Marriage bells will ring, despite Mr Abbott

Love will win over hatred. Equality and fairness will triumph over prejudice and chauvinism. Common sense will beat the irrational. And the people of this nation will have what they are demanding. The Marriage Act will change in the next Parliament. It will be done.

The tide of opinion has turned as strongly and certainly in Australia as it has in most of the Western world. In England and Scotland, in New Zealand and France, throughout Scandinavia, and in Canada, Belgium, the Netherlands and more, the people and their parliaments have overturned marriage laws that discriminated against same-sex couples. In Ireland, the predominantly Catholic nation, where homosexuality was banned until 1993, divorce was outlawed until 1996 and abortion remains a criminal offence, the people this year voted to change the law to ensure couples of the same sex could marry. And in the US, the highest court in the land recently cleared the way for its citizens to unite in marriage irrespective of their gender or sexual orientation.

Australia will do the same. Our love of freedom and personal liberties, our foundation beliefs of equity and justice, will make it happen. And the people of this nation are wise enough and progressive enough to recognise the only way forward from here is by calmly, rationally and respectfully letting our elected representatives know it must be done.

Marriage equality will be one of the defining issues of the next federal election. Prime Minister Tony Abbott has made it so, though he is also the person most resolutely blocking change in this country. He has stood like a guardian of the old ways, a soldier for the most conservative ranks, who would rather stick with his out-of-date views and engage in political chicanery than lead with vision and wisdom.

That was displayed yet again on Tuesday. Faced with imminent debate on a private member's bill on same-sex marriage, Mr Abbott did not take the matter to cabinet, an omission that offended some frontbenchers. Rather, he called a Coalition party-room meeting, which offended some Liberals who wanted their party to have its own debate, aware that the Nationals are predominantly against same-sex marriage.

The result of the six-hour meeting was that 66 Coalition MPs indicated they were in favour of maintaining the existing situation for now, and 33 wanted to be released from party unanimity so that they could vote on the marriage bill however they wished.

The outcome is disappointing. Barring extraordinary circumstances, changes to marriage laws will now not be debated before the next election. Mr Abbott is already fashioning the divide as one between a party that would leave the vote in the hands of politicians (which he says is Labor), and the Coalition, which he says would make it a decision of the people.

That is rich indeed, considering Mr Abbott has warned Coalition frontbenchers must resign if they speak against the party position. He says that after this term of government, Coalition MPs will no longer be bound by a whole-of-party vote on the marriage issue. He also says there is "the potential" for a plebiscite if the Coalition wins the next election. A people's vote is not necessarily binding; it is advisory only. Whether voters trust the Coalition to deliver a plebiscite is another matter. Labor says it will introduce a marriage equality bill within the first 100 days, if elected.

The roadblock thrown down by Mr Abbott has only a short time to run. The state should not be the ultimate arbiter of who consenting adults choose to marry. We are confident that, come the next election, Australians will demonstrate that equity, free choice, respect and love can and must prevail.

Let voters have their say on this important social issue

Marriage equality is not a political issue. It is a social issue. "Same-sex marriage is an issue," August 12, 1935, should not be decided by politicians. It should never have been. The people of this country are ultimately the ones who should decide on this question.

The debate is minefield. What we do next will have national implications. All Australians have a right to be heard on this issue. Whether we are a republic or not, Australians have a right to be included in the democratic process. Australians have a right to determine their own future, not to have their marriage equality forced on them, whether we are a republic or not.

SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

Date: 13/8/2015
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