

Australians vote overwhelmingly to legalise same-sex marriage

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Australia should have same-sex marriage legalised by Christmas after an overwhelming 61.6% “yes” vote in the voluntary postal ballot, to 38.4% for the “no” side.

After the decisive result, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull declared it was now up to parliament to “get this done”, as the result triggered celebrations across the nation by the supporters of change.

Turnbull said the people “have spoken in their millions and they have voted overwhelmingly yes for marriage equality.

“They voted yes for fairness, yes for commitment, yes for love. And now it is up to us here in the parliament of Australia to get on with it,” he said, reiterating a pre-Christmas deadline.

The outcome is a victory and a relief for the embattled Turnbull, although it was determined backbenchers who initially forced the action.

Opposition Leader Bill Shorten told a crowd in Melbourne: “Today we celebrate, tomorrow we legislate”.

Nearly 80% of voters returned the voluntary ballot, well above voluntary votes on issues in other countries.

The ballot was strongly carried in all states and territories, and won in all but 17 of the 150 electorates.

The ACT had the highest “yes” vote (74%) and New South Wales the lowest (57.8%). Participation was highest in the ACT (82.4%) and lowest in the Northern Territory (58.4%).

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The “no” vote was victorious in western Sydney, reflecting the significant ethnic composition of that area. NSW electorates voting “no” were Blaxland, Watson, McMahon, Werriwa, Fowler, Parramatta, Chifley, Barton, Banks, Greenway, Mitchell, and Bennelong.

The “no” electorates in Victoria were Calwell and Bruce. In Queensland, Maranoa, Kennedy and Groom recorded “no” results. All electorates in Tasmania, South Australia, Western Australia, and the territories voted “yes”.

Warringah, held by Tony Abbott, a leader of the “no” campaign, voted 75% “yes”, just several points short of Turnbull’s seat of Wentworth, which recorded an 80.8% “yes” vote.

The defeat will see “no” campaigners concentrating their efforts into [trying to get maximum protections and exemptions](#) in the private member’s bill that will be passed, although the size of the win will weaken the hand of the hardline conservatives.

The issue has produced deep schisms in Liberal ranks, including some fracturing within the conservatives themselves between those who just want the matter cleared away and others who would like to delay it further. But Turnbull is making it clear that there will be no delay.

[The bill proposed](#) by Western Australian Liberal Dean Smith, introduced to the Senate on Wednesday, will be debated there on Thursday. It provides broad religious protections.

This bill has now been co-sponsored by a cross section of senators. Apart from Smith they are Liberals Linda Reynolds and Jane Hume, Labor’s Penny Wong and Louise Pratt, the Greens’ Richard Di Natale and Janet Rice, the Nick Xenophon Team’s Skye Kakoschke-Moore, and Derryn Hinch from the Justice Party.

A competing bill from Victorian senator James Paterson would impose tougher exemptions. It would allow businesses such as florists and cake makers to refuse services for same-sex weddings, citing “religious or conscientious belief”.

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Earlier this week, Turnbull, who arrived back in Australia from his Asian summit trip on Wednesday, rejected the tougher bill. He said he did not believe Australians would welcome legalising discrimination that was illegal today.

After the result, he again commended the Smith bill, while emphasising there would be a free vote and anticipating some amendments would be moved. He said he had not studied the Paterson bill in detail – he had only been given notice of it while overseas.

Acting Special Minister of State Mathias Cormann said he thought the Paterson bill went too far – he would like to see the parliament meet somewhere between the two bills.

Nationals MP George Christensen said that given his electorate of Dawson voted “yes”, he would not vote “no”. He would support the Paterson bill or one with similar protections, but abstain if the ultimate legislation fell short of that.

The five Liberals who forced the issue back onto the agenda – Warren Entsch, Trevor Evans, Smith, Tim Wilson and Trent Zimmerman – said in a statement the “emphatic ‘vote’ by Australians for equality and fairness in our laws should be immediately respected by the Australian parliament”.

Abbott said: “I congratulate the “yes” campaign on their achievement. The people have spoken and, of course, the parliament should respect the result.”

“I look forward to a parliamentary process that improves on the Dean Smith bill to implement same-sex marriage with freedom of conscience for all, not just the churches.”

Postscript

Within hours of the result, Paterson dropped his own proposed bill and said he would work with colleagues on amendments to strengthen the Smith bill.

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He conceded that it was “clear the majority of senators believe my colleague senator Dean Smith’s bill is where we should start”.

“I will now work constructively with my parliamentary colleagues over the coming weeks on amendments to ensure that the strongest possible protections for the freedoms of all Australians are enshrined in the final legislation.”

A “yes” voter, Paterson said he was very pleased with the strong “yes” result.

“The parliament must now quickly pass a bill to legalise same-sex marriage.”

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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