

Dear Prime Minister,

We the undersigned faith leaders urge you not to proceed with a plebiscite on the issue of allowing same-sex couples to marry.

We believe such a plebiscite would be damaging to faith communities, the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex community, and the broader community. We believe a plebiscite has the potential to,

- polarise faith communities over a highly politicised moral debate
- silence and threaten LGBTI people of faith
- discredit the voice of faith communities more generally on public matters
- provide a platform for disparaging LGBTI Australians and their families, leading to increased incidences of anxiety, depression and suicide
- severely damage relations between LGBTI and faith communities
- not resolve the issue because plebiscites offer no binding or agreed outcome

#### Division Among Faith Communities

Polls have demonstrated that opinion on legalising same-sex marriage varies among people of faith. In fact most polls find that a majority favour change. Yet the negative case will be put by religious groups and leaders who claim to speak on behalf of people of faith generally, or religious institutions as a whole. The tensions this poses for faith communities are exacerbated because significant, open dialogue around LGBTI issues is often yet to occur. A volatile, public and politically-charged debate could both distance leaders from lay people, marginalise faith communities from broader society and alienate LGBTI individuals within religious communities.

#### De-stabilisation of Religion in Society

In a secular society divorce, re-marriage and de facto relationships have long since been recognised in law. Various faith groups disagree theologically with these, but widely support the in-principle separation of law from confessional doctrines. By uniting a confessional doctrine (on marriage) to a specific public policy, a plebiscite threatens to undo the social consensus central to Australia's secular-religious harmony. This poses the knock-on effect of undermining the wider contribution faith communities can make to other public matters. We also want to avoid any public perception that the resources available to faith communities for important charity and welfare work are expended instead on a plebiscite campaign.

#### Detrimental Effects on LGBTI Australians

All sides disavow causing harm to LGBTI Australians. Nonetheless, there are grave concerns about what a plebiscite would mean. Such concerns cannot be put down to exaggerated

imagination. High profile proponents of 'traditional' marriage have a track record of public statements that have been widely interpreted as disparaging LGBTI people. This includes linking same-sex relationships with odious moral behaviours such as incest and bestiality; with negative health outcomes, such as smoking and sexually transmitted diseases; and with charges that children in same-sex households suffer parental loss and a breach of their human rights. After decades of legalised discrimination, and ongoing social stigma embodied, LGBTI Australians will face an angry, drawn-out debate, one likely to multiply existing disadvantages and harms.

### The Uncertainty of a Plebiscite

Some law-makers who oppose legalising same-sex marriage have stated that even if a plebiscite result was in favour of change they would not vote accordingly. This highlights that a plebiscite will not be binding and that marriage equality can only be resolved by a vote in parliament. A plebiscite creates serious risks of polarisation within faith communities, societal divisiveness and harm to vulnerable minorities. Yet the process itself lacks consensus and offers no guarantee that it will progress, or finalize, this debate.

We ask that, instead of holding a plebiscite, you allow marriage equality to be resolved by a vote in parliament as soon as possible.