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To Whom It May Concern,

Consultation Response on Equal Civil Marriage

We are writing to respond to the Government's consultation on civil marriage. We have answered the questions in the consultation which we are best placed to comment on.

Equal Marriage

Question 1: Do you agree or disagree with enabling all couples, regardless of their gender to have a civil marriage ceremony?

Question 2: Please explain the reasons for your answer?

We agree that all couples, regardless of their gender or sexuality, should be allowed to marry and welcome the proposal from the Government enabling same-sex couples to have a civil marriage ceremony. The Civil Partnership Act was an important first step in extending long-denied legal rights to same-sex couples. We do not believe, though, that it went far enough. The cultural, social and religious importance that many associate with marriage was not extended to same-sex couples. Both the concept of marriage and the use of the word carry an important significance for many people throughout the world and for many couples it is an important part of a committed relationship. For many couples, marriage is not just about the legal and material manner in which they are viewed by the state; it is about a deeper, emotional commitment that can also be recognised by friends and family.

The current situation creates two parallel legal frameworks, one for opposite-sex and one for same-sex couples. This is not full equality and it is contradictory for the Government to accept that same-sex couples should receive the same legal rights as opposite-sex couples, but still deny them access to the established social institution of marriage.

Marriage should be open to all couples, regardless of gender, sexuality, or religious belief as a means of affirming their love and commitment to each other.

Religious Marriage

Question 5: The Government does not propose to open up religious marriage to same-sex couples. Do you agree or disagree with this proposal?

We disagree with the Government's proposals to implement a blanket ban on religious marriages between same-sex couples. The current Government proposals state that 'This means in law, marriage conducted by the Church of England, Quakers, Jews and all other religious organisations (who have registered their religious premises to host marriages) would only be legally recognised if they are between a man and a woman'. This is discriminatory and does not create full equality.

This proposal also means that religious marriages for same-sex couples are prevented for all religions, irrelevant of the position of that religion or denomination. So, for example, Quakers who wish to be able to legally conduct religious marriage for same-sex couples would be prevented from doing so. Everyone has a right to practice their religion, and it seems astonishing that the Government is proposing to prevent all religious marriage for same-sex couples, even if their religion wishes to perform a religious same-sex marriage.

Any religions or denominations licensed to conduct marriages should be free to perform a same-sex marriage in their place of worship, if they wish to do so. Preventing all religious marriage, irrelevant of the wishes of the couple or the religion, is wrong and continues to prevent full equality between opposite-sex and same-sex couples.

Civil Partnerships

Question 6: Do you agree or disagree with keeping the option of civil partnerships once civil marriage is available to same-sex couples?

Question 8: The Government is not considering opening up civil partnerships to opposite-sex couples. Do you agree or disagree with this proposal?

We believe that civil partnerships should be retained and made available to all. The reason for opening civil partnerships up to opposite-sex couples is precisely the same reason that marriage should be open to same-sex couples: they are different institutions. Equality demands that they should both be available to any couple, regardless of sexuality or gender.

It is because marriage and civil partnerships are different that everyone should have the right to choose between them. For some couples, whether same-sex or opposite-sex, the category of marriage has emotional and historical connotations which make it less attractive than a civil partnership. They would prefer to receive the same legal rights and responsibilities within the framework of a civil partnership rather than a marriage. It is discriminatory to prevent opposite-sex couples from having a civil partnership and it is discriminatory to prevent same-sex couples from getting married.

Converting civil partnerships into marriages

Question 10: Do you agree or disagree that there should be a time limit on the ability to convert a civil partnership into a marriage?

Question 11: Do you agree or disagree that there should be the choice to have a civil ceremony on conversion of a civil partnership into a marriage?

We disagree that there should be a time limit on the ability to convert a civil partnership into a marriage and agree that couples who wish to convert their civil partnership into marriages should be able to have a ceremony if they wish to do so. Deciding to convert a civil

partnership into a marriage is a personal decision. The timeframe and manner in which this can be done should therefore be a matter for the couple involved and not dictated by the state.

Practical Considerations

In general, our view is that the rights and administration should be the same for civil partnerships, civil and religious marriages. Not only would this demonstrate that same-sex and opposite-sex partnerships are of equal value, but it would also simplify the administrative and legal processes.

It is important that surviving partners in occupational pension schemes, irrespective of the gender or sexuality of either partner, receive full equality and are able to receive a pension based on his or her partner's contribution.

On the issue of international recognition and devolution, we believe that if England and Wales are seen to recognise equal marriage, it can act as a spur for other countries, both within the UK and further afield, to do so too. The UK government should recognise same-sex marriage internationally and lead the way in working for full equality and respect for LGBT rights worldwide.

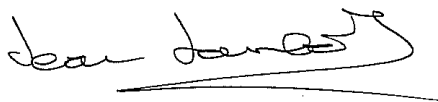
Conclusion

We urge the Government to take this opportunity to ensure that full equality is reached, so that all couples, regardless of gender or sexuality, have equal rights to have a civil partnership or a marriage.

Yours sincerely,



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Jean Lambert, Green MEP for London