

Tory rebels want a referendum on gay marriage as 150 MPs threaten to wreck new law

- National vote being called on to ensure new law has full backing of the public
- Opponents seek amendments to the bill including one to protect churches

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Decisions: David Cameron's Coalition may have to offer the UK public a referendum on gay marriage

Tory rebels are demanding a referendum on gay marriage – and have threatened to wreck the Coalition's attempts to make it law if they do not get their way.

Up to 150 MPs are said to support a call for a national vote on same-sex weddings to ensure that such a historic change in legislation goes ahead only with full public support.

Without it, opponents say they could torpedo the Government's gay wedding Bill with a range of amendments such as allowing churches and registrars to opt out if they have strong religious or principled objections.

Other demands include giving religious schools and teachers the right to refuse to teach the topic, and making sure at least 51 per cent of voters approve the legislation in a national referendum.

David Burrowes, Tory MP for Enfield Southgate, said: 'Despite 13 sittings of the Bill committee and a majority of Conservative MPs voting against the Bill, the Government has not amended one word of it.

'It has steamrollered ahead and ignored all opposition on its path.'

Polls have regularly revealed broad public support for same-sex marriages, but rebel MPs say the Tories need to respond to the success in the recent local elections by UKIP, which opposes the issue. Whitehall sources say they will not accept the amendments because Culture Secretary Maria Miller – who is pushing the legislation through Parliament – believes it would set a precedent for public servants to opt out of duties they object to.

However, ministers are expected to offer a compromise in which registrars with strong objections could take on other duties, unless there is a shortage of people to marry same-sex couples.



Legislation: Culture Secretary Maria Miller is an advocate of gay marriage and is helping the government push through the law

A deal could also allow teachers to avoid the promotion of gay marriage in classrooms and even let them voice personal objections.

However, they would still have to teach children that marriage between same-sex couples was within the law.

The Government is expected to reject the national referendum clause.

Tory and Labour MPs who abstained in February's key vote on the Bill have indicated they could oppose it this time unless there is greater protection for registrars and others with conscientious objections.

Some Labour MPs with religious concerns are considering voting for some of the amendments.



Divisive topic: Campaigners in the UK and abroad have taken to the streets to support or oppose the legalisation of gay marriage; here two people embrace during a 'yes' demonstration in London earlier this year



Controversial issue: Thousands of people in France take part in a demonstration last month against same-sex marriage and adoption

Other possible clauses tabled by Tory rebels include the protection of those who discuss or criticise same-sex marriage from prosecution on grounds of discrimination.

They have also called for straight couples to be given the right to a civil partnership, a move which ministers are expected to oppose.

Tim Loughton, the former children's minister, said: 'If the Bill is to go through, same-sex weddings and civil partnerships will be available to gay couples, but there will be clear discrimination against opposite-sex couples who don't want to get married but do want to enter into a formal relationship through civil partnerships.'