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Australia

A historic repudiation of the conservative right

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In a society that thrives on division, prejudice and fear, the result of the marriage equality postal survey is a triumph.

Instead of accepting, as we have become so used to doing, injustice and discrimination being carried out in our name by our elected representatives, the mass of people have finally had a say. And they have expressed a resounding and unambiguous desire for equality and social justice. They have voted for decency and respect to be shown to a minority subject over many, many decades to humiliating secrecy, persecution and shame.

61.6 per cent of total voters, 133 out of 150 electorates and a majority in every state returned their forms with the "Yes" box ticked.

It was impossible not to be moved by the jubilant celebrations. Thousands in capital cities and towns around the country were electrified by a result that sent a message to every LGBTI person that the majority has their back. Strangers embraced, overcome with pride that they had been able to make their small contribution to this long overdue win.

This is not what the likes of Peter Dutton and Tony Abbott had in mind when they proposed the postal survey back in July. They hoped that by throwing enough hurdles in the way of equality, one might prove a stumbling block. They hoped via the postal survey to whip up a homophobic hate campaign and stoke anti-"political correctness" hysteria.

And they hoped to draw on the putative "silent majority" – that mysterious demographic that has been repeatedly evoked since the Howard years as evidence for a mandate for everything from wars in the Middle East to attacks on multiculturalism and "political correctness" – to prevail against the forces of progress. Despite repeated polling indicating majority support for marriage equality, the right insisted that this was the product of intimidation by the "political correctness police" (a force more powerful apparently than the combined might of the law, religious establishment, tabloid press and mainstream political parties).

This "silent majority" trope has been exposed as a lie. When given the choice, and encouraged by a determined social justice campaign, the majority have very loudly rejected bigotry and hate. They have demonstrated themselves to be for equality and respect, not discrimination and prejudice, and shown that they care more about these values than the supposed pitfalls of political correctness. They have proven that the reactionary religious right in Australia belongs to a bygone era, and speaks only for a shrinking minority.

What was once the abc of conservatism – that the nuclear family must consist of a male bread winner, dutiful wife and obedient children never to be deviated from and imposed on people via law – is now the stock in trade only of the reactionary fringe of the Liberal Party and their religious cheerleaders. There is no longer a majority, let alone a social consensus, behind them.

And yet these reactionaries – Abbott, Abetz, Andrews, Dutton – continue to enjoy a privileged and powerful place in society. They have successfully held the country to ransom over the issue of marriage equality, and via a compliant media and political connections have enjoyed a platform for their ideas out of all proportion to their support. Their scare campaigns about religious freedom and encroaching cultural Marxism have been encouraged, and acceded to, with shamefully little push back in the mainstream press. The conservative right unabashedly present themselves as the spokespeople for sensible middle Australia when most of this demographic wants nothing to do with them.

A historic repudiation of the conservative right

But you wouldn't know this from the reverence with which they are treated by the rest of the political establishment. Successive Labor and Liberal governments have maintained marriage discrimination at the behest of their outspoken but unrepresentative right wings over thirteen years. It has taken the actions of the majority outside of parliament to achieve what the political class has been unable to.

It is now time to stand up to their belligerence and make marriage equality a reality. In a country with one of the lowest rates of church attendance and religious conviction in the world, the fact that the issue of religious freedom has been allowed to significantly encroach on the public discussion and debate about this issue is a disgrace. The same people who rail against Muslims for not assimilating because they refuse to give up their religious practices claim to be the champions of religious freedom when it means slandering and encouraging prejudice towards another minority. This transparent and spurious attempt to stymie progress must be rejected.

The bill that will be put to parliament is that drafted by Liberal Dean Smith. This bill is far from the rebuke to bigots that the postal survey provides a mandate for. Indeed, it does as much to placate religious prejudice as it does establish real equality in relation to marriage. It should be significantly amended to remove these concessions, and any attempt by Abbott and co to make it more reactionary should be roundly rejected.

Perhaps most pertinently though, further delay should not be endured. The postal survey results mean that LGBTI people deserve to be walking down the aisle by Christmas. The parliament must immediately make this happen.

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