

It's six months since cabinet minister Peter Dutton told business leaders who called for action on same-sex marriage to [stick to their knitting](#). But company chiefs are as little impressed by politicians as the rest of the population. And rather than heed the admonition, many in the corporate sector have launched boots and all into the postal ballot debate.

The marriage reform campaign is a social cause that has enlisted significant business heft.

Qantas's Alan Joyce – a long-term outspoken change advocate who particularly attracted Dutton's ire – is [reportedly personally tipping](#) A\$1 million into the effort.

Business Council of Australia chief executive Jennifer Westacott, who opened up about her personal experience, this week [told the ABC](#) that businesses “stand very strongly for diverse workplaces and some of them have very strong views that this is the kind of symbol of that kind of diversity”.

Westpac Group chief executive Brian Hartzler says: “In my opinion, same-sex marriage is a good thing for the health of our community, and for the economy”.

Corporations haven't surfaced on the “no” side, although individual businesspeople have. The contribution of Roger Corbett, former Woolworths chief, [blew up](#) when he used a comparison involving “a black man and a white man” to make his points about gender relationships.

Business participation is a reflection of the wider community's feelings. Companies have picked up on public support for change, and are also tapping into an issue that concerns many of their own staff and customers.

There was considerable opposition, especially from the LGBTI community to having a popular vote. Labor, Greens and crossbenchers blocked the legislation for a compulsory plebiscite. The postal ballot – ironically, pushed by Dutton – was a fallback that both kept Malcolm Turnbull's promise to give the people the say and avoided the need for Senate approval.

Polls had shown the public liked the prospect of voting, rather than the politicians deciding the matter. And while it can only be impressionistic – probably the ultimate measure will be the response rate – one gets the feeling this ballot is capturing people’s attention.

That’s not so surprising, especially when voters are so deeply alienated from politicians.

Here is something people are deciding, directly. It’s not like an election, where they are voting for parties or individuals and only indirectly on multiple specific issues. And where in a safe seat a vote is of less real value than in a marginal seat.

In the postal ballot, every vote is of equal weight and – despite Coalition politicians having a conscience vote on legislation after a “yes” result – the voter can be pretty confident the outcome, positive or negative, will be reflected in what follows.

It’s a rare example of direct democracy – albeit non-compulsory and conducted by mail.

It has led some to say, if we can have a vote on same-sex marriage why not on other issues, such as euthanasia, immigration, and the like?

The nature of many issues would rule out plebiscites. Consider the question of how to lower power prices – a minute’s thought and the impossibility of putting that to the people becomes clear.

On others, for example euthanasia, it is hard to argue in logic against a popular vote. But in practice there’s much to be said for the more constrained setting of a parliament as the better and safer, albeit more conservative, place for deciding.

On something like immigration, the dangers of decision by plebiscite are obvious.

So we won't be seeing a repeat of a popular vote (leaving aside the possibility of referendums) to settle an issue – at least not for a long time. And that I think is a good thing, despite the superficial appeal such votes might hold for many people.

In this case, the downside of the popular vote has been a great deal of undesirable pressure on many LGBTI people – manifested in part by increased [appeals for mental health help](#) – and the exposure of the dark side of our society.

Just one example of the latter. This weekend a far-right group is holding a “Straight Lives Matter” rally in Sydney. The spot chosen is near a gay bar in Darlinghurst, and close to a memorial for gay victims of the Nazis.

The campaign is seeing excesses on both sides, some serious, others less so. On Thursday Tony Abbott, campaigning for the “no” side in Tasmania, said he was “headbutted” by “a chap wearing a Vote Yes badge”.

Because the government couldn't have its compulsory plebiscite, in which things would have built up to the nominated voting day, this is an odd campaign. Most of the voting papers are now out; soon all will be. Many people who intend to vote do so as soon as they receive their paper; the bulk of the returns are likely to be in quite early. Yet the final cut-off is November 7.

So if you have voted or are about to, you'll still be subjected to the argument for weeks to come.

Now the campaign is in full swing, we're seeing the numbers tighten. Support for change in this week's [Essential poll](#) was 55%, down from 59% on September 5, while opposition was up 3 points to 34%. That remains a large gap.

The intention to vote was still high, unchanged at 62% “definitely” intending to vote. The poll found 71% of those supporting change said they would definitely vote, compared to 60% of those opposed.

The “yes” and “no” campaigners have different challenges.

For the “yes” side, starting with a healthy majority in favour of reform, the big (albeit not the only) task is to get out the vote. A massive phone and doorknocking effort is underway to do this. The risk for this side is that some of its voters fail to translate positive intentions into posting the letter.

For the “no” campaigners the imperative is not just to round up committed supporters but to alarm the apathetic into action. They are trying to do this by broadening the issue and fanning fears.

John Howard dwells on protections for religion and rights and says they should be spelled out ahead of the vote. The “no” case is tapping into the broader question of religious freedom that, rather surprisingly, some people regard as under pressure in modern Australia. One part of the “no” campaign is to bring the debate around to the Safe Schools program.

If the postal vote’s result is “yes”, the five Liberal backbenchers who forced the issue back onto their party’s agenda will have achieved a significant reform, allowing Turnbull to bask in a victory that would not have happened but for the boldness of others.

The immediate political consequences of a No vote are somewhat unpredictable. But as far as Turnbull [is concerned](#), “if the people have spoken against [same-sex marriage], we won’t be proposing it at the election I can assure you”. That would make for a sharp policy contrast, because Bill Shorten has promised Labor would legislate for change, even if the postal vote had rejected it.

Update On Friday a 38-year old Hobart man was charged with common assault over the Abbott incident, but he said his action had nothing to do with the marriage issue. [News Corp](#) reported him as saying he had been drinking before he saw Abbott, for whom he had a “personal hatred”.

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company

Grattan on Friday: Same-sex marriage ballot captures attention of a public alienated from politicians

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

Authors: Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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