

Speech to the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission Inquiry into discrimination against same-sex couples

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Good Morning,

I'd like to thank the commission for this opportunity to present today.

The Human rights commission's website reminds us that "every person has inherent dignity and value"— yet we are gathered here, because a significant number of Australians are being denied basic human rights in recognition of their relationships. It still strikes me as remarkable that a group of people who in fact are probably one of the largest so called "minority groups," remain so openly discriminated against. The cause behind this is our nation's very own laws; laws whose purpose it is to be just and to serve the common good for all citizens.

In a commission looking into the effects of discrimination against same-sex couples, there may be some of you wondering why I am here presenting as a young, single person. My purpose is to make it known that the push for equal rights is coming from all generations in our community – and not just those currently in relationships.

And while the current laws do not appear to specifically affect single people in day to day life, they certainly have indirect influences in shaping societal attitudes which we all have to deal with.

Regardless of sexuality, relationships are pivotal events in most people's lives.

When the government likens our relationships to nothing more than a close friendship, it has serious emotional effects on youth; one that is not easily quantifiable. What kind of message is being sent to our youth when the Anti-Terrorism Act is the only piece of Federal legislation that recognises same-sex couples?

The laws in their current form are extremely dangerous in that they portray a strong sentiment of disapproval which seeps down from government into society. This only makes life harder than it needs to be for gay and lesbian people.

According to Wesley Mission statistics, gay & lesbian youth are already between three and fourteen times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual counterparts. If a society can create circumstances that are so horrible that people risk suicide, then it is time for social change. These laws can no longer be the basis of political power play – they are affecting people's lives in a very real way.

So to bring this issue back to the realm of this commission - the point I'm trying to make is that the push for relationship recognition is not just a push for financial and workplace benefits. Yes these are certainly very real, visible and important aspects of the situation, but there is a wealth of indirect and intangible benefits that go hand in hand with formal relationship recognition.

As a single gay man, regardless of whether or not I plan on committing to a partner in the future, I should be given the right to make that choice.

While the others making speeches to the commission are experiencing the direct effects of relationship discrimination, I am not. However, like most gay youth I have enough foresight to acknowledge that these issues will directly affect me in the near future. Our rights as honest members of society are not being reflected in law.

I'd like to talk briefly about my upbringing. Like most children I was raised on the belief that we lived in a democracy – a country where human rights were upheld for all. After all – children are not born racist, sexist or homophobic. But I was astonished when I discovered that gay marriage was illegal.

When I started my journey of coming out, it was simply incomprehensible to me, as a young 17 year old, just how all our governments could get away with such blatant discrimination. Why were people not standing up for their rights? Why was this even an issue?

I honestly struggled with these questions and when I asked politicians, time and time again I was told that this issue simply wasn't on the agenda.

It is time our legislators afford us this human right. Our legislation has a major impact on many people's lives and surely this is more important than pandering to the conservative vote.

So why is recognition of our relationships so important to youth? The answer lies in our unique ability to hide behind a facade when growing up.

Unlike other minority groups, gays and lesbians prior to coming out, are not raised in a group where they can rely on each other for support. Most of us feel isolated in a society where gay and lesbian couples are rarely visible.

Coming out is hard enough given that one has to deal with the negative attitudes within society. The situation is only exacerbated by the intrinsic approval of homophobia through the government's legislation.

When our own government participates in and endorses discrimination against its citizens, they construct a society that follows their lead. This is very dangerous as it reinforces homophobia from the top, down.

Often the term "equal rights" is bandied about; however we should not forget exactly what it means. Members of our community are not asking for special treatment; we're simply asking for the same rights as everyone else.

If through movements put forward by this commission, the laws were amended to recognise same sex couples, it would not only bring about equality in financial & workplace benefits, but furthermore it'd pave the way to realigning community attitudes.

From looking at past experience, some of the most significant moments in human rights change have been through governments taking a progressive stance to bring

equality to all their citizens, despite some backlash within the community. I sincerely hope that this will be the result of the commission's inquiry.

Should we fail to achieve recognition of same-sex relationships it will result in a whole new generation of gays and lesbians facing hardship. Until we see legislative change one could ask; is our government saying that we are not quite human enough to deserve full human rights?

It is time for the government to join the growing number of nations who have repealed discriminatory laws. Its time for our government to step up to the challenge!

Thankyou