

Time to move on

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With last night's vote in favour of same-sex marriage, one of the most divisive parliamentary debates in memory came to an end. Good. For too long, a relatively minor issue that will have little impact on most Canadians has dominated political discourse at the expense of other, more pressing matters. It's time to move on.

That is not to say that the outcome was our preferred choice. As we have argued previously, a better option would have been for the government to get out of the marriage business entirely. Moreover, now that Parliament has come down decisively in support of same-sex marriage, there are further rights in need of protection.

Given that marriage falls under the provinces' jurisdiction, or that of their human rights commissions, it is incumbent upon provincial governments to follow up on the marriage bill's protections of religious freedoms by passing legislation of their own. Not only should they work to ensure that religious leaders are not forced to perform same-sex weddings against their will, they should also protect the right of public servants to opt out of performing civil same-sex services if it offends their beliefs.

At the federal level, however, the summer break will offer an opportunity for all concerned to direct their efforts toward more urgent matters. This applies, in particular, to Conservative leader Stephen Harper, who has decided to make gay marriage the focal point of his party's efforts in recent months, taking greater umbrage at the bill's passage than, say, at the Liberal-NDP budget.

Mr. Harper's opposition to the bill has no doubt been principled, and perhaps even strategically sound (though that remains to be seen). But if he continues to press forward on it now that the legislation has been passed, he risks the Conservatives being defined by a single policy stance -- and one that is unpopular in large parts of the country at that. Far better, both for Conservatives and for the public good, that he turn his focus to policy matters the current government has shamefully ignored -- notably health care reform.

This month's Supreme Court decision opening the door to private health insurance represents a tremendous opportunity for the Conservatives. With the Liberals having bizarrely dismissed the decision out of hand, and with Health Minister Ujjal Dosanjh now picking fights with the Canadian Medical Association because doctors dared suggest a role for the private sector in medicare, a Conservative campaign in favour of greater flexibility within the public system could not be more timely.

There are other priorities, too, for the Conservatives -- notably lowering taxes, improving productivity, giving direction to our foreign policy and re-establishing some semblance of order to federal-provincial relations. What is essential is to stop letting a single hot-button issue rule the day. We hope all parties will return from the summer break ready to move forward, not look back.