

Continued from Page 27

AUSTRALIA

The government of Australian Prime Minister John Howard plans to insert the words "man" and "woman" into the Marriage Act to keep from having to recognize the unions of same-sex couples who get hitched abroad. Three Australian same-sex couples who married in Canada have filed with the Family Court for recognition of their unions.

"I realize in public life what you do sometimes offends some people," Howard said. "It's not designed to do that. But I equally don't apologize for putting to the law the simple proposition that a marriage is a union between a man and a woman, hopefully for life. That doesn't in any way prevent people having same-sex relationships. It doesn't express a view on whether they should have same-sex relationships."

The legislation, to be introduced in Parliament by Attorney General Philip Ruddock, also will prohibit gays from adopting children from overseas. At the same time, it will expand gay rights by allowing a same-sex partner to inherit his or her partner's retirement pension without paying the 30 percent tax that applies to any beneficiary other than a spouse, de facto spouse or child.

"The Howard government is clearly using homophobia to divert attention of the Australian public from more serious issues that should be concerning the government," said

Somali Cerise, spokeswoman for the queer lobby group Equal Rights Network. "Howard is using equality as a political football to create a crisis where one does not exist."

The group welcomed the proposed changes to superannuation (pension) legislation, calling them "long overdue."

"It is a case of give with one hand and take away with the other," Equal Rights Network's Matthew Loader said. "The fact that they have suddenly decided to act upon superannuation now, just before a federal election, seems opportunistic. There has been...legislation in Parliament supported by Labor, Democrats and the Greens since 1998 on this issue, and the Howard government has refused to act."



Aussie activist Somali Cerise accused Prime Minister John Howard of "using equality as a political football"

Leading activist Rodney Croome of the Tasmanian Gay and Lesbian Rights Group said the government may have bundled superannuation reform with the anti-gay measures to increase the likelihood the latter will pass. "The fact that the government has had many opportunities to support this reform since 1996 and has knocked it back every time strongly suggests that its current superannuation reform proposal is about sweetening a legislative agenda which is otherwise bitterly sour with prejudice." □

Compiled by REX WOCKNER, who has reported for the gay press since 1985. He has a bachelor's degree in journalism from Drake University and started his career as a radio reporter.

FRENCH MAYOR PERFORMS 'ILLEGAL' GAY MARRIAGE

Noël Mamère, a member of France's Parliament and mayor of the Bordeaux suburb of Bègles, conducted the marriage of a gay couple June 5 despite the national government's threats to prosecute him.

Shop worker Bertrand Charpentier, 31, and nurse Stéphane Chapin, 34, arrived at Bègles City Hall in a Rolls-Royce to the cheers of gay activists. About 200 riot police kept the gays and a small number of right-wing protesters from clashing.

Reports described the scene as a "media frenzy." "Your marriage is a first, and I hope it will become something normal," Mamère told the couple.

"I think the fight I am leading is a political fight...for the defense of an open society, to

combat all forms of discrimination including homophobia," he told reporters earlier.

Shortly after the wedding, Interior Minister Dominique de Villepin launched a "sanctions procedure" against Mamère. He could be suspended, fired or fined \$1,840.

Justice Minister Dominique Perben immediately declared that the couple's marriage would be voided. If that happens, Charpentier and Chapin have promised an appeal to the European Court of Human Rights.

"If we have a message to give, it is: Be like us, be tolerant, love each other and pursue your dreams to the end," Charpentier told reporters after the wedding, according to Reuters. "We are going to go and buy a house and get on with our lives."

Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin also denounced the wedding.

"The Civil Code does not allow or authorize the marriage of two people of the same sex," he said. "Any elected official who does not respect the law in this respect, who does not respect the Civil Code, lays himself or herself open to the punishments provided for by the law."

French gays have had access to Civil Solidarity Pacts since 1999, but they do not carry all the rights of matrimony. Full marriage is available to same-sex couples only in the Netherlands; Belgium; the Canadian provinces of British Columbia, Ontario and Quebec; and the U.S. state of Massachusetts.

—RW □



Bègles Mayor Noël Mamère (right) presides over the marriage of Stéphane Chapin and Bertrand Charpentier on June 5 in France

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