

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 The Plebiscite for an Australian Republic Bill 2008 (the bill) was introduced into the Senate on 11 November 2008. On 13 November 2008, the bill was referred to the Senate Standing Committee on Finance and Public Administration (the committee) by the Selection of Bills Committee for inquiry and report by 10 March 2009.¹ On 25 November 2008, the Senate extended the reporting date to 15 June 2009.

1.2 The Selection of Bills Committee stated of the reasons for the referral:
The issue of Australia becoming a republic is an extremely important one for the Australian Parliament and public. It is important that the process by which this issue is progressed now has appropriate public input and is properly scrutinised and debated.

The Plebiscite for an Australian Republic Bill 2008

1.3 The Plebiscite for an Australian Republic Bill 2008 provides for a plebiscite to be held to give the Australian people an opportunity to vote on whether Australia should be a republic.

1.4 The bill sets out one simple question: Do you support Australia becoming a republic? It requires a simple yes or no response.²

1.5 The purpose of the bill is to:

- require a plebiscite on whether Australia should become a republic in order to ensure that the Australian people have the opportunity to vote on Australia becoming a republic;
- provide for a simple yes or no question, setting out the words of the question which the electors will vote on; and
- specify that the plebiscite be held in conjunction with the next House of Representatives election.³

Plebiscites

1.6 A plebiscite is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as a:

1 On 14 May 2009, the Senate committee system was restructured and the inquiry into the Plebiscite for an Australian Republic Bill 2008 was re-referred to the Finance and Public Administration Legislation Committee.

2 Senator Bob Brown, Second Reading Speech, *Senate Hansard*, 11 November 2008, p. 32.

3 Plebiscite for an Australian Republic Bill 2008, *Explanatory Memorandum*, p. 1.

Direct vote of all electors of State on important public question, e.g. change in the constitution; public expression of community's opinion, with or without binding force.⁴

1.7 The Parliamentary Handbook of the Commonwealth of Australia notes that referendums on questions that do not affect the Constitution are usually called plebiscites.⁵ Thus, plebiscites in Australia are considered non-binding or non-constitutional referendums.

1.8 The Australian Electoral Commission notes of plebiscites or advisory referendums:

An issue put before the electorate which does not effect the Constitution is called an advisory referendum or a plebiscite. Governments can hold advisory referendums to test whether people either support or oppose a proposed action on an issue. The Government is not bound by the "result" of an advisory referendum as it is by the result of a Constitutional referendum.⁶

1.9 Two national plebiscites were held in Australia on military service in 1916 and 1917. In May 1977, 'Advance Australia Fair' was chosen through a national plebiscite as the official national song.⁷

Conduct of the inquiry

1.10 The inquiry was advertised in *The Australian* and through the Internet. The committee invited submissions from interested organisations and individuals.

1.11 The committee received 229 public submissions and 20 confidential submissions. A list of individuals and organisations that made public submissions to the inquiry together with other information authorised for publication is at Appendix 1. The committee held a hearing in Canberra on 29 April 2009. Appendix 2 lists the names and organisations of those who appeared. Submissions and the Hansard

4 *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, Oxford University Press, Seventh edition, 1982, p.786.

5 Parliamentary Handbook of the Commonwealth of Australia, *Handbook of the 42nd Parliament: National Plebiscites*, <http://www.aph.gov.au/library/handbook/referendums/index.htm> (accessed 24 November 2008).

6 Australian Electoral Commission, *Advisory Referendums (also called Plebiscites)*, Updated 9.10.07, http://www.aec.gov.au/Elections/referendums/Advisory_Referendums/index.htm (accessed 24 November 2008).

7 Parliamentary Handbook of the Commonwealth of Australia, *Handbook of the 42nd Parliament: National Plebiscites*, <http://www.aph.gov.au/library/handbook/referendums/index.htm> (accessed 24 November 2008).

transcript of evidence may be accessed through the committee's website at http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/fapa_ctte/index.htm.

Acknowledgment

1.12 The committee thanks those organisations and individuals who made submissions and gave evidence at the public hearing.

Structure of the report

1.13 The committee's report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2 provides a brief historical overview of initiatives towards an Australian republic;
- Chapter 3 considers arguments in support of the plebiscite proposed in the bill;
- Chapter 4 considers arguments against the plebiscite proposed in the bill;
- Chapter 5 considers clause 6 of the bill; and
- Chapter 6 provides the committee's concluding comments and recommendations in relation to public education.

1.14 Many submissions and witnesses addressed the issue of an Australian republic. However, this inquiry was not a forum for wider debate on the merits or otherwise of an Australian republic. Nor was it an opportunity to compare republican models against Australia's present system of government.

1.15 The committee's deliberations are restricted to the terms of reference before it and thus the appropriateness of a plebiscite asking the question 'Do you support Australia becoming a republic?' It therefore does not address the appropriateness of an Australian republic. For this reason, the committee's report is a reflection of the evidence received from both those who support the plebiscite and those who do not.

Note on references

1.16 References to the Committee Hansard are to the proof Hansard: page numbers may vary between the proof and the official Hansard.