

# Love & (GAY) MARRIAGE...

## Are we ready for change?



Whether you support it or not, same-sex weddings are a hot topic. *Cosmo* investigates...



**T**he tale of how Olivia, 32, and Danny, 27, got together reads like a modern Australian love story. They met on a Friday night on an inner-city dance floor in 2008. Neither of them were looking for a relationship, but there were sparks.

Within a few months of dating they were head over heels, and in September, 2010 they tied the knot in a ceremony in Sydney's Hyde Park. The romantic occasion was complete with stunning flowers, a three-tiered wedding cake and an excited gathering of 150 of their closest family and friends.

So far, so typical. Except for the fact that Olivia and Danny are both women, which means that while their marriage was celebrated by their family and friends, it is not recognised as such by the Australian government.



**THE TIDES OF CHANGE**  
The issue of same-sex marriage has now been on the gay and lesbian community's radar for a couple of decades, but it's only recently that the debate has really taken off in Australia.

Why? One reason could be the increased acceptance of same-sex couples, which is partly thanks to the vastly higher visibility of gay couples on television. In fact, just about every successful sitcom has one. Years ago it was shows like *Will & Grace* and *Sex and the City*, but today *Glee*, *Modern Family*, *Brothers & Sisters* and *Grey's Anatomy* are having a real impact on mainstream media. And no one bats an eyelid when top-rating talk-show host Ellen DeGeneres opens many of her shows by talking about life with her wife, Portia de Rossi.

Another reason, explains Ryan Heath, editor of [thegaymarriageblog.com](http://thegaymarriageblog.com), is that as same-sex unions are legalised in some areas around the globe, the prospect of the same happening here in Australia seems more likely. "Once you get the idea that you could marry, it's very hard to accept that it's OK to *not* be equal," says Heath. >



"It's an equality thing. I should have the right to marry another woman..."

GETTY IMAGES

It could also be the increasing influence of The Greens party. And The Greens member who's making the most noise on the topic is 29-year-old South Australian senator Sarah Hanson-Young, who's lobbying for the Australian Labor Party and the Liberal-National Coalition to allow their ministers a conscience vote on the issue.

## GROWING ACCEPTANCE

Attitudes towards gay marriage have certainly changed dramatically over the years. In 2004, just 38 per cent of Australians supported same-sex marriage, but recent polls show support of up to 60 per cent\*. And a recent survey conducted by *Cosmo* found that 83 per cent of readers support same-sex marriage. "There seems to be a more active community now, and a stronger voice for it," says Olivia. "Australia has come a long way in 10 years."

Senthoran Raj, a senior policy coordinator for the Gay & Lesbian Rights Lobby, says, "Being gay is no longer

## EQUAL RIGHTS FOR ALL

At the end of 2008, the Federal Government passed legislation giving same-sex de facto couples in Australia the same rights as heterosexual couples, which includes equal rights when it comes to social security, hospital visitation, taxation, superannuation and citizenship. *Isn't that enough?*, argue those against gay marriage.

Frank, 34, a UK citizen who registered for a civil union in 2007 with his Australian husband Nathan, 28, says it's important to remember that people – whether gay or straight – don't just marry for the legal benefits. They marry because they're in love, and because they want to celebrate that love with the people they deeply care about. The legal benefits help, too. "The state recognising you as a couple carries all kinds of niceties when it comes to visas, tax purposes, etc," says Frank. "It informs people around you of the seriousness of your relationship."



Frank and Nathan's weddings – the first ceremony took place at the British consulate, the second with family and close friends in Albury, NSW – awarded them the legal right to live together in either the UK or Australia, and the affirmation and support of those nearest and dearest to them. However, what their union lacks – and what an equivalent union between a straight couple would not lack – is recognition from the broader community.

"We had a great reception in Albury with our family and friends. It was quite moving. Nathan ran into a celebrant the day before, and she came and did a ceremony for us," says Frank. "It's lovely having a civil partnership, but it would be great to be able to marry. Even though it's the same in terms of the rights you have, the name is important."

