

Gay activists try to halt referendum

Australia

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Gay rights advocates in Australia have launched an 11th-hour attempt to block a referendum on same-sex marriage after homophobic groups plastered hate posters across the main cities.

The postal vote is due to start in a week but activists argue that it is "hate-filled" and demeaning and are asking the High Court to block it.

Australia is one of the few western democracies that continues to outlaw gay marriage, although opinion polls show that most Australians are in favour of legalising it. Activists argue that MPs should decide the matter.

The campaign against gay marriage has been championed by Tony Abbott, the former prime minister.

A neo-Nazi group put up posters in

Melbourne claiming that gay marriage "enabled" paedophilia. In Sydney pamphlets aimed at the Chinese community depicted a girl shielding her eyes from gay couples and urged people to withdraw support for the Labor Party, which supports same-sex marriage.

The High Court has begun an urgent hearing on the referendum. One legal argument to block the vote is that the government is behaving in an unconstitutional manner.

It should have applied to parliament for the £75 million required to pay for the vote. However, in an attempt to prevent conservative MPs from blocking it, the government defined the vote as a survey handled by the statistics office, circumventing the need for a parliamentary vote.

The court's full bench of seven judges will hear two cases opposing the vote.

Some constitutional lawyers believe that by the weekend the court could stop tens of millions of ballot papers being posted to Australian homes.

Malcolm Turnbull, the prime minister, who has declared his support for gay marriage, promised to hold the vote after pressure from conservative MPs. If the majority of Australian voters support gay marriage, parliament would rule on the issue by holding a vote among MPs by the end of this year.

Mr Abbott, a Catholic who studied for the priesthood before going into politics, is leading the public case against gay marriage, arguing that it threatens the sanctity of marriage.

His sister, Christine Forster, a councillor in Sydney, is engaged to her female partner. He said last month that a vote against gay marriage would also be a vote against political correctness.

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