

# Canadian court OKs gay rites: Nonbinding opinion throws issue into Parliament

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Canadian religious groups that oppose gay marriage are trying to make the best of a Supreme Court ruling that paves the way for Canada to become the third nation besides Belgium and the Netherlands to allow nationwide recognition of gay nuptials.

The court's opinion, in a clarification sought by Prime Minister Paul Martin, said December 8 that the federal government has exclusive authority to define marriage and said a proposed law to allow same-sex marriages is constitutional.

The court, however, also ruled that Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms protects religious groups from being forced to perform gay weddings against their beliefs.

Canada's largest Protestant denomination, the United Church of Canada, welcomed the Supreme Court ruling.

The decision by the high court's nine justices came 18 months after the federal government under former Prime Minister Jean Chrétien abandoned its fight against gay marriage when courts in Ontario, British Columbia and Quebec declared traditional marriage laws unconstitutional.

Groups against same-sex marriage said the court's nonbinding opinion throws the issue squarely to Parliament, where evangelicals predicted defeat. "I believe people are going to stand up and say enough is enough is enough," Charles McVety, president of Canada Christian College in Toronto, told Canadian Press.

Parliament may take up the proposed bill early in 2005 to allow gay weddings in city halls, courthouses and religious institutions that choose to perform them. Martin's Liberal Party may have trouble holding all of its 134 votes in the 308-seat House of

Commons, but it should win the support of most or all of the left-leaning 19 New Democrat and 54 Bloc Quebecois members. -*Religion News Service*