

An 18 year-old's personal account of her oral submission against the Marriage Amendment Bill given 10th December 2012 in Wellington

When I first heard of the Marriage Amendment Bill and its intentions, I had no idea that I would become so deeply involved - but knew that I strongly opposed it with the deepest conviction. I do this because:
I became Catholic Christian 6 years ago and through those beliefs I oppose,
I believe in protecting the fundamental institution of marriage,
I believe in the welfare and conservation of family,
I believe in protecting our society,
I believe that such things should be faithfully and fully fought for.

As an 18 year-old female on the cusp of entering university - who has never had the slightest to do with politics before - it would seem a daunting task to stand up and speak out in person against the Bill. Yet, despite the bias and emotively driven attitudes of pro-Bill people, I am steadfast as ever to rise to the challenge to achieve the right outcome: The protection of marriage and family, and thus the common good of society.

Who shall fight to preserve it? For if we do not stand up for what is right, it shall pass out of existence.

I presumed that my work would start and finish with a written submission. But the Bill left an imprint on my mind and from the moment I picked up a pen I was, and am, in it to the end.

My approach to the Bill was clear from the start. That I would look at it from the heart of the matter and at angles not as straightforward as I first thought. To look at it from virtue and democratic ideals reasoned with logic and applied through different channels of discussion is not an easy position to convey. Yet I have been compelled to write exactly what I did.

I eagerly accepted the offer to present an oral submission. Extended research shed further light on the Bill, completing my argument. The list of detrimental implications grew. But I was driven. And though I felt uneasy and unwilling to continue at times, the critical nature of what this Bill proposes outweighs any sense of the enormous task ahead.

Tense with anticipation on the day of the oral submission, I walked with my mother who supported me towards select committee room 2, which is physically separate from the usual Parliament-based select committee rooms in Wellington. We passed two grim-faced Asian men briskly walking away from the room, one flush-faced and commenting to his colleague "but Chinese, as a people, are *against* the Bill".

Arriving a little early, the large conference room seated over 30 spectators in public seats. Chaired by MP Chris Auchinvole, MPs seated on the left were Kanwaljit Singh Bakshi and Eric Roy and, on the right MPs Charles Chauvel, Moana Mackey, and Kevin Hague. Clearly dominated by pro-Bill parliamentarians (4 out of 6). It was also clear by their demeanour that all spectators were pro-Bill, one large group of young varsity-aged men seated closest to Kevin Hague, another mostly female group closest to the door.

Five submissions before mine were pro-Bill, ran similar themes, and were alarmingly emotive and warmly welcomed with a "thank you very much for coming here, we've read your submission and won't need to ask you any questions" by the Chairman. Five minutes seemed standard with no questions, no comments from the committee.

Two male submitters independently focussed on "*love*" - for each other and all non-heterosexual couples, because love is the same for all LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) people. "*We come from loving families who want this Bill to be law too*" (though their families didn't actually appear to be present). In this "*society of egalitarianism*", to "*advance society*", this Bill in law will be "*enlightenment for this country*".

A lesbian couple around their mid 20s reasoned that the Bill should be law because their attempts at heterosexual relationships "*failed before it began*" so they always "*felt different*", and "*if this Bill becomes law it will stop a lot of unnecessary unhappiness for non-heterosexuals and couples everywhere*". As law, this Bill will give equality in society because they "*feel devalued*". They also addressed their desires to have children stating, "*role models for children come in many forms*" (sole reference to male models), and "*we want our children to be*

recognised as equals" with an emphasis that the Bill becoming law would help their children be *"equals"* and *"avoid a lot of unhappiness"*. *"We each have a strong sense of family and strong religious backgrounds"* (one Presbyterian, one Catholic) and *"whether this Bill becomes law or not, we WILL be a family together and we WILL have children"*.

A young male submitter focused on the wording *"person"*, saying that sex and gender seems important, suggesting that this could be *"gotten around"* if they would simply *"remove gender altogether"* from all forms and documents. He said that *"rejecting this Bill"* will be *"dangerous"*; we shouldn't let the status quo continue; there is a *"heating up"* of support for this Bill; and *"the time is now"* to make *"social change to make New Zealand a fairer society"*. If the Bill is rejected, it will *"allow discrimination"* and *"gays will be second class citizens"*.

An 18 year old female who was called just before me – was allowed to introduce her supporting lesbian partner and whose father was given a profuse invitation by the Chairman to sit beside her in support (to which he yelled a Maori greeting) – stating this Bill should be law because it's *"important especially for those not here who have been lost through homophobia and trans-phobia"*. It's about a *"very basic right"* and *"we're in 2012 and want that otherness"*. *"People in New Zealand are homophobic and trans-phobic"* leading to *"high suicide rates"*. We need to be allowed to *"love who you love"* and *"I feel a civil union is different to marriage"*. *"Marriage is a strong part of culture and custom and ancestors"* and *"my rights are the same as anyone else's"*.

