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Passion for same-sex marriage a problem for Labor

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THE Labor Party comes to next weekend's national conference with a political passion for same-sex marriage far removed from its low priority with the public and fixated by the false polemic of "marriage equality".

The same-sex cause is a crusade now close to seizing Labor's heart. At a time when Labor is weak on conviction, this is a remarkable event. It is an insight into the transformed values of Labor's rank and file and how much its membership is pledged to cultural Left causes. Labor, it seems, wants to become a same-sex marriage party and is even prepared to humiliate Julia Gillard in this quest.

The party seems ignorant of the public unease beneath unconvincing polls showing strong support for change or even the full import of what same-sex marriage actually means.

National conference numbers are in the balance about changing the meaning of marriage with the Prime Minister battling to carry her compromise to allow a conscience vote on gay marriage. A policy change without a conscience vote would mean a split in the parliamentary party because many caucus members will not vote for gay marriage.

What will the Australian public think if Labor treats same-sex marriage as its main goal at its national conference or if it is sufficiently fixated to humiliate Gillard on the issue? Is there any other matter -- jobs, health, education, environment -- where the rank and file is so agitated and so passionate?

This passion is the real problem for Labor. The impression is that Labor is obsessed by its own causes at odds with the public's priorities and preoccupations.

In essence this campaign shifts Labor as a political party into a post-Christian identity. It is a fundamental break from Labor's social origins and values. This is how many Australians will interpret a vote for gay marriage. The party's repudiation of the cultural and religious foundations of marriage will be an epic event in its history.

It is noteworthy that only a few people will gain directly; that is, the number of gays who will marry. While this change matters deeply to those affected, rarely in Labor's history has the party become so focused by a policy alternation that affects such small numbers. The real point, of course, is this is Labor's new ideological cause. It must, therefore, prompt the question: what exactly is the ideology?

The activists say gay marriage is needed to remove discrimination in marriage. This polemic conceals rather than reveals what is happening. Discrimination is not the real issue. In a civilised polity there is no place for discrimination based on age, race, gender or sexual preference. The Gillard government has removed discrimination affecting gays and gay couples. Seen in this context, changing the Marriage Act is about changing the concept of marriage. This affects the entire society, not just gays.

What is the new ideology of marriage? It is overwhelmingly about rights and expanding the rights agenda. It says consenting adults bound by love have equal rights to marry. In his own words Greens MP Adam Bandt says: "Love has no boundaries; love has no limits." It seems as good a definition as any. And it raises problems because the public is wary of more rights without matching responsibility.

It erects a libertarian construct of marriage and, once opposite-sex exclusivity is terminated, it opens the way for a variety of postmodern and cross-cultural constructs where marriage can encompass a range of sex options and people. That's what "love without boundaries" means.

In this situation legal recognition of fatherhood and motherhood comes under assault because they constitute an obsolete view of marriage. This is now happening in a number of same-sex marriage nations. The new concept is parenthood. Its introduction is necessary and logical and flows from the legal recognition that children within marriage can have parents of the same sex and cannot be typecast by ideas of father and mother as such.

Once this notion takes hold, how will the public react?

In political terms, legalisation of same-sex marriage brings state and church into direct conflict. To try to solve this problem, Labor activists specify that changes to the Marriage Act will not impose an obligation on a minister of religion to solemnise any marriage. This is the escape clause and it is pivotal. It is designed to permit religious freedom to continue to exist in Australia. Only a fool would accept this at face value.

The churches know this issue penetrates to the heart of religious freedom. Once the state changes the meaning of marriage, can you imagine the pressures all religions will face to perform same-sex wedding ceremonies against their will? The Christian churches, at some point, will become the focus of attack for denying gay marriage ceremonies in the name of religious faith.

While churches will enjoy an initial exemption from the state's law, that exemption over time will be attacked as an anomaly. No religion will accept at face value any guarantee from the Labor Party.

This is obvious from the recent struggle over the statutory bill of rights. The churches opposed the rights charter because its anti-discriminatory provisions could be applied to churches and their institutions (schools and charities) to remove their religious character and practices, unless exemptions were granted. And some politicians opposed the exemptions.

The campaign against religious freedom has much traction. It is manifested in frequent demands that religion be driven from the public square into a strictly private realm, an idea that constitutes a betrayal of the secular state whereby the state was to guarantee religious liberty.

A recent and sophisticated polling survey, sample 1200, conducted by the Sexton Group for the Ambrose Centre for Religious Liberty, found a 49-40 per cent majority for changing the Marriage Act. It is a strong pointer to overall support for change. But the real picture is more complex.

It found only 14 per cent "strongly" wanted to change the Marriage Act.

For most people, there is no passion or priority. Opinion is sharply split along party lines, with Labor voters backing change 57-33 per cent and Coalition voters backing the marriage status quo 56-34 per cent. Much depends on the way the issue is framed. For instance, 69 per cent agreed that man-woman marriage should be upheld for its traditional meaning and as an important social institution.

Labor has only a couple of days left: it needs to open its eyes and clear its head.

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