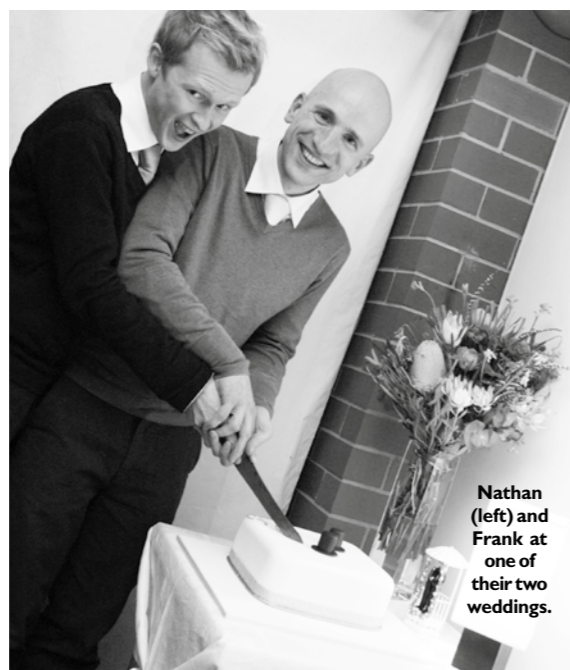
Olivia agrees. "It's an equality thing, from my point of view," she explains. "I should have the right to marry a woman, just as another woman out there has the right to marry a man. It's not political – it's just how I feel."

However, it's a right that has broader implications, says Heath. "It's so important for young gay and lesbian people in society to have role models when they grow up. It's something I didn't have growing up, and I struggled with it," he explains. "[It's confirmation] that you can have a future where you can spend your life with someone you love. There's no better way to get that message out to young gay people than to let this community be part of our biggest institution."

“There’s an active community now and a stronger voice for same-sex marriage. Australia has come a long way...”

considered an immoral perversion. Many of us have friends or family members who are same-sex attracted, and it's much harder to discriminate against someone you know personally," he says.

Heath points to the role of generational change: "If you look at the percentage of support across different age groups, 75 per cent or more of young people support gay marriage," he says. "It's not simply that older generations have become more exposed to the debate. It's that young people, who have always been comfortable with gay people, are thinking, 'OK, I'm engaged and about to get married, so why can't my best friend do it, too?'" says Heath.



Nathan (left) and Frank at one of their two weddings.



Danny (left) and Olivia had a romantic commitment ceremony in Sydney's Hyde Park in front of 150 family and friends.



## THE RULES FOR MARRIEDS

Still, not everyone agrees. For a large portion of the population, "marriage between a man and a woman" isn't just a catchphrase – it is the word of God. "As a Christian, I don't think it's what God wants for us," remarked a friend of this journalist over dinner. "But I also know that not everyone believes what I do, and I'm not sure it's my place to project that onto other people."

Christopher Pearson, an openly gay Catholic who writes for *The Australian* newspaper, believes that marriage's heterosexual tradition serves a social purpose as well. "Throughout history, society has privileged a man and a woman as the natural unit for the reproduction of society and socialisation of children," he explains. "That is essentially what marriage is about."

Unsurprisingly, Hanson-Young isn't convinced. "All we hear in defence of the system is the line that Australia's laws state that marriage is between a man and a woman," she says. "That tells us

the current, discriminatory legal definition, but doesn't give any reason why we should continue to deny equality." Not to mention that the current legal definition only came into effect in 2004.

And, as Raj points out, "It was less than a century ago that women were just seen as property for transaction or that mixed-race marriages were prohibited on the basis that having 'mixed-blood' children would be a 'violation of the natural order'." This is proof that marriage has never been a static institution – and it may be time for its next phase of evolution.

Aside from the politics, wanting to commit publicly to the love of your life is a desire many of us have in common, whether we're straight or gay. "You know when you're in love, you're just like, 'Oh my God, I've got to get married,'" explains Danny. "I felt like an absolute princess. My mum and dad walked me down the aisle. I loved it when my dad got up [and said], 'Oh, my little girl is happy. And welcome to the family.' My mum gave a really beautiful speech, too, and Liv's mother has also been wonderful and supportive. It's just about love. I love my wife." **Rachel Hills** □

### Get your voice heard

So, what's next? Hanson-Young is optimistic. "I believe Australia will have equal marriage rights within this current parliament," she says. "The fact that senior members of the government, like Senator Penny Wong, are speaking out in favour of equal marriage is a sign of a shifting in the debate."

It's clear that opinions on same-sex marriage are changing. "Currently, opinion polls estimate between 57 and 62 per cent majority support it," says Raj. However, laws haven't changed. Importantly, though, we're talking about it more than ever before – and, one thing's certain, once you get the conversation started, it's sure to be an interesting discussion. And, if it's a topic that you feel strongly about, you can get your opinion across by calling or emailing your local MP.

\*SOURCE: AUSTRALIAN MARRIAGE EQUALITY. DANNY AND OLIVIA PHOTOGRAPHY BY LES DAINTER