My submission time of 10 minutes was in stark contrast. My name was called and as I walked to the table, the Chairman greeted me frostily, rather flippantly, and the atmosphere completely changed. The heavy air was charged with emotion and I am still astounded that I managed to walk towards that table and chair despite apprehension and feeling sick at heart at my different treatment and the apparent hostility.

My submission opening sentence *"The Marriage Amendment Bill is illogical"* was greeted with the Chairman's incredulous shout of *"Pardon?!"* followed by a brief, awkward silence that prompted me to repeat it. Proceeding to read my carefully prepared oral submission, I was aware of intense animosity by pro-Bill members of the committee towards me – through their facial expressions and body language.

After a mere 30 seconds or so into my submission, Chairman Chris Auchinvole MP – who'd minutes earlier ingratiatingly welcomed the previous 18 year old female - got up, pointedly turned his back towards me, walked to the tea trolley at the back wall near his seat, and made a great show of preparing himself a hot drink and rummaging for food. This lasted for over three minutes, half of my speaking time.

Yet I continued.

MP Moana Mackey rolled her eyes and pulled faces during my commentary on democracy, when addressing concerns of the need for virtue, and points about righteous discrimination.

Yet I continued.

Personally unaware, but recounted by my mother, spectators loudly fidgeted in their seats, loudly whispered, sniggered, rustled papers and loudly blew their noses while I spoke, a stark contrast to the intense, respectful silence given to previous pro-Bill submitters. The Chairman did nothing.

Intermittently looking into the eyes of the Chairman and MP Moana Mackey, I continued to speak my submission and after finishing was curtly thanked by the Chairman.

Ensuing silence was deafening.

Then MP Kevin Hague addressed me in an insolent, contemptuous tone, *"I think you know who I am Grace"* and proceeded with a personal individual question of *"what harm would it do ... to you personally if I married my partner, Grace?"* Pausing to think, I replied that it was a matter of perspective and of the wider consequence. Interrupting me in mid-sentence he stated, *"I think you're saying that homosexuality is wrong"* ... *"I think you are homophobic"*. I responded by stating, *"No, I believe in the dignity of everyone and respect all individuals"*. Kevin Hague replied, *"No, I think you are"* in an unsavoury and menacing manner. I ended the conversation with a final *"No I am not"*.

Quickly following on from Kevin Hague, MP Moana Mackey addressed me stating, “*Nothing* you have stated in your submission has anything to do with the Bill”. She quickly said heterosexual marriages can be violent, and asked about success of "other" marriages using situations where there is “violence”. I replied, “I don't see how that applies to this Bill”, that “anyway there will always be circumstances where things do not work out or untoward events prevent marriage from being sustained... it was about the ideal”.

MP Charles Chauvel ended my submission time dismissively saying “*all we're doing*” is to “insert a definition of marriage” for “equality”, and I was abruptly dismissed by Chairman Chris Auchinvole.

Dazed, I returned to my chair to briefly collect myself, and couldn't remain in the room any longer.

Outside, the entirety of the proceedings started to sink in, and I felt humiliated, disappointed and frustrated at my treatment by these supposedly *professional* Members of Parliament who could not even give me common courtesy or respect. MPs who think that democracy, virtue, morals and the majority have – in the words of MP Moana Mackey – got "nothing to do with this Bill" or, seemingly, their jobs.

I had expected a basic level of respect and professional conduct from the committee MPs, regardless of my position concerning the Bill – the committee who are supposed to represent the whole public and their views with integrity when working in Parliament. Indignity of being labelled homophobic by an MP is ridiculous and to have received the disrespectful, humiliating, and pro-Bill biased, hostile reception is appalling.

A confirmation of what I had hoped was not the reality.

Everyone's dignity should be preserved, and an equal and fair representation and account for the views of both sides and ALL New Zealander's should be present. My experience represents and illustrates that the state of the government, their attitudes and actions - especially regarding this sensitive matter - is unfair and undemocratic. People need to be aware of the reality of this Bill.

It seems ironic that these people, LGBT people, seek 'equality' and 'rights', yet cannot return the same. They seek respect yet cannot show other citizens of New Zealand the same. How can they expect people to respond kindly or to take them or their perspectives seriously if they cannot display the basic rights towards people – the people they serve as representatives – even if those people are opposing their positions? Are we a democratic nation? No matter that I respectfully, objectively and calmly presented my submission, it was lost on their emotive, aggressive, and disrespectful attitudes and conduct towards me. And I am not the only one, because it could happen, and has happened to many more.

So - are we living in a democracy?!

I ended my oral submission by quoting Martin Luther King Jr –

"Cowardice asks the question: is it safe?

Expediency asks the question: is it politic?

Vanity asks the question: is it popular?

But conscience asks the question: is it right?

And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular – but one must take it simply because it is right.

MP Moana Mackey smirked.

I felt sick at heart. But I have never been afraid. I am never afraid. To speak the truth.