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Same sex marriage ends the debate, leads the coverage

Marcus O'Donnell

University of Wollongong, marcuso@uow.edu.au

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Abstract

Kevin Rudd's promise to introduce legislation for "marriage equality" within the first 100 days of his government, if elected, was one of the few concrete new promises to emerge in the election debate.

This promise, which came at the end of the debate, led the news in a number of debate round-ups internationally and locally. Britain's Independent had a story online within half an hour of the debate's conclusion headlined: "Australia election debate: Kevin Rudd promises to legalise same-sex marriage" and news.com.au had a story: "Rudd commits to gay marriage".

It is interesting that this issue, which hasn't played large in the campaign so far, was an issue raised in a debate that had limited time and only explicitly tackled a handful of issues such as: the economy and taxes, asylum seekers, the NBN, transport, aged care, and climate change.

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Given its placement at the end of the debate, it seemed to fill the heart warming/human novelty story that wraps a classic news bulletin.

Rudd answered very strongly and positively. Abbott could only obfuscate awkwardly. Rudd talked about the reality of same sex relationships as being equal to his own relationship with his wife Therese. Abbott pointed to the presence of his lesbian sister.

But apart from the fanfare of his 100 day proposal, Rudd played the point carefully and very tactically.

He seemed to deliberately use the phrase "marriage equality" rather than "same-sex marriage" which is how debate moderator David Speers framed the question. This makes me wonder whether Labor focus testing has indicated this framing is a way of defusing the issue among conservative Labor supporters. He promised to introduce legislation within 100 days and to follow the current arrangement for Labor members to have a conscience vote. He forthrightly challenged Abbott to allow his colleagues a similar free vote.

So he used his support for same-sex marriage as a way of making Abbott look "unfair" and against "equality". But he knows full well that under present arrangements, with a Labor conscience vote and Liberal opposition, no matter what the outcome of the election, any such legislation would be unlikely to pass.

So no, he didn't promise to "legalise same-sex marriage" as *The Independent's* headline spruiked. The news.com.au story made this very point:

While Rudd's support on the issue has earned him a few extra votes, no one party can deliver reform and he we will need to follow in the footsteps of prime ministers David Cameron (UK) and John Key (NZ) by reaching across the aisle and collaborating with all sides of the political spectrum.

It will be interesting to see how this issue plays out in the media and the campaign over the next few weeks.

Julia Gillard concocted her anti same-sex marriage stance in the hope of firming up her conservative credentials in marginal electorates and with right wing Labor unions.

Kevin Rudd has been a convincing advocate for same-sex marriage since his turn around on the issue a few months back but like his predecessor he seems to be using the issue as a tactical issue rather than taking any decisive action to ensure real change.