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ASSISTANT MINISTER FOR DEFENCE
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ASSISTANT MINISTER FOR THE REPUBLIC**

SPEECH

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**GOULBURN SOLDIERS CLUB
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***** CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY *****

Acknowledgements omitted.

Goulburn represents the ambition and belief of the Australian people.

Home to the Mulwaree people and proclaimed Australia's first inland city in 1863.

Your home has been an agricultural powerhouse and can also lay claim to one of Australia's first country newspapers.

Goulburn's pioneer settlers came with a belief in a better life beyond Sydney and showed the courage and foresight to look beyond Australia's main city.

It was through this ambition, in defiance of this harsh and unforgiving land, that Australia developed into one of the world's most attractive and vibrant democracies.

And with this ambition and vision we saw Australia lead the way in social and democratic progress for its citizens.

The Australian people pioneered the advancement of civil and political rights for all.

Australian governments were among the first in the world to grant universal suffrage.

Workers seeking fairer wages and conditions formed some of the world's first trade unions and fought to achieve the world's first 8-hour day.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians fought for decades to push governments and the legal system to recognise their cultural connections to their land as a source of their being and belief.

Australians have always had a belief in our ability to affect social progress and improved democratic rights.

This belief defines who we are and the pride we have in the society we have built.

We believe we should never stand still...we can always do better.

Friends, I say it's time for Australians to believe in ourselves once again.

The Albanese Labor Government wants Australians to embark on a journey of belief.

It's a belief that we can make better decisions and improve lives if we listen to First Australians.

It's a belief that we can govern ourselves and make independent decisions about our future.

It's also a belief that we can grow as a nation and strengthen our democracy if we have an Australian as our head of state.

The first step we want Australians to take on this journey is a constitutionally enshrined Voice to Parliament.

Australians derive their rights, freedom and liberty from our Constitution.

Our Constitution is our Federation's birth certificate.

It established our system of government. It set the rules of how we make decisions and the rights of citizens.

We have not updated our Constitution to reflect our evolving democracy and consider advancing the rights of citizens to achieve a stronger democracy.

For some time, Australia has stood still when it comes to democratic progress and constitutional reform.

There's been no referendum since 1999.

And there's been no successful referendum since 1977.

Indeed, it's been the longest period we have gone without the government consulting Australians about updating Constitution.

It means that anyone under 40 has never voted in a referendum and anyone under 60 has never participated in a successful referendum.

As one constitutional scholar recently highlighted, there have been just 8 out of 44 successful constitutional amendments in Australia since Federation.

And it's because of this relative difficulty of passing constitutional amendments that our nation was dubbed the "frozen continent".

That assessment was made by Jeffrey Sawyer back in 1967 and it remains as relevant today.

We have many rights - the right to vote, the right to a fair trial, the right to practice religion and many more, all derived from our Constitution.

But our Constitution has a significant flaw – it is not truthful about our history.

It does not recognise, or worse still, it does not allow First Nations Australians the right to be heard and consulted about matters and policies affecting them.

It's an outdated untruth about Australian history and the influence of First Nations' culture in Australia.

First Nations Australians have had a connection to their land for millennia.

"We don't own the land, the land owns us."

That's what an elder from La Perouse, in the community that I represent, once told me.

First Nations Australians are humanity's greatest survival story.

They have a deep cultural connection to country forged over thousands of years and have managed to survive on the harshest continent on Earth.

They have developed a system of customs and law and have been able to sustain the environment.

There's a deep spirituality to that connection.

At Uluru, First Nations Australians spoke up.

They came together and demanded the right to be heard about government decisions that affect their people and their land.

They spoke as one voice about the importance of truth telling and respect for their views.

Australia has a moral obligation to grant that right.

At various times, Australian Governments have established bodies that have provided a voice for First Nations Australians.

But governments have also taken that voice away, as the Howard government did when they shut down the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission.

At Uluru, First Nations Australians said enough is enough.

We deserve the right to be consulted and heard about issues that affect our people, on our land.

Justifiably they want the right to be talked with, not talked to. They want a voice that cannot be removed by politics, and the only way to guarantee that right to be consulted and heard is to enshrine the Voice in the Constitution.

I believe if we grant this right, in the Constitution, all Australians will benefit over time from a deeper understanding and appreciation of First Nations anthropology, issues and aspirations which will be a source of greater pride in our nation and people.

A First Nations Voice to Parliament will strengthen reconciliation, will strengthen our society, and will advance our democracy.

It's the first and necessary step to a mature and independent nation.

But we should not stop there.

On any journey after the first step comes the second.

That second step is instilling a belief that Australian can grow as a nation....

that we can become truly independent and make our own decisions.....

that we can take the final step to nationhood by becoming a republic and having one of our own as our head of state.

We are a mature, independent nation.

We have our own system of government.

We have a unique and remarkable culture and identity

And Australian governments govern for Australians

We should reflect this in our Constitution by having an Australian as or head of state.

Not a foreign monarch, but an Australian, that is a citizen of our country, that lives here, that understands our people and our culture.

An Australian head of state for the Australian people.

A nations head of state is the person the people entrust to protect their interests under the Constitution.

