

Government should not stand in way of homosexuals marrying in church, say Tories

Governments should not stand in the way of religious organisations that wish to allow homosexuals to marry in church, the Conservatives have suggested.

By Rosa Prince and Alex Spillius

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Since 2005, same sex couples have been able to enter into civil partnerships, which give them the same legal rights as married people Photo: GETTY

Nick Herbert, the front bencher and first homosexual man to be selected to become a Tory MP, said that the Conservatives were sympathetic to churches, such as the Quakers, who wanted to offer homosexual couples religious wedding ceremonies but were currently barred by law from doing so.

Party insiders said that the Conservatives were sympathetic to churches, such as the Quakers, who wanted to offer homosexual couples religious wedding ceremonies but were currently banned from doing so.

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Some homosexuals are also angry at laws which bar them from describing their civil partnership commitment ceremonies as a “marriage”.

In a speech in at the Cato Institute, an American libertarian think tank based in Washington DC, Mr Herbert said that under a Conservative government, homosexuals would be encouraged to form lasting relationships and adopt children.

Insisting that the party had ended its traditional 'hostility' to same-sex couples, he said that there was a "definite change" in the Tories' attitude to gay people.

In words which may alarm some traditionalists, Mr Herbert, who took part in a civil partnership ceremony with his long-term boyfriend last year, also said that while he understood why some religious groups opposed homosexual unions, there was no reason why marriage and adoption rights should not be extended to same sex couples.

He called on communities to support fidelity and family values among homosexual people as a way of tackling high levels of promiscuity among gay men.

Mr Herbert went on: "I appreciate the view held by some, on a strict reading of their faith, that marriage is a unique arrangement which is only available to a man and a woman.

"But in the UK, we created in law a civil union for heterosexual couples, specifically devoid of any religious ceremony and significance for those who do not wish to marry in church.

"So what religious grounds could there be for opposing the extension of a secular institution to gay couples through the introduction of civil partnerships in 2005?

"And why stand against the extension of a civil institution which demands a public declaration of commitment and stability?

"Those who argue against legal recognition for gay partnerships often claim that many gay people have promiscuous lifestyles.

"But there are few social incentives of the kind which conservatives should naturally embrace for gay people to embrace commitment.

"So it's right to recognise commitment in gay partnerships. In the same way, we should reject discrimination against gay couples who wish to adopt.

"We should not seek to prevent adoption by same-sex couples who may offer a love and stability that is absent from too many homes."

Since 2005, same sex couples have been able to enter into civil partnerships, which give them the same legal rights as married people.

But following strong lobbying from religious groups, they may not call their union a "marriage". Homosexuals are also banned from having any religious conduct as part of the ceremony, and can not wed in a church or other holy building.

A Tory spokesman said that, as they were relatively new, the party wanted to see how civil partnerships "bedded in" before taking immediate action to legalise homosexual marriages.

But legislation could follow if homosexual groups and churches felt that they wanted to go further by scrapping civil partnerships and allowing homosexual couples full marriage rights, including religious ceremonies.

Mr Herbert said: "If we form the next government, we intend to entrench the progress made on gay equality, and to move the agenda forward. If there is a need for new laws, we will consider them."

Labour and the Liberal Democrats have accused the Conservatives of having a "deep strain of homophobia".

But Mr Herbert, the shadow environment secretary, said that under David Cameron, the Tory leader, the party had changed its attitude to homosexuality.

He added: "The truth is that there are millions of people who we drove away but who share our values and want to join us.

"Gay people are not the property of the left, or of any party. They are not an interest group or a political commodity to be traded. Gay people are motivated by the same issues as any other voter.

"They will vote for the political party which best sits with their views – so long as that party does not make itself taboo.

"For the modern Conservative Party, embracing gay equality is neither a temporary phenomenon, nor an agenda which can be reversed.

"If we form the next government, we intend to entrench the progress made on gay equality, and to move the agenda forward. If there is a need for new laws, we will consider them."