

The Expensive Affirmation: Australia Says Yes to Same Sex Marriage

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The overall figure was comfortable, though hardly dashing. 62 percent of Australians (7.82 million) decided that same sex marriage was a perfectly feasible, even desirable notion, while 38 percent (4.87 million) did not.[1]

Out of 150 federal seats, 133 registered affirmative totals in returning their response to the question “Should the law be changed to allow same-sex couples to marry?”. All states featured majorities, while some so-called conservative states – Queensland and Western Australia, for instance – registered higher percentages than, for instance, New South Wales. Notable federal seats with large yes votes were Melbourne (84 percent); Sydney (84 percent) and Brisbane (80 percent).

The result for New South Wales was deemed an odd one by some commentators, given that Sydney is the place of the annual Mardi Gras, vulgarly cosmopolitan, brash and open. But this reductive simplicity belies the important fact that Sydney, and New South Wales, more generally, have diverse populations, many non-English speaking and reluctant to embrace the language of rainbow sexuality.

The pattern in Western Sydney was of deepest interest to Antony Green and the political science fraternity keen to peer through the electoral glass darkly. Twelve seats in Sydney, nine Labor and three Liberal, voted against marriage equality.

Blaxland, the seat of former Labor Prime Minister, Paul Keating, registered a thumping no vote of 74 percent. Watson, the seat of Labor front bench, Tony Burke, furnished the Australian Bureau of Statistics a figure of 70 percent. These results again showed how postal plebiscites that require scrutiny of what would otherwise be private matters tend to ruffle, even damage. The bag of prejudice is always a deep one.

It also followed that such strong no votes in specific seats would face some tip-toeing candidates keen to avoid those culturally sensitive voters. Particular interest will be paid to the seat of Bennelong, whose previous sitting member, John Alexander, had to resign for being a dual national.

Same-sex marriage, noted Green, does not fit into the class structure of Australian political thinking. Even today, however odd that note rings in discussions, electoral assessments tend to fall to demographic variables, and brute figures of income and living, rather than abstract values. Cultural values, in other words, tend to be nudged into the background, if, indeed, they actually figure at all.

It is precisely these cultural values that are going to play out in Parliament. This

ceremonially farcical show, costly and non-binding, was meant to give conservatives enough ammunition to avoid a same-sex marriage vote while giving the false impression that this was plausibly democratic. (Should prejudice ever be democratised?) The same tactic had been deployed in sinking the Republican debate in the 1990s by Prime Minister John Howard.

Having confronted the spectre of a significant yes vote, the strategy now is to water the pre-existing Dean Smith bill, embraced across parties, in favour of more discriminatory provisions under the guise of human rights. The discussion, claimed Senator Matt Canavan, had to continue, parliamentarians not being automatons in the service of the elector.

Unfortunately for Canavan, it was precisely the fact that parliamentarians had abdicated their legislative role in this matter that perpetuated this exercise. Conservative members of parliament are already insisting that parents have rights to shift children from schools that insist on a radical sex education agenda. Specific dispensations for prejudice will be sought.

Members of the same-sex marriage community have also jumped the gun in some instances, presuming that the passage of legislation will be automatic, a smooth matter without hiccups. Proposals were made on the lawn of the Victorian State Library in Melbourne. Corks were popped, champagne guzzled.

The celebrity circuit, ever keen to lend loud voices to causes, was triggered in communal enthusiasm. "It's a g'day," tweeted US talk show host Ellen DeGeneres. "Way to go Australia." [2] Singer Sam Smith jumped on Twitter with a sequence of crying face and rainbow emojis.

Much of the delight and ebullience centred on this vote being one of love. Such formulations on human institutions are rarely accurate. Marriage and love were only coupled as a fairly modern, middle-class phenomenon, and a general postal vote favouring same-sex marriage is probably more accurately termed one of fairness than emotional indulgence.

Few other communities in a social sense have been singled out as singular, marginal, and peculiar relative to rights and liberties. Such private realms should rarely be the preserve of the state. But the state will now determine whether the Marriage Act will be altered. Now, the tune may well change, but it is bound to be jarring at points. The judgments are far from over.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-11-15/same-sex-marriage-results-ssm/9145636>

[2] <https://twitter.com/TheEllenShow/status/930573863955472391>

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