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## **'Historic advance' for equality as Civil Partnership Bill passed**

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SAME-SEX couples will be able to avail of legally-binding civil partnerships for the first time from next year.

The Dáil last night completed its work on the Civil Partnership Bill, which is expected to be signed into law in the autumn.

The Bill passed all stages in the Dáil shortly after 8.40pm, without the need for a vote, and will be sent to the Seanad. There was applause from the public gallery.

Under the terms of the Bill, marriage-like benefits will be extended to gay and lesbian couples across a range of areas such as property, social welfare, succession, maintenance, pensions and tax.

Once the Civil Partnership legislation is fully enacted and implemented, gay and lesbian couples will be able to register their relationship before a registrar, as long as the partners are over 18 and not involved in any other unions.

Couples will be required to provide registrars with three months' notice of a planned civil partnership, as is the case with civil or religious weddings. Any registrars who refuse to officiate may be prosecuted.

As with divorce laws, courts will be able to dissolve relationships as long as the partners have lived apart for two of the previous three years.

The legislation also provides for the legal recognition of civil partnerships, or their equivalent, obtained in other jurisdictions.

In addition, a court-administered redress scheme is due to be established for both straight and gay unmarried cohabiting couples who have been living together for five years or more.

At present, cohabiting couples – who account for one in 12 of all family units – have few rights under our family laws. Government officials say no formal date for the beginning of civil partnerships has been agreed, as the legislation has yet to be finalised by the Seanad. This is expected to occur within the next fortnight and the legislation is due to be signed into law in the autumn.

In addition, two more pieces of related legislation – covering social welfare and tax changes – must be enacted before civil partnerships are made available. These changes are expected to be signed into law either late this year or early next year. Officials expect civil partnerships will be available shortly afterwards.

The Gay and Lesbian Equality Network (Glen) last night welcomed the progress of the Bill through the Dáil as a “historic advance” and a further stepping stone towards full equality. Glen spokesman Brian Sheehan pointed out while the legislation was important, there were still key omissions. For example, it did not provide any right for same-sex couples with children to be legally recognised as joint parents, he said.

The legislation has been criticised by Catholic bishops who say it undermines the institution of marriage. They have also called for a “freedom of conscience” provision which would allow registrars to opt out of officiating at same-sex unions.

Minister for Justice Dermot Ahern has insisted the law has been carefully drafted to ensure that it does not undermine the constitutional position of marriage.

Glen said there is democratic consensus for the measures which, according to opinion polls, are overwhelmingly supported by the public.