Almost all democracies grant the citizens of that nation the right to choose who they want to protect their rights and interests under that Constitution.

It's sacrosanct and defines the democratic ideal.

The power is in the people.

Yet the Australian people – you - do not have that right.

The person chosen to be head of state is determined by right of birth, not by the rights of Australian citizens.

The fundamental weakness in our system of government is that it can subvert the rights of citizens.

Recently we learned that in 2021 former Prime Minister Scott Morrison advised the Governor General to swear him in as a Minister for several ministries.

He did this without informing the Ministers whose jobs he took or the Australian people.

This fundamentally undermined the rights of Australians to know who their ministers were that were administering government on their behalf, particularly during a health emergency.

Can I say that I'm slightly disappointed that Scott Morrison didn't swear himself in as a Minister for the Republic!

But the serious point is that he was able to claim all those other Ministries during a time of national crisis with the Covid pandemic because our system allowed it.

The Governor General is accountable to the King or Queen of the day and not the Australian people.

Indeed, the G-G is appointed by the Monarch and swears an allegiance to them, not the Australian people.

And it's clear that on this the system has clearly failed the Australian people.

This is not the only instance of the democratic rights of Australians being undermined by our system.

In 1975, we now know that the Governor General at the time, Sir John Kerr, was corresponding on a frequent basis with Buckingham Palace about the potential dismissal of a democratically elected Australian government, without the knowledge of the Australian Prime Minister, that the governor general is supposed to accept the lawful advice of.

The dismissal saga demonstrated that our system failed the Australian people and undermined citizens fundamental democratic right to choose who governs them.

The governor general Sir John Kerr was communicating with the Queen regarding the Constitutional crisis and his intentions, not the Australian Prime Minister or the Australian people.

He did this because he was accountable to the Queen as her representative, not the Australian people as the protector of their democratic interests.

If we are to be a truly independent nation this must change.

We need a head of state that is accountable to the Australian people...and acts in their interests, not the interests of another nation.

It is now long past time Australia's head of state is an Australian.

An Australian devoted entirely to this nation, and not beholden to the advice, influence and interests of a foreign power.

We need to have faith and belief in an Australian to perform this important role and the belief that we can improve and grow as a nation if we make this overdue change.

And we need to believe that we can work to achieve a stronger democracy with greater rights for citizens to participate in choosing our head of state either directly or indirectly.

And our nation will be better for it.

A hereditary head of state is derived from the British system.

It was put in place when Australia was British.

We were all British citizens.

We had British passports.

We sang God Save the King.

And there was no Australian citizenship.

Our Constitution is not ours - it is an act of the British parliament, and when they enacted our Constitution it is evident that they did not trust us to make our own decisions.

They included a provision allowing the King of Great Britain the right to disallow legislation passed by the Commonwealth Parliament within 12 months under Section 59 of the Constitution. It remains there to this day.

Today we are a different nation.

And yet so much remains stuck in that time.

One example of that inertia was highlighted back in July when the 47th Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia was established.

Members of the House of Representatives and Senators, elected to serve the Australian people, took their oath or affirmation of office.

That pledge is not one of service to the Australian people, but allegiance to the British Monarch.

Under section 42 of our Constitution, our elected representatives – including myself – had to swear allegiance to Queen Elizabeth II, her heirs and successors.

There was no mention of service to the Australian people that elected us.

This archaic ritual is not representative of modern Australia and does not reflect the expectations of the Australian people about the role of their elected representatives.

It is outdated and demonstrates why our Constitution simply does not reflect who we are any more.

Australians have grown and matured, but our Constitution has not.

Instead of one ancestry, we now have many more.

And we are a truly multicultural nation.

We have our own unique identity and culture.

We make our own decisions and we do it well.

It's time to have pride in who we are and all that we have achieved.

Our head of state should represent that pride.

They should represent us and do so proudly.

We need to have a belief in Australians and who we are.

Daniel Deniehy believed in Australians.

He also saw the importance of the regions to Australia's progress and maturity.

Despite being born and raised in Sydney, he represented the regions of Goulburn and Bathurst in Parliament.

Much of Australia's great progressive movements have their origins in regional Australia.

The rebellion of goldminers a Eureka Stockade in Ballarat that laid the foundation for male suffrage in 1857.

The establishment of a political party for workers... the Labor Party in Barcaldine.

The Commonwealth Franchise Act in 1902 that gave women the vote in federal elections, growing from an earlier movement in South Australia.

And the Uluru Statement from the Heart as I mentioned earlier.

And it will be the region's that hold the key for Australians progress as we embark on the next leg of the journey to maturity and independence with the Voice and hopefully one day an Australian Republic.

Daniel Deniehy was a regional republican.

He passionately and effectively used his voice as a regional politician, journalist and writer to advance the democratic rights of Australians and to give them a say in their future.

We must use his courage and inspiration to help deliver a more representative, democratic Australia.

The right of First Nations Australians to a voice to government.

And the right of Australians to choose their head of state.

You all will be crucial in the success of this journey.

Goulburn leads the way in helping to develop an expansive, progressive Australia.

Let Goulburn lead the way again.

Thank you.

ENDS

