

Why the same-sex marriage consultation mattered

Written by Rodney Croome | ABC The Drum
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The response among commentators to the recent same-sex marriage consultations and report-back by federal MPs has been uniformly pessimistic and negative.

Michelle Grattan says it shows a conscience vote "would clearly fail".

Paul Kelly believes it shows the push for marriage equality "will not prevail".

Gay news site SameSame called it "a tough setback".

They couldn't be more wrong.

Sure, the majority of MPs who reported back said they and their constituencies oppose same-sex marriage. But this doesn't mean a majority of MPs, let alone a majority of Australians, oppose reform.

The sample sizes were tiny and in stark contrast to all the large-scale national opinion polls which show at least 60 per cent support for marriage equality.

The best we can say about most of the surveys is that a handful of churches in a handful of electorates successfully persuaded their parishioners to fill out proforma letters.

It was disappointing that more MPs who support equality didn't say so, including those who had conducted polls with positive responses. But we shouldn't forget that the major parties and their leaders still oppose marriage equality.

Until recently the party discipline on this issue was so tight MPs could be reprimanded for

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speaking in favour of equality.

Seen this way, it was quite an achievement that so many MPs defied their party by speaking up for reform.

In my role as campaign director of Australian Marriage Equality I have lobbied more MPs on this issue than just about any other equality supporter. I know there are many MPs waiting for the right conditions before they express their support.

I'm not saying a conscience vote would be won, but neither am I convinced it would be lost.

What I am sure of is that the consultation process that led up to last Wednesday's report-back was of immense benefit to the campaign for equality.

By giving marriage equality a local angle it spread debate beyond the metro dailies to suburban, regional and rural media.

It's not a coincidence that the most spirited public debates on this issue are now occurring in places like Wagga, Mt Isa and Moorabool.

The consultation motivated thousands of equality supporters who might otherwise have remained disengaged to write to their local MP.

It prompted thousands of those who were indifferent to think about their position.

In my experience anything which sparks this kind of constructive debate inevitably changes hearts and minds for the better. Most of all, the consultation opened the doors of MPs to those same-sex couples and their family members who have important personal stories to tell about

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why marriage matters to them.

A good example is the member for Ballarat, Catherine King, who told the ABC, "I am on the public record of supporting the current definition of marriage but I have to say that view has been fundamentally challenged by the representations of same-sex couples".

This kind of change is slow and low-profile.

It is happening far from the centres of political drama and media focus.

But it is what will see Australia inevitably achieve marriage equality sooner than many political commentators currently believe.

Rodney Croome is the Campaign Director for Australian Marriage Equality.

Source: [The Drum](#)