

Archbishops: It is not too late to stop this shambolic Bill



Left, Archbishop Smith; centre, Archbishop Nichols (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

The Church in England and Wales has criticised Government plans to push ahead with same-sex marriage next year, after the Culture Secretary announced a timetable for the historic change.

In a statement released on Tuesday Archbishop Vincent Nichols of Westminster and Archbishop Peter Smith of Southwark said: “The Government has chosen to ignore the views of over 600,000 people who signed a petition calling for the current definition of marriage to stay, and we are told legislation to change the definition of marriage will now come to Parliament.”

The bishops were responding after Culture Secretary Maria Miller announced Government proposals for the Bill, which allows same-sex civil and religious marriages for religious groups that choose to conduct them, which is expected to be introduced in January, with the first gay weddings likely in early 2014. The Methodist Church of Great Britain, as well as Quakers and Unitarians, are expected to conduct gay weddings, although the Church of England would be banned from holding such weddings, with Catholic churches, synagogues and mosques having “watertight” protections, according to Miss Miller.

The archbishops said: “We strongly oppose such a Bill. Furthermore, the process by which this has happened can only be described as shambolic. There was no electoral mandate in any manifesto; no mention in the Queen’s speech; no serious or thorough consultation through a Green or White Paper, and a constant shifting of policy before even the Government response to the consultation was published today.

“We urge everyone who cares about upholding the meaning of marriage in civil law to make their views known to their MPs clearly, calmly and forcefully, and without impugning the motives of others. It is not too late to stop this Bill.”

Speaking ahead of the publication of the proposals, Prime Minister David Cameron said churches would not be coerced into holding weddings for homosexuals.

He said: “I’m in favour of gay marriage because I’m a massive supporter of marriage and I don’t want gay people to be excluded from a great institution.

“But let me be absolutely, 100 per cent clear – if there is any church or any synagogue or any mosque that doesn’t want to have a gay marriage, it will not – it absolutely must not – be forced to hold it. That is absolutely clear in the legislation,” Mr Cameron added.

The Government has been saying it would push for same-sex marriage in civil offices and hotels, but including churches widens the scope of the legislation. The proposals to re-define marriage have been opposed by the Catholic and Anglican churches and by Jewish, Sikh and Muslim leaders.

The Catholic Church has consistently argued that the Government is not able to offer guarantees of religious freedom because such legislation is susceptible to amendments in Parliament and to challenges under equality laws in the European Court of Human Rights.

A spokesman for the bishops’ conference said: “They’re positioning it as an issue of religious freedom, but the secondary issue is what is taught in school. What’s taught in the classroom is not

protected. In sex education and citizen classes will it become compulsory for Catholic teachers to say there is equivalence between same-sex marriage? The goalposts shift all the time. The guarantees we'll take with a pinch of salt."

The Coalition for Marriage called the Government proposals a "sham". Campaign director Colin Hart said: "The decision to ignore a petition of half a million people is disgraceful and undemocratic and goes against assurances from civil servants that all submissions would be treated equally and fairly."

Bishop Philip Egan of Portsmouth spoke of the "catastrophic consequences", saying that the Prime Minister was "luring the people of England away from their common Christian values and Christian patrimony, and forcing upon us a brave new world, artificially engineered".

Bishop Mark Davies of Shrewsbury called it "a tragic moment for British society with serious implications for religious freedom". Bishop Joseph Devine of Motherwell, in a letter to Mr Cameron, wrote: "You vacillate, ambivalent about the role you wish to perform – the disciple of David or Nero. With such a contradiction between your statements and actions, on what basis can you expect anyone – Christians in particular – to trust or respect you?"

Catholic lawyer Neil Addison, director of the Thomas More Legal Centre, said the legal changes would have a significant impact on the Church of England.

"A marriage of the Church of England is automatically a lawful marriage. In all other religious services they register separately. If they're allowing same-sex marriage, I don't know how legally an organisation registered to do marriage can refuse to do so."

He said it is likely the Catholic Church would move towards the system it has on the continent, where the civil marriage is performed separately before the church blessing.

"The Catholic Church could remove itself from marriages. That is one of the reasons why there hasn't been a problem. The real problem will be the Church of England. Any safeguards will not be relied upon in the long term."

The Labour Party has announced it will hold a free vote on the issue. Eight Labour MPs have confirmed they will oppose the change, among them Catholics Joe Benton, Jim Dobbin, Paul Murphy and Stephen Pound.

Ed West and Simon Caldwell