**Did The Spectator prompt the new consultation on gay marriage?**

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It isn’t often that a piece in the Spectator makes its way straight into a Prime Minister’s party conference speech but, as this magazine’s online Coffee House hinted last week, Douglas Murray’s ‘Why conservatives should welcome gay marriage’ (1 October) looks like an example. I’ve often disagreed and occasionally crossed swords with Mr Murray but always admired him as a writer; this article, though, was to my mind not only framed with clarity and grace, but came close to constructing the definitive case in moral logic for ending inequalities between civil partnership and marriage.
I can’t add to it. For years after being elected to parliament I tried to explain the Conservative case for giving social status to same-sex relationships. I attempted to draw attention to the cruel circularity of the argument that gay love was a flimsy affair, typically short-lived, furtive and driven only by lust, therefore society should penalise such pairings, make it as hard as possible for homosexuals to meet or stay openly together, and drive home by law the moral inequivalence between heterosexual and homosexual love. But somehow the time was not right for my argument; or I never found the right words. Murray did; and it can surely be no coincidence that a few days later David Cameron found almost the same words when he addressed the Tory conference in Manchester, and explained how he supported gay marriage not ‘despite… [but] because I am Conservative’.
Gay ‘marriage’. On the question of nomenclature I remain torn. I distrust campaigns to change social attitudes by changing language. That has a rather Orwellian feel. To many of my generation, and older generations too, ‘marriage’ refers to the union of a man and a woman. I wouldn’t want to steal the word from people who use it exclusively in that way, or distort its natural meaning. But the natural meanings of words change through usage, and even in the last few years I’ve noticed it sounding less awkward or silly to talk about two men being married, as it did (to me) at first. The term ‘marriage’ may be evolving in common parlance. Then let it take its course.
The day may even come when it wouldn’t sound impossibly precious for two men each to describe themselves as the other’s ‘husband’ (or two women each other’s ‘wife’) but for me that day — if coming — is some way off. I feel more comfortable with ‘partner’, bloodless as the term may be. Given the choice I’d have gone for ‘companion’, but I’m not given the choice.
In Manchester at the Conference Pride dinner, we were lightheartedly discussing what — all things being wholly equal — the civil partner of a knight should be called. How about rectifying two injustices with the honorific ‘squire’ for the male spouse of a knight or a dame? When the first Tory MP to get a civil partnership becomes, as we all hope, Sir Alan Duncan, perhaps his partner James could be Squire James? A dame’s female spouse should get an honorific ‘Lady’, like a knight’s.
But this is trivial. What, though, beyond names, will be the scope of the consultation that Mr Cameron has promised, on equalising civil partnership with marriage — or, as he put it last week, ‘legalising gay marriage’? It’s less clear than at first sight it may seem. In questions like inheritance, the law already puts same-sex partnerships on a similar footing to marriage, apart from the name. Such differences as remain, apparently obscure or minor, were not arbitrary, but maintained because removing them might have been contentious or problematical. On examination, the problems will resurface.
Would the new status be retrospective? By custom, legislation affecting the married state has applied to existing as well as new marriages; but creating gay marriage goes deep. Perhaps civil partners might be permitted but not required to upgrade their partnerships? And the consultation must surely reconsider, whatever the government says now, the banning of same-sex ceremonies in places of worship. Why shouldn’t this be up to the place of worship? Nobody’s forcing any church to hold gay weddings, but why prohibit this?
Other inequalities may seem minor. An example: if you were unmarried when you retired, but married in [retirement](http://www.spectator.co.uk/columnists/all/7308953/did-the-spectator-prompt-the-new-consultation-on-gay-marriage.thtml), and your pension scheme offers a pension on your death to the surviving spouse of such a marriage, this part of your scheme was not retrospectively re-written by law to cover civil partnerships. Public sector pension schemes have extended the cover nevertheless. Some private sector schemes have too; others have chosen not to. Will this be rectified? Tremendously important to a few; but retrospection is difficult.
And there are inequalities of resonance to all. Adoption is one. There is no ban on gay adoption but — to the best of my understanding — no requirement, either, that adoption authorities should be officially blind to whether a couple’s partnership is heterosexual or homosexual. Should they be? I don’t find this easy. There are many happy and successful gay adoptions; and it’s easy to imagine cases where it was obviously better that a child should have two loving same-sex adoptive parents than no parents at all. But, all other things being equal, and where there’s a choice, might the authorities give weight to the heterosexuality of a couple wishing to adopt?
Half of me says no. The other half says I’m glad I had both a mother and father, and that as after childhood I was to spend my life among both men and women, and as men and women are not the same, I would have missed something if I had not learned first about the world from, and with, both a woman and a man, and in the love of both. Perplexing, isn’t it? The promise of consultation may prove easier than the consultation.

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