

Australia Introduces Gay-Marriage Legalization Bill

The leader of Australia's opposition Labor Party introduced a bill to legalize same-sex marriage on Monday, adding the backing of a major party to growing public support for the issue after last month's landmark 'yes' vote in Ireland.

Labor Party leader Bill Shorten introduced the bill in the government-dominated lower house of parliament despite opposition from conservative Prime Minister Tony Abbott, who is not expected to allow it to come up for a vote.

The proposal, the first by a leader of a major Australian political party, added to pressure on the government to allow a vote sooner rather than later.

"The laws of our nation should give us hope. Our laws should tell our children what we believe. Our laws should tell strangers who Australians are," Shorten told parliament, where government benches were noticeably empty.

"It is time," he said, to resounding applause from the chamber's visitors gallery.

Ireland backed same-sex marriage by a landslide in a referendum last month that marked a dramatic social shift in a traditionally Catholic country that only decriminalized homosexuality two decades ago.

A telephone survey of 1,000 people conducted in Australia a year ago by polling agency Crosby-Textor found support for legalizing same-sex marriage at 72 percent.

Abbott, a socially conservative Catholic, said on Monday the government was focused on passing legislation to help small businesses and did not want a vote on same-sex marriage to

distract from that issue.

"I accept that same-sex marriage is a significant issue," he told reporters.

"But frankly, this government's absolute fundamental priority ... is to get the most urgent budget measures through and by far the most urgent budget measure is the small business budget boost," Abbott said.

Supporters of same-sex marriage within the government say they will seek backing for a bipartisan bill in the second half of the year, but only after the budget has been debated.

Pressure is building on Abbott from his party's libertarian wing and from within his own family.

Abbott's sister, Christine Forster, is engaged to a woman and called for bipartisan agreement.

"It doesn't change the institution of marriage at all, the institution of marriage still remains being about two people committing to each other, hopefully for life, and that being legally recognized by our government," she told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

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