

## Comment: Same Sex Marriage Bill

Yesterday saw parliament vote on the Same Sex Marriage Bill. Considering the importance of the bill, it is understandable that I have been contacted by many residents from Milton Keynes asking me to vote one way or another. I hope that my explanation below will shed some light on to why I voted the way I did.

It is a matter that I have taken a great interest in and have consulted widely on with my constituents, including meetings at the end of January with leaders of the faith community and Q:alliance, the body representing the LGBT community in Milton Keynes. Having read the Bill in detail, I am a firm believer that there are actually two separate issues here; one is the equality of couples who publically commit themselves to each other and the recognition of this by the State, and the second is the right of the State to impose its will on religious bodies and the potential threat to religious freedoms.

On the first issue when it comes to recognition of couples committing to each other in the eyes of the State, I am firm believer that there should be equality across the board which is why I am a supporter of civil partnerships, there are aspects of the Bill which strengthens civil partnerships which I actively support, though personally for a Bill that aims to deliver equality, it is a disappointment that the Bill does not propose to allow heterosexual couples to form a civil partnership. Equally I regret that the strengthening of civil partnerships have been included with other elements of the Bill which I feel fail to adequately protect religious freedoms.

On the Second issue, I do not believe that it is right for the State to impose its will on religious bodies as to who they should 'join in union'. There are already restrictions on this, for example as a divorced man I am not automatically allowed to get married in a church or indeed in a parish that I am not resident in, but nor am I automatically excluded, it is for the religious body to decide. When the Bill was published there was specific protection for the established Church but not for other faiths, once again for a Bill that aimed to deliver equality, it appears that we are not treating all faiths the same or providing them the same level of protection. I am equally cautious as to the potential 'unintended consequences' for religious freedoms that have not been clearly and logically thought through. I am a great supporter of equality, but equality for some cannot be at the price of religious freedom for others and my concerns that the Bill was not sufficiently well drafted to deliver both were not adequately answered.

I do appreciate that there are complications involved over the definition of 'marriage' and the role of the established church in effectively being licensed by the State to carry out marriage in the UK. This was highlighted by responses to the recent Government consultation. My initial thoughts on the Bill were that it was a mess and rather than produce a level playing field simply added to the complexity of the issue in the UK and will not stand the test of time. For this reason I was unable to support the Bill at second reading.

The Bill will now pass to committee and report stage and I will maintain an open mind as to whether the issues outlined above are addressed.