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Election win could advance wedding 2:30 p.m. - Ont.'s gay health minister may bump up date if Harper wins

By the Canadian Press

TORONTO — If Conservative Leader Stephen Harper wins the federal election, it could mean wedding bells sooner rather than later for Ontario Health Minister George Smitherman.

Smitherman, who is gay, said today he and his partner Christopher Peloso have talked about moving up their wedding date if the Conservatives are victorious next Monday.

"I'm one of those Canadians that does feel a little bit at the risk of having rights that I currently possess taken away," Smitherman said. "I never thought that would happen in my country."

The federal Liberals legalized same-sex marriage last summer, but Harper has said he would allow a free vote in Parliament asking MPs if they want to scrap the law if the Conservatives win the federal election.

"The reality is for some Canadians who currently possess certain rights, these rights seem to be less certain — put at risk — by a Harper election, so we're going to watch that play," Smitherman said.

"If there is a risk to the ability for same-sex partners to marry and express their love for one another that way, then we're going to work to avail ourselves of the opportunity to get married."

Smitherman said he and his partner are considering getting married this year, which is earlier than originally planned.

He's not the only one with this idea.

Toronto-based wedding planner Melissa Samborski said seven of her same-sex clients have moved up their wedding dates to 2006 from 2007 solely because of the threat posed by a potential Conservative victory.

"A wedding is a wedding, so for them they just want it done and on that day they don't want politics surrounding ... their day," said Samborski, who started up One Fine Day Event Planning and Design Inc. two years ago.

However, if the Conservatives win and repeal the law, Samborski said she's also concerned about what it will mean financially, since about 40 per cent of her business is based on planning same-sex marriages.

"Now you may lose a market because our government doesn't see that it's right," she said.

Legalizing same-sex marriage told the world that Canada was an inclusive, tolerant and respectful country, said Laurie Arron, director of advocacy for Egale Canada, a gay and lesbian rights organization.

"Taking away our right to marry, kicking us out of the marriage club, if you will, would send a terrible message about Canadian values and what we stand for," Arron said.

The tolerance message is a key part of the business for Phil Connell, founder and president of Hudson Nuptials, which focuses on wedding planning for out-of-country same-sex couples.

Even the threat of revoking same-sex marriage rights tells gays and lesbians they're "second-class citizens," he said, and means he can no longer lure customers to Canada with the message that its top politicians are tolerant.

"That's a giant step back," Connell said.

A Conservative victory is a concern, but it doesn't mean there should be a rush to the altar, Arron said.

“Certainly there’s fear out there,” he said. “We’re not telling people to get married right away.”

“Ultimately, it’s clear that it won’t work to try and take away equal marriage” since courts in eight provinces have already ruled it’s unconstitutional to exclude same-sex couples from civil marriage, Arron added.

Brenda Cossman, a law professor at the University of Toronto, was one of 104 professors who wrote a letter to Harper earlier this week demanding he first refer any such legislation to the Supreme Court of Canada to prevent “utter legal chaos” with earlier provincial court rulings.

The Supreme Court will likely rule in favour of same-sex marriage, as the lower courts have done, Cossman said. That would mean Harper would have to use the notwithstanding clause to enact a law stating marriage can only be between a man and a woman — something he has said he won’t do.

Read more in Thursday's Edmonton Sun.