

Rights groups, churches waiting for same-sex marriage decision

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OTTAWA - The Supreme Court will offer its opinion today on whether Canada should become one of the first countries in the world to legalize same-sex marriage, a decision being closely watched by religious, traditional family and gay rights groups.

The federal government has asked the country's top court to offer its non-binding opinion on proposed legislation that would legally change the definition of marriage.

Justice Minister Irwin Cotler said Wednesday the government will bring legislation to Parliament as early as next week if the court agrees with the proposed bill, which Ottawa drafted after a June 2003 Ontario court ruling allowed same-sex marriage.

- FROM DEC. 8, 2004: [Cotler expects Supreme Court go-ahead for same-sex marriage](#)

Groups await decision

Religious, traditional family and same-sex rights groups from across the country will be watching Thursday's ruling.

Derek Rogusky, with Focus o-n the Family, says it's important to maintain the traditional definition of marriage.

"If we begin to start suggesting that any two people can parent the same way as a mother and father can, then we really are suggesting to Canadians that fatherhood and motherhood are really empty concepts and that gender doesn't matter," said Rogusky.

Tom Reilly of o-ntario's Conference of Catholic Bishops says he'll be looking for the court's opinion o-n whether churches will be protected from having to perform same-sex marriages if it opposes their faith.

"Catholic priests or the Catholic church shouldn't be forced to

marry people that don't meet the standards that they would set," said Reilly.

Gays and lesbians say they just want the government to move ahead with the issue.

Joe Varnell and Kevin Bourassa married in January 2001, the first gay men in Canada to legally marry in a church.

Varnell says sending the proposed bill to the Supreme Court was a "political exercise" to prevent debate on the politically divisive issue.

"This Supreme Court reference is...the last opportunity for excuses from our justice minister and prime minister and will force them finally to...present legislation in Parliament," said Varnell.

Liberals hold thin majority

Conservative Leader Stephen Harper, whose party is split on the issue, says Parliament should make the decision, not the courts.

The Liberals hold a thin minority government, with 134 of the 308 seats in the House of Commons, but should have the support of most or all of the 19 New Democrat MPs and 54 Bloc Québécois MPs.

NDP Leader Jack Layton has said his caucus will vote in favour of the bill, while Harper says it will be a free vote.

Ontario Liberal MP John McKay says a number of Liberals don't agree with the government's position.

If the bill is passed, says McKay, "people who take my view will be deemed by the government to be the equivalent of racists."

Along with Ontario, court rulings have now made same-sex marriage legal in British Columbia, Quebec, Saskatchewan,

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Nova Scotia, Manitoba and the Yukon.

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