

# British government launches consultation on same-sex marriage

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(ENInews)--The British government on March 15 launched a 12-week consultation in England and Wales that is widely expected to lead to the legalization of same-sex marriage, despite strong opposition from the Roman Catholic Church and conservative elements within the Church of England.

"Should two people who care deeply for each other, who love each other and who want to spend the rest of their lives together be allowed to marry?" Home Secretary Theresa May asked in *The Times* on March 15.

"That is the essential question behind the debate over the government's plans to extend civil marriage to same sex couples," she said.

The coalition government led by Prime Minister David Cameron (Conservative) and his deputy, Nick Clegg (Liberal Democrat) has made it clear that it wants to see a law which allows gays and lesbians to marry before the next general election in 2015. It is also supported by the opposition leader, Ed Milliband (New Labour).

But the consultation will also include an option of retaining the status quo and that has met with the approval of senior church figures, as well as a number of Conservative MPs.

The plans for same-sex weddings only covers civil marriages for gay and lesbian couples. Religious buildings would only be used where church, temple, mosque or synagogue leaders wished to offer that ceremony.

If the reform goes ahead, it would only affect same-sex couples in England and Wales, not Northern Ireland or Scotland (which make up the rest of the U.K.). Last year, the Scottish Government held its own consultation process and received more than 50,000 responses.

The decision to go ahead with the consultation was taken despite fierce opposition from Christian church leaders. The Church of England on March 15 issued a statement saying that the Church of England/Archbishops' Council will study the government's consultation on whether to redefine marriage and respond in due course.

"The Church of England is committed to the traditional understanding of the institution of marriage as being between one man and one woman," a statement said.

On March 11, Roman Catholic priests read out a pastoral letter signed by two leading clerics, the Archbishop of Westminster Vincent Nichols and the Archbishop of Southwark Peter Smith.

It warned Britain's estimated four million Roman Catholics that "changing the legal definition of marriage could be a profoundly radical step. Its consequences should be taken seriously." The letter was read by priests from 2,500 pulpits in churches across England and Wales.

Earlier, Cardinal Keith O'Brien, the leader of Scotland's estimated 500,000 Roman Catholics, described as "grotesque" plans for same-sex weddings. He said if a law was passed making same-sex weddings legal it would "shame the United Kingdom in the eyes of the world."

The Archbishop of Canterbury and leader of the 77 million strong worldwide Anglican Communion, Rowan Williams, has cautioned that the law should not be used as a tool to bring about social changes, such as gay marriage.

But other religious groups, including Quakers, Reform Jews and Unitarians, have welcomed it.

Several countries recognize same-sex marriage, including Argentina, Belgium, Canada, Iceland, Netherlands, Norway Portugal, Sweden, Spain, South Africa. In the U.S., same-sex marriage is legal in eight states.

Civil partnerships were introduced in the United Kingdom in 2005. They gave same sex couple the same legal rights as married couples. Those in favor of same-sex marriage say it would lift another barrier to equality and give gays and lesbians the same rights as those enjoyed by heterosexual couples.