

Why marriage should be between a man and a woman.

Michael Kellahan Sydney Morning Herald August 10, 2017

"On the issue of marriage I think the reality is there is a cultural, religious, historical view around that which we have to respect. The party's position is very clear that this is an institution that is between a man and a woman."

If I told you that was a quote from Cory Bernardi, Lyle Shelton or worse, that oft condemned unreconstructed traditionalist Tony Abbott, would you consider it just more evidence of their homophobia? Many commentators would. It seems right now no one can make any statement in favour of marriage without being condemned for being a "hater" or "bigot". What exactly would change for same-sex couples if they could marry? However, the statement doesn't come from Mr Bernardi, but from that other strong-minded senator from South Australia, Penny Wong.

Senator Wong articulated the traditional view of marriage in an interview on the Sunday program on network TEN in 2010. She spoke it in that calm, emphatic metre which has made her so formidable in our parliament. It's a bold statement, sure. But it's also a fair and reasonable summary of how many Australians feel about marriage. And given that Senator Wong is a woman in a committed lesbian partnership, no one could say the statement was homophobic. I accept of course that she was speaking in support of her party's position while working hard to change it. But do not miss her deeper point – the traditional position deserved respect. She acknowledged that many Australians have traditional views on marriage formed by culture, religion, and history. That is still true. People shouldn't be ashamed to speak up for the classical vision of marriage.

Senator Wong wasn't homophobic then, and she's certainly not homophobic now. However she has changed her view on whether the traditional view is one worthy of respect and can be spoken. I won't take issue with her argument for redefining marriage here. We disagree, no doubt, but I would strongly defend her right to express her beliefs. However, everyone who is passionate about our democracy should take issue with her argument against a plebiscite. Senator Wong has in her Senate speech this week put the strongest possible case against the plebiscite that can be made. She argued that a plebiscite, by allowing people with a traditional view to speak up, will unleash hatred and division and expose the children of same-sex couples to harm. Silencing of conservative voices is therefore necessary to protect children, and the entire LGBTI community.

This is an argument from injury. It says that we can't allow a debate to even be had in public because people will be hurt. Because children will be hurt. Who could speak against that? For anyone who has a heart, it's a powerful argument. The Senator has a strong point, this isn't an abstract argument for her, and for thousands of others, it's deeply personal.

Amongst social conservatives, especially Christians, no one is interested in hurting others, just so there can be a debate. But as Senator Wong herself showed in 2010, it's perfectly possible to make a statement supporting traditional marriage without being homophobic. Certainly as our organisation argues for the protection and promotion of religious freedoms, we want to do that in ways that are never driven by prejudice, fear or hate. Some supporters of same-sex marriage share our concerns about the potential for same sex marriage to erode religious freedom – clearly they are not coming from a place of hate or homophobia.

For anyone who loves liberal democracy, which depends on free speech and the ability of all citizens to make a case for what they believe, the idea of restricting what we can discuss is abhorrent. We believe in protecting the fundamental freedoms that permit civil debate. Which is why we would encourage people to vote in a plebiscite. Let's have a great conversation. And let's have it with the tone set by her in 2010. To make our case, without dehumanising our opponents.

For us, we'll be making a positive case. We'll argue for the right of people to say what they believe marriage should be. Australians must be allowed to make the case that this thing called marriage, when it has actually been practiced, has brought fantastic good to the wider society. People shouldn't be ashamed to speak up for the classical vision of it. Many are not persuaded that a legal or cultural rearrangement of marriage will bring good. Most importantly, we believe in the freedom to speak and express those beliefs. And with the example set by Senator Wong in 2010, all sides should be able to make their case in a way that lets us disagree, without being disagreeable.

Michael Kellahan is the executive director of Christian think tank Freedom for Faith and the Sydney Anglican Archbishop's advisor on religious freedom.