

## **Britain to Allow Same-Sex Civil Unions**

From AP News on February 21, 2005

LONDON (AP) -- Same-sex partners in Britain will be able to enter into civil unions from December, joining gays in parts of Europe and the United States in obtaining many of the rights enjoyed by married people, the government said Monday.

The Civil Partnerships Bill passed by Parliament last year gives same-sex couples the right to form legally binding partnerships and entitles them to some of the same tax and pension rights married couples have.

Starting Dec. 5, couples will be able to notify the register office at their local council that they intend to form civil partnerships. After a 15-day waiting period, they will sign an official partnership document in front of witnesses.

``This legislation is going to make a real difference to these couples and it demonstrates the government's commitment to equality and social justice," said Deputy Minister for Women and Equality Jacqui Smith.

``It opens the way to respect, recognition and justice for those who have been denied it for too long."

The government said some register offices have already started receiving inquiries from same-sex couples.

Separately Monday, the armed services said they will allow same-sex couples with registered partnerships to share family quarters.

``We will be complying with the law. We are obliged to give equal treatment to gay and lesbian partnerships" under the new act, said Royal Navy spokesman Anton Hanney, adding that same-sex couples in the armed services already enjoy equal pension rights.

The new act does not use the term ``marriage," but among other benefits it grants same-sex couples rights to their partners' pensions; gives them next-of-kin status; and exempts them from paying inheritance tax on a partner's home. It also will require partners to provide maintenance for each other and any children in the case of a break-up.

Partners will be able to dissolve the agreement in a form of divorce settlement.

Officials at the Department of Trade and Industry estimate there will be more than 42,000 same-sex partnership agreements in place by 2050.

``This is the moment we fought so hard for," said Ben Summerskill, chief executive of the gay rights group Stonewall. ``At last, lesbian and gay couples can begin to plan their future lives together."

Nine European Union members allow same-sex partnerships, beginning with Denmark, which legislated for the unions in 1989.