

Supreme Court legalises same-sex marriage across USA

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In an historic case the US Supreme Court has ruled 5-4 that same-sex couples have a legal right to marriage.

Justice Anthony Kennedy, who wrote the majority opinion, argued: "Marriage is sacred to those who live by their religions and offers unique fulfilment to those who find meaning in the secular realm. Its dynamic allows two people to find a life that could not be found alone, for a marriage becomes greater than just the two persons. Rising from the most basic human needs, marriage is essential to our most profound hopes and aspirations."

He said that prohibitions on same-sex marriage placed a "burden" on the "liberty of same-sex" couples and were contrary to "central precepts of equality".

Justice Kennedy added that gay people do not "disrespect the idea of marriage" but "respect it so deeply that they seek to find its fulfilment for themselves."

"Their hope is not to be condemned to live in loneliness, excluded from one of civilization's oldest institutions. They ask for equal dignity in the eyes of the law. The Constitution grants them that right."

The ruling requires states to provide marriage licenses to same-sex couples.

President Obama enthusiastically welcomed the decision and said it was a "big step in our march toward equality."

Chief Justice Roberts strongly criticised the decision in his dissent and told advocates of gay marriage: "do not celebrate the Constitution. It had nothing to do with it."

He dismissed the ruling as the view of "five lawyers who happen to hold commissions authorizing them to resolve legal disputes according to law." He said "five lawyers have closed the debate and enacted their own vision of marriage as a matter of constitutional law" and that the issue of marriage equality had been 'stolen' by the ruling which "cast a cloud over same-sex marriage".

NSS executive director Keith Porteous Wood said: "The ground is falling out from under the religious-right. For all intents and purposes they have lost the culture war. This is a momentous day for the civil rights of LGBT people."

The ruling was also welcomed by Americans United for Separation of Church and State who said it was a "beautiful day for civil rights and true religious liberty", but warned that it would "spur a new round of 'religious freedom' battles" as religious right groups seek to undermine the historic ruling.

Meanwhile in Northern Ireland, a challenge against the ban on gay marriage has cleared its first major legal hurdle, after a Belfast high court judge ruled that there is a sufficient case for a judicial review.

The challenge was brought by two same-sex couples, including Grainne Close and Shannon Sickles, who were the first same-sex couple to have a civil partnership in the UK.

The couple said, "we believe that religious policy and religious views shouldn't be affecting public policy."

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