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## "Gay Marriage"



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### Message

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## "Gay Marriage"

### The most famous "gay marriage"?

Sir Elton John, the famous singer, got married to his long-time partner in a civil marriage ceremony held in Windsor Guildhall on 21st December 2005. Nothing special about that, you might say, until you discover that Sir Elton's marriage partner is a man.

Fifteen days previously the law in England and Wales had changed to allow civil partnerships to take place between people of the same sex and such was the demand for this change in the law that Sir Elton was far from being the only person to take advantage of it: 700 other people tied the knot in same-sex partnerships that day across England and Wales. Fifteen days elapsed between the law coming into force and the first "gay marriages" being performed as the couple has to declare publicly, in writing, their intent to marry, at least two weeks before the ceremony takes place.

### When is a "gay marriage" not a "gay marriage"?

A civil partnership in England and Wales is a legally recognised partnership between two people of the same sex which grants the participants new legal status as far as employment, pensions and inheritances are concerned. The partners in the arrangement become next of kin to each other, as in a heterosexual marriage. The new law also alters the civil partners' rights in relation to immigration and nationality. Nevertheless, the partnership is not legally the same as a marriage, according to UK law. This is partly due to the fact that the ceremony itself does not need to be conducted in public and the participants do not need to be present together at the same time to

sign the necessary documents. Hence the terms "gay marriage" and "gay wedding" have no legal meaning although some couples choose to use them.

### **How popular are civil partnerships?**

According to reliable sources they are very popular and likely to become more so in the future. In the UK the government predicts that between 4,000 and 5,000 civil partnerships will have been formalised. Some sources predict that in five years' time the number will have risen to as many as 20,000.

### **Where can same-sex partners "get married"?**

Many European countries have introduced legislation to officially recognise same-sex partnerships. Britain is only the latest in quite a long line of countries to allow "gay weddings". As long ago as 1989, Denmark became the first country to give same-sex partners the same rights as married couples. Norway, Sweden and Iceland followed suit in 1996. In 2001 Germany began to allow same-sex couples to register as "life partners", though this arrangement was not a full civil partnership. In the same year however, the Netherlands passed laws offering full civil marriage rights to same-sex couples and in 2002 Finland followed their example, albeit with a slightly less sweeping change in the law. The following year Belgium began to allow "gay marriages" too and by July 2005 Spain had decided to permit full marriage for same-sex couples including rights of child adoption. France has had a form of civil contract for partners who live together, regardless of sex, since 1999 but it does not afford the same rights as a marriage. In 2004, when a daring French mayor performed the first "gay marriage" in the country, the union was declared void by a French court. Apart from the UK, the latest country to institute some form of legislation to cover the rights of same-sex partners is Luxembourg, which introduced new laws in 2004.

Outside Europe "gay marriages" have been allowed across Canada since July 2005, in Argentina since 2003, and in New Zealand since the end of 2004. South Africa's High Court has recently announced that denying gay people the right to marry is unconstitutional and has ordered parliament to introduce legislation allowing same-sex partnerships before the end of 2006. "Gay marriages" are permitted in some states in the USA, for example, Massachusetts. Vermont was the first to permit them, giving same-sex partners the chance to make civil unions in 2000. In California, however, an attempt to legalise same-sex partnerships was stopped by the State Governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger.

**Quick Quiz:** Read the clues below and write the solutions on a piece of paper. Then take the first letter of each answer and rearrange them to find the hidden word connected with this Talking Point.

1. Sir \_\_\_\_\_'s marriage partner is a man.
2. The law in England and Wales changed to allow civil partnerships to take \_\_\_\_\_ between people of the same sex.

3. 700 other people \_\_\_\_\_ the knot in same-sex partnerships that day across England and Wales.
4. A civil partnership in England and Wales is a legally \_\_\_\_\_ partnership between two people of the same sex which grants the participants new legal status as far as employment, pensions and inheritances are concerned.
5. The partners in the arrangement become \_\_\_\_\_ of kin to each other, as in a heterosexual marriage.
6. In 2001 the Netherlands passed laws offering full civil marriage \_\_\_\_\_ to same-sex couples.
7. Outside Europe "gay marriages" have been allowed across Canada since July 2005, in \_\_\_\_\_ since 2003, and in New Zealand since the end of 2004.

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