

Grits break ranks; same-sex vote holds

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(P.S: All highlightings etc below are mine - RJ)

OTTAWA - The government's controversial same-sex marriage bill easily passed second reading in the Commons yesterday by a 164-137 vote, but there were signs it has no future with the Conservatives poised to defeat the minority Liberal government in a confidence vote.

Thirty-five Liberal members of Parliament broke ranks to align themselves with Conservative leader Stephen Harper against the legislation, which would make Canada one of only three countries to legally recognize marriage for gay couples.

Only four Conservatives, including former leadership contender Belinda Stronach, sided with the government.

The legislation, which went through 12 days of Commons debate following its introduction in Parliament last February, will now undergo public hearings.

The hearings will take place before a committee the House struck to look primarily at legal aspects of the bill.

However, even though the committee was expected to begin hearings soon after a planning meeting as early as today, Mr. Harper made it clear he has other plans.

"I don't expect the bill to make it through this Parliament," he told reporters following a caucus meeting earlier in the day.

The government has managed to forestall a confidence motion in the House since Mr. Harper vowed last week to "put this government out of its misery," but Conservative insiders indicated Wednesday they can orchestrate a government defeat by at least next week.

A spokesman for a coalition of groups supporting the bill, Alex Munter, said after the vote the Conservatives and the Bloc Quebecois should follow the wish of the majority of Canadians, according to recent polls, and keep Parliament in session.

"I am amongst the overwhelming majority of Canadians who feel there is work for Parliament to do, and the equal-marriage bill is part of that work," he said.

Liberal MP Pat O'Brien, an opponent of the legislation who earlier won a promise from Prime Minister Paul Martin for full public hearings after he hinted he would leave the party over the issue, said he expects Mr. Martin to live up to the agreement.

"I was assured personally by the Prime Minister that there will be meaningful public hearings and I know him to be a man of his word (Please don't fall off your chair laughing - RJ) and I fully expect that to happen," Mr. O'Brien said.

Conservative MPs *James Moore, Gerald Keddy and Jim Prentice* joined Ms. *Stronach* in support of the bill. A handful of Bloc Quebecois MPs opposed it, and *NDP MP Beverley Desjarlais*, who earlier threatened to vote against it, *abstained*.

The ranks of Liberals who opposed the bill included several from Toronto ridings that have large populations of recent immigrants to Canada, many of whom oppose same-sex marriage for religious reasons.

The bill includes a specific allowance stipulating churches will not be forced to solemnize gay marriages, but opponents argue it will not be long before the courts strike the provision down under equality rights guarantees in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The courts in seven provinces and one territory have ruled it is against the Charter's equality provisions to deny marriage to same-sex couples.

Legal marriage is available only to opposite-sex couples in Alberta, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Nunavut and the Northwest Territories.

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