

Rainbow warriors

France's parliament votes to legalise gay marriage and adoption

IT WAS a moment of jubilation for some, consternation for others. After 136 hours of riotous parliamentary debate and months of demonstrations by opponents and advocates, French deputies voted on April 23rd to legalise gay marriage and adoption. The measure should be on the statute books by June, making France the 14th country to approve it. But the critics have not given up and are appealing to the Constitutional Council to reject the law.

"Marriage for all" was one of François Hollande's campaign promises. Thanks to the left's strong majority in parliament the law passed by a solid margin. The Socialists called it an historic text, comparable to the abolition of the death penalty in 1981. Mr Hollande called it part of an "irreversible movement of history". Yet it has proved extraordinarily divisive. It has reignited culture wars, and divided the country more than anything else under Mr Hollande's presidency. Even those close to him are surprised that it has prompted more street protests than any economic issue. Organisers claimed that one day in March drew 1.4m protesters on to the streets of Paris in a wave of baby-pink and blue.

The antis argue not only for preserving the traditional family but for guaranteeing "equality for children", meaning the right to a mother and a father. At times things have got nasty. Police used tear gas at one rally, after radicals infiltrated the demonstrators. Deputies on each side have accused the other of provoking homophobia. There have been several homophobic attacks, including one on a gay bar in Lille, and scuffles both inside and outside the parliament building.

Why has the legalisation of gay marriage created such a fuss? Despite its Catholic roots, France is laid back about family affairs. Mr Hollande is not married to Valérie Trierweiler, his girlfriend. France legalised abortion as long ago as 1975. Earlier this year, when Mr Hollande made the contraceptive pill available free to all 15- to 18-year-olds, it barely caused a stir.

One reason is that the protest movement found an unusual leader: a one-time humorist calling herself Frigide Barjot, whose pseudonym alone grabbed attention. Her presence galvanised the protesters and won her plenty of airtime, although some were dismayed when she was joined by the far right. She has now called for another march, on May 26th, to try to force the government to back down even though the law has passed.

Another explanation is that the political right has swung behind the movement, spotting a cause that would mobilise not only those against gay marriage but also those fed up with Mr Hollande in general. Leading right-wing politicians joined some of the marches. They included Jean-François Copé, head of the UMP party, and Henri Guaino, Nicolas Sarkozy's former presidential adviser, who inadvertently pressed the wrong button during the vote and backed the law. When calling on the French to join the protests, Mr Copé urged Mr Hollande to stop dividing the country unnecessarily and look after more important issues like the economy and jobs.

In reality, few people are likely to take advantage of the new law. In Spain, which legalised gay marriage in 2005, same-sex marriages represent only 2% of the total. Applied to France, this would suggest fewer than 5,000 gay marriages a year. Under French law, marriage confers firmer rights, particularly over inheritance, than the civil pacts that have long been open to same-sex partners. The irony is that, for heterosexual couples, such pacts are now nearly twice as popular as the increasingly unfashionable institution of marriage.

Fonte: The Economist, London, v. 407, n. 8833, p. 50-51, Apr. 27th – 3rd May 2013.