I Telegraph, MPs and Peers launch gay marriage rebellion saying Cameron has 'no mandate'](#)

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