There will be a debate in the Assembly on gay marriage on Monday 2 November 2015.

The motion by SDLP, Sinn Fein and Green MLAs, under the title ‘Marriage Equality’, reads, “This Assembly calls on the Executive to table legislation to allow for same sex marriage.”

This will be the fifth time the subject has been debated. On the last occasion, it was defeated by two votes. A petition of concern has however again been tabled which means that the DUP veto provided by having a majority of Unionist MLAs will ensure defeat.

Given expected voting changes by Alliance MLAs, it is possible there will be an initially favourable result this time. If some Ulster Unionists abstained, or several more voted for the motion, there would definitely be a majority.

It is reasonable and proper for UUP MLAs to vote against the use of a petition of concern in this instance, or to abstain. If legislation is brought forward, members can, at that time, choose which way to vote on both the principle and the detail, and indeed to propose amendments.

A future option would be a strong element in any Bill to protect religious institutions from anti-discrimination suits that invoke the European Convention on Human Rights and which tried to exploit the existence of marriage equality. Examples would be in relation to employment and educational aspects.

On Saturday, at the UUP conference, the party leader Mike Nesbitt said “*We also need to think about the cold spot that is how we are perceived by members of the LGB&T community. What if it was your son? Your daughter? What would you want for them? What would you offer them? I hope the answer is Unconditional Love.*

*Some of us support same sex marriage, some do not, and it’s part of the beauty of the Ulster Unionist Party that we can respect each other’s positions.*

*I shall not labour the point today, but to those of us who cannot bring ourselves to support same sex marriage, I say this – we are on the wrong side of history. There is a new generation coming and they simply do not understand why there is a problem.”*

His welcome words are best translated into a reconsideration by UUP MLAs of their voting stance or in the case of the three new members, two replacing supporters of change, a first and positive vote.

The Belfast Telegraph on Monday reported the encouraging results from a poll of fifty members at conference. The survey was taken before Mike Nesbitt’s speech yet, even then, 56% wanted a law allowing same sex marriage with 44% opposed. A majority of UUP councillors in Belfast City Council support law reform while it is worth remembering that an Ulster Unionist MP, Harford Montgomery Hyde, who represented North Belfast from 1950 to 1959, was a leading advocate for homosexual law reform at Westminster.