DEBATE SPLITS NATION

THE CASE FOR

A S A LIBERAL and an advocate for equality, I have been rocked by the decision of the Federal Coalition party room to deny its members a conscience vote on the cross-party bill on same-sex marriage.

Tuesday night’s decision, by a majority of about two thirds of party room members, was a bitter personal disappointment.

I firmly believe that this issue should have been decided by all of Parliament, just as Prime Minister Tony Abbott himself called for when he addressed MPs in May.

For that to happen though, all MPs needed to be free to exercise their consciences when they voted on the bill.

Sadly, for me and my partner Virginia, and for millions of other Australian families, that will now not happen in the current term of Parliament.

This is not, however, an issue that will go away.

The Coalition party room’s decision has clearly differentiated the Liberals and Nationals from Labor.

Inevitably, that difference will be one that people consider as they weigh up where they will direct their vote at the next federal election. Clearly, Labor regards it as a vote winner and will seek to use that to their advantage.

Labor will put the debate around marriage equality even more firmly on the agenda as an election issue.

That means the Coalition will have to have a totally unambiguous policy to take to voters in 2016.

It won’t be able to take the approach adopted in the run up to the last election, which was that the issue would be open for debate in the new party room.

After Tuesday’s meeting the Prime Minister said the Coalition had not yet finalised what its position would be for the next election.

But he added that the “disposition” was that it should go to a vote of the people.

In other words a plebiscite.

As a supporter of change, and with an eye on the polls, including one conducted Wednesday by the Daily Telegraph which put backing for marriage equality at close to 75 per cent, I have no doubt that the Australian people will vote strongly in favour of reform.

But if the issue is now not to be decided by Parliament until after the people have spoken, there is simply no justification for delaying the vote until the next term.

A plebiscite will be expensive and is unfortunately very likely to be divisive for the Australian community, just as it has proven to be for our politicians.

If they abrogate responsibility for the decision and put it directly to the people, there will be strong campaigning from both sides.

That will polarise Australians and has the potential to pit us against each other on an issue that is ultimately all about mutual respect, inclusion and ending discrimination.

If the government decides a plebiscite is the right path the vote should be held concurrently with the next federal election.

That will help ensure maximum participation and deliver the most unequivocal result.

Bring it on.