

TOM PURSGLOVE MP
CORBY & EAST NORTHAMPTONSHIRE



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

19th August 2019

Dear Constance,

RE: SAME-SEX MARRIAGE.

Thank you for your recent correspondence in respect of the *Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill*, which was debated in the House of Commons on the 8th and 9th July, and the amendments tabled relating to same-sex marriage; your comments upon which I read with great interest.

In broad terms, the purpose of this legislation is to amend the *Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018*, so as to extend the period that Northern Ireland Ministers can be appointed until the 21st October 2019, with the option of a single extension to the 13th January 2020 with the approval of both Houses of Parliament. This is necessary because of the hugely undesirable situation which persists at present, whereby the power-sharing Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly is not functioning.

As you will appreciate, the UK Government's absolute priority, quite rightly, remains the restoration of devolved government in Northern Ireland and it remains steadfast in its commitment to the *Belfast Agreement* and its successors, including the provisions setting out an inclusive, power-sharing executive. An approach that excludes representatives of either part of the community is not a sustainable way forward for Northern Ireland, hence why the talks are ongoing with a view to restoring devolved government at the earliest opportunity. Essentially, therefore, this legislation is a contingency plan, should the political parties in Northern Ireland not reach agreement during the ongoing talks.

Given this strong commitment to restoring devolution, it is hardly surprising that many MPs across Parliament, myself included, believe it would be far preferable for Northern Irish politicians, elected by the people of Northern Ireland, to take the decisions on a number of matters that were debated in relation to this legislation during its Committee Stage - the two most notable being the extension of same-sex marriage to Northern Ireland, and bringing its abortion laws in line with those of the rest of the United Kingdom.



For obvious reasons, the political situation in Northern Ireland is volatile and unique and I do have concerns that MPs in Westminster taking decisions on these matters arguably makes it harder to make progress towards restoring devolution, because it is seen, rightly or wrongly, as Westminster imposing its will on Northern Ireland. That said, I have consistently warned that unless Northern Irish politicians come together, take responsibility, and resolve the current impasse, it is inevitable these decisions will be made for them here in Westminster. As such, I hope the passing of this Bill into law will re-energise the talks and help to spur positive progress towards restoring devolved government.

In relation to extending same-sex marriage to Northern Ireland, you will see that I voted in favour of New Clause 1 (NC1) in the name of Conor McGinn. This new clause "*would require UK secondary legislation to extend same-sex marriage to Northern Ireland unless a Northern Ireland Executive is formed by 21 October 2019.*"

At present, Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK or Ireland which still bans marriage for same-sex couples, but in November 2015, a majority of MLAs in the Assembly voted to support equal marriage, and the UK Government has always been clear about its support of same-sex marriage for the whole of the UK.

The fundamental position remains, however, that same-sex marriage is a fully devolved issue in Northern Ireland, and again, I would make the point that I would prefer for Northern Irish politicians to take responsibility for this and make the decision positively for themselves, but as I have said, I voted in favour of NC1.

Once again, thank you for having taken the time to contact me and if I can ever be of any further assistance to you then please do not hesitate to contact me again.

With best wishes,

**TOM PURSGLOVE MP
MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT
CORBY & EAST NORTHAMPTONSHIRE**