

Women for an Australian Republic

Opening Statement for Senate Inquiry into Republic Plebiscite Bill 29 April 2009

Thank you for inviting *Women for an Australian Republic* to address the Committee today. We are pleased to appear and present our views on this bill. This is another very important inquiry because it is dealing with a concrete proposal to advance the Republic, doubly so *now* because of its timing.

We say that because the Government's response to the republic recommendations from the 2020 Summit was announced last week. One of the 2020 Summit recommendations - and the one that got a standing ovation - was for a plebiscite with a threshold question on the republic – albeit it a slightly different question to the one proposed by Senator Bob Brown. It's very – almost painfully - clear that the Government does not intend to take steps towards the republic anytime soon. Yet another setback, *but* we do need to keep the flame burning.

We thank Senator Bob Brown for putting forward a private members' bill for a non-binding vote held at the same time as the next federal election because it keeps up the momentum; keeps the idea of the republic before the people and in the public domain.

It is so good to see a concrete step for advancing the Republic. We're further advanced with this proposal for a plebiscite than we've been for ages. Steps like this allow *the people* "to get on with it".

Turning now to the subject matter of today's hearing:

The reason why plebiscites are important is because they allow the whole community to be involved in the process for the republic. They can test ideas and propositions without binding the Government. This will undoubtedly lead to a better result. The republic debate is well suited to this form of polling to allow the best options to be put forward at referendum. Plebiscites *will* allow women to fully participate in the debates and be fully represented in decision-making forums.

The UMR poll of November 2008 revealed women's support for the republic to be 43 percent, the highest that we are aware of to date.

The main points that we make in our submission on the proposed plebiscite bill are:

- that it needs to be framed in the context of a specified number of plebiscites before referendum : the form and content of a single plebiscite would need to be carefully drafted if it is the only one to be held before referendum
- that the opportunity should be used to ask several questions about the form of the republic over and above the threshold question to ensure openness and honesty
- that it should be kept simple
- that a plebiscite should not be held at the same time as the next federal election because it will be too confusing and possibly allow the vote to become mixed up with other issues, or even buried.
- that costs should not be an issue because they are small
- and, importantly, we add, if there is to be single question in the first or only plebiscite, that it should be a question seeking agreement to sever our constitutional ties with the British monarchy (as proposed by Real Republic and at the 2020 Summit)

Our recommendations are based on our experience of the 1999 referendum campaign, our analysis of the failed outcome and our increased knowledge covering all aspects of the republic debate since then.

However, we wish to make it clear that if the bill is passed by the Parliament, unchanged from its current form, that *Women for an Australian Republic*, will support it. We will not campaign against it. We have no interest in forming or being a member of a NO Republic coalition.

This is particularly so because we have been closely involved in the work that has been undertaken since 2005 to bring republic groups together to jointly support the next opportunity for a vote on the Republic. This bill could just be *that next opportunity*.