

**Address by Luke Gahan, Australian Marriage Equality
To the NSW Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby "Relationship Forum"
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Marriage is a bedrock institution worthy of protection. Marriage has endured for thousands of years and across cultures and religions. It is a social institution which benefits family members and society. There should be no doubt about its definition.

- Liberal Party Senator Guy Barnett.

If you took what Sen Barnett was suggesting literally, you would believe that the institution of marriage has hardly changed since its early beginnings. For according to him marriage is like "bedrock". Bedrock is a solid unweathered rock lying beneath the surface.

So let's go back a few thousand years and see if marriage really is bedrock.

Many of the customs we act out at weddings today in 2005 have their origins to weddings from the earliest of times.

Firstly the groom would usually capture his bride and fight off all in his way. It is here where we first hear of the 'best man'. The best man would assist the groom in fighting off other men who wanted the same bride.

It is said this is also why the bride stands to the left of the groom, for if the groom needs to fight off other suitors he could easily pull out his sword on his right side, while his bride stands safely to his left.

The honeymoon was no romantic holiday in the tropics either. This was originally the time when the groom would kidnap his new wife and go into hiding. They would usually return either when the bride was pregnant or when her family had given up looking for her.

In more recent days brides are choosing not to wear the white dress, being a symbol of her 'virginity' and many choose not to be given away like a gift by their fathers. In fact many couples prefer to be married by an Elvis impersonator in Vegas and broadcast it live on the internet for their family in Australia to watch. I recently heard of a couple who were married whilst skydiving. This is all completely legal.

So as you can see marriage has certainly changed over the past thousand years, it is certainly not as bedrock as Guy Barnett would have you imagine.

We do not necessarily need to create any new institution for we already have an institution that has up until now changed to reflect our society.

Take for example the 2001 Australian Census results on Marriage.

In every single state and territory Marriages performed by non-religious civil celebrants outnumbered those performed by ministers of religion. In fact in the Northern Territory 70% of marriages were performed by Civil Celebrants.

The choice to marry is all about equality. No single group in society owns marriage. Not long after AME began I was sitting in the Belvoir Street Theatre in Surry Hills waiting for a play to begin.

An American woman behind me was explaining to her Australian friends why she and her male partner immigrated to Australia ten years ago.

"We do not want to get married" – She said.

"We came to Australia because at least here you can choose not to marry and still have all the same

rights as a married couple”.

Ironically I understand exactly how this woman and her male partner felt. They had no choice but to marry. If they did not marry they would still be seen as single in all aspects of law.

Same sex couples in NSW are also given very limited choice.

We are allowed to form de facto relationships and if we choose to we can now register this at the Sydney Town Hall as a part of the City of Sydney partnership registry.

The fight for Same-Sex Marriage is all about equality.

As equal Australians we deserve the ability to choose how our relationship is to be recognised and what form this takes.

Some of us here may be like the woman I met at the theatre. You may prefer a separate system that does not carry all the cultural baggage that some see marriage as holding.

Some of you however may choose to marry like Matthew and I have chosen recognising that marriage has changed from those early days.

It is all about equality of choice.

In the Netherlands unlike Australia or NZ same-sex couples and heterosexual couples have the ability to choose between 3 systems.

They have full Marriage Equality, they have a partnership registry, and they have de facto relationships.

Australian Marriage Equality believes that all three systems can and do work together offering different forms of recognition depending on peoples own beliefs and choice.

Having a three tiered system of relationship recognition and the equality of choice for all, can and should be our gift to society.

AME is working hard to secure full equality for Same-Sex couples.

Several years ago one of our AME national Board Members Peter Furness sat on the South Sydney Council.

Despite no support from the then NSW GLRL, Peter launched a new system of relationship registration for Same-Sex couples.

This gave couples the ability to prove to the world that their relationship existed.

I work in Superannuation and one of the biggest challenges for our death claims area is to make sure that a relationship really existed between the dead policy holder and the claimant.

Many same-sex couples fail to prove their interdependency and thus can not receive their partner's superannuation.

Couples on the City of Sydney or the former City of South Sydney partnership registration can use their registration as proof of an interdependent relationship.

The Tasmanian Gay and Lesbian Rights group successfully brought in a state wide partnership registration scheme.

Unlike other Civil Union schemes the Tasmanian system not only allows same-sex couples to register, but allows all non congeal couples to register as well. For example a young man who looks after his sick neighbour can register their caring relationship with the state registry of birth deaths and marriages.

This was the first of this type of relationship recognition anywhere in the world.

The UK has since used the Tasmanian scheme as a base model whilst drafting their own UK Civil Unions Law.

Our community has certainly come a long way in the last 27 years.

In 1978 as people stood together in the streets of Sydney fighting for the basic right to exist they would have never imagined that in such a short time they would be sitting in this room today discussing things like Same-Sex marriage or Partnership schemes.

They would however understand our fight for equality and the right of choice.

We are living in a time where same-sex couples are being offered great choice around the world.

Many Australian Same-sex couples are travelling far and wide in order to have these choices made available to them. A week doesn't go by when I am not receiving another email from a couple leaving Australia to get married. Many never come back. They deserve a community that will fight for their marriage to be recognised.

Early last year a media statement from the NSW GLRL stated and I quote:

“our concern is that by pushing for what is largely seen as the religious or symbolic stamp of marriage, progress towards genuine rights would be jeopardised by resulting ideological backlash from threatened conservatives”.

As I have explained today Marriage is certainly no longer a religious institution for the heterosexual community or ours.

It is a genuine right to choose that we are being denied simply because we are of the same-sex.

We must never settle for a separate system. We must never give up the fight.

The groups that so actively campaigned for the Federal Marriage amendment last year make no effort to hide their dislike of “de facto” relationships” for same-sex or different sex couples. They also make it very clear that they dislike Civil Unions even more than Same-sex marriage.

In a 1987 song by Yazzy, she sang,

“Now don't take what you don't want”

“Just Take what you need”

“Its your right, don't be frightened to fight it”

““Don't hold back”Make up your mind”“Don't hold backStand up for your love rights and enjoy itStand up for your love rights”

As a community we must not be afraid to fight for our rights. We must never forget that the right to choose how our relationship is to be recognised is as important as any other right.

It is a basic right to equality.

If we allow this right to be taken from us with out a fight, we will open the door to the removal of all other rights.

Australian Marriage Equality have and will continue to fight for full Marriage Equality in Australia. We will never give up until that equality of choice is open to all.

We are please to now have the NSW GLRL on board the national campaign for Same-Sex marriage. They now join every other State and territory Rights group who believe in Same-Sex Marriage Rights.

In fact today it was announced that 80% of respondents to a Victorian Gay and Lesbian Right Lobby survey supported same-sex marriage.

On August 13 it will be one year since the Marriage amendment.

As a community we must show the world that we want full equality and will not settle for anything less.

Community Groups right around the nation are beginning to get together to discuss national rallies. I have also been informed by AME members living abroad that they will take our campaign to the doors of the Australian Embassies in their new homes.

Lets join hands as a community and let's stand up for equal rights.