

The Australian marriage equality survey: An exercise in political division and diversion

The Socialist Equality Party (Australia)
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Voting in Australia in the voluntary, non-binding “postal survey” on whether same sex civil marriages should be legalised has been underway since September 13, and will continue until November 7. The result will be announced on November 15.

The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) has opposed the survey from the outset and calls for a boycott. No legitimacy should be given to a process that constitutes a travesty of democratic rights and that will not deliver genuine equality for same-sex couples.

The question posed when the Liberal-National Party Coalition government of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull announced the survey in August was: why is it being conducted at all?

For well over a decade, opinion polls have shown that a clear majority of the population wants the law changed. Ending the proscription on same sex marriage is, and is now widely understood to be, a basic issue of democratic rights. The ban is a relic of reactionary legislation that criminalised homosexuality itself, which was only progressively abolished at the state and federal level between 1975 and 1997.

Parliament, at any time, could have deferred to democratic principle and the popular will. This would simply have required a vote to remove the reactionary clause inserted into the Marriage Act in 2004, which defined marriage as solely between “a man and a woman.” Successive Coalition and Labor Party governments, however, have refused to conduct a parliamentary vote on the issue. Both major parties have been far more concerned with the reaction of organised religion, and its bigoted adherents in their own ranks, than with democratic rights.

The very conception of staging a “postal survey” was motivated by the most sordid considerations on the part of the Turnbull government. It was a last-ditch effort to appease ferocious opposition to any change within the Coalition.

If the outcome of the plebiscite is “No,” Turnbull has pledged there will be no parliamentary vote on marriage

equality, meaning the status quo will prevail. If the outcome is “Yes,” his government intends to shore up its support among a religious-based, right-wing constituency by *entrenching* discrimination against same-sex couples.

To this end, the survey has facilitated an outpouring of homophobic marketing and calls for a “No” vote by sections of organised religion. Turnbull’s Coalition government has responded by vowing to introduce legislation protecting so-called “freedom of religion.” The genuine democratic principle of “freedom of religion” means the right of any person to practice their form of worship as they choose. But as far as Turnbull and his rightwing constituency are concerned, it now means the right of religious zealots to impose their doctrines on the rest of civil society.

A bill recently proposed by Liberal Party members would allow ministers of religion, military chaplains and “independent religious celebrants” to refuse to marry couples, on the grounds of sex, sexuality or family status. In addition, however, it would permit religious educational institutions to discriminate on the grounds of sexuality in regard to employment. Moreover, the extreme rightwing layer in Turnbull’s own party, to whom he is shamelessly adapting, is advocating that further laws be passed allowing businesses—including bakers, florists, photographers and even venue-hirers—to refuse to service same-sex weddings.

Labor leader Bill Shorten has essentially endorsed such demands, declaring himself to be a “person of faith.” Last month, he declared: “I can give this guarantee to the Australian people. I and Labor will not support legislation which impinges upon religious freedom in this country.”

The aim of both the Coalition and Labor is to institutionalise the treatment of same sex couples as second-class citizens. There is no difference between the proposed legislation regarding same-sex marriage and the enactment of laws enabling businesses to discriminate on the basis of skin colour, nationality or ethnic background.

Moreover, the entire process of subjecting a basic democratic right to a “survey” is establishing a repugnant precedent. What comes next? A right-wing campaign for a

national opinion poll on whether to illegalise the right of Muslim women to wear the burqa or other cultural attire? Calls for a “non-binding” postal vote on banning the immigration of certain ethnic or religious groups altogether?

For these reasons, the survey should not be supported in any way. Such questions of principle, however, are a matter of indifference to the broad “Yes” coalition—which unites Turnbull and factions of the Coalition with Labor, the Greens, the trade unions, LGBT advocates, self-styled “progressive” churches and pseudo-left formations such as Socialist Alternative and Socialist Alliance.

The overwhelming majority of the country’s corporations, along with media celebrities, musicians and sporting codes, have also wrapped themselves in the rainbow flag.

A large degree of conscious political diversion has been involved in the amount of time, energy and resources that have been devoted to the survey. Both the “yes” and “no” camps have used it to try and drown out any discussion or debate on the immense war dangers that are looming on a world scale and within the Asia-Pacific region, or on the growing class antagonisms within Australia itself.

Far more attention has been paid to the marriage equality survey than to Australia’s active role in US preparations for a potential nuclear war on the Korean peninsula. Few Australians even know that the country has dispatched six warships on operational deployment in the region, or that US missiles and airstrikes would be targeted against North Korea from the Pine Gap base in central Australia. Or that Australian troops would almost certainly be part of any occupation force sent into North Korea, in the wake of its destruction.

The marriage equality debate has likewise overshadowed a stream of recent studies on the unprecedented fall in wages and mounting social distress, the dysfunctional organisation of energy and transport infrastructure, housing stress, and the crisis in public health and education. It has received more coverage than the “anti-terror” laws agreed unanimously by Turnbull and state Labor governments, which mean children as young as 10 can be detained without charge for 14 days, and that the entire population will be subjected to facial recognition surveillance, without so much as a vote in parliament.

Under conditions of unprecedented alienation and disaffection from the entire parliamentary setup, one aim of the survey has been to channel this growing social anger back behind the very corporate elites and political organisations responsible for the rise of militarism and social inequality, solely on the grounds of their attitude toward same-sex marriage.

Along with Labor, some of the most ruthless representatives of big business, from the boards of the major

banks to Qantas CEO Alan Joyce, have been promoted as the “progressive” wing of the Australian establishment on the basis that they call for a “Yes” vote.

The greatest fear of the ruling elite is the prospect of a unified movement of the working class, openly fighting to end the capitalist profit system and national-state divisions—the source of war, exploitation and all forms of oppression. The elevation of identity politics, based on race, gender and sexual orientation, over the common class interests of all workers and youth, has served as a means for blocking the development of such a movement.

During the past decades, during which the ruling elite has claimed to address racism, women’s rights and homophobia, social inequality has grown to historic proportions, there has been unending imperialist war and violence, while fundamental democratic rights have been eviscerated. While a thin layer of “ethnic” minorities, women and gays now occupy powerful positions within the ruling elite, the vast mass of workers, of all “identities,” have suffered a wholesale social reversal.

The realisation of genuine social and democratic equality can only be carried out by the international working class, unified in a world movement on the basis of the perspective of socialist internationalism. The experiences of the past decades have proven that the capitalist profit system is completely incompatible with democratic rights. They require the overthrow of capitalism, the establishment of workers’ governments and the socialist reorganisation of economic and social life on a world scale. That is the perspective of the Socialist Equality Party and we call on all politically serious workers and youth to commit themselves to it, and join the SEP.



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