

SUBMISSION TO INQUIRY INTO THE PLEBISCITE FOR AN AUSTRALIAN REPUBLIC BILL 2008

I submit that the Committee *not* recommend that the Bill be put to the vote in the life of the current Parliament. I contend that the strategy upon which the Bill is based represents too high a risk in the current circumstances. If such a straightforward proposal were to be rejected by the people, this would represent the effective end of any impetus towards a republic in the lifetimes of us all. As Professor George Williams – one of our leading republicans - recently put it, it would be the end of the debate.

There are two grounds for my recommendation, both to do with the probability that the proposed plebiscite would fail.

First, the Shadow Attorney- General has already predicted that it would fail, and the very fact that such a political leader appears to be opposed to the proposal strengthens still further the probability of defeat. If the Shadow Attorney- General were to assume a leadership role in opposition to the plebiscite proposal, it would surely fail.

(I have sought a clarification of his views from Senator Brandis, but apparently he does not see it as part of his responsibilities to pay a mere citizen the courtesy of a response. Presumably the Chair of your Committee will be more successful in eliciting a response, as Senator Brandis is a Participating Member of the Committee).

Secondly, there is the problem of the ‘blank cheque’ – a problem that was well stated in the report of an earlier Senate Committee inquiry – *The road to a republic*. Unfortunately, that Committee was more successful in stating the problem than it was in surmounting it. Just what would be the consequences of a positive vote in the plebiscite? In particular, what would be the view of the government if the plebiscite gained the support of the majority but did not carry a majority of States? It is hard to see how this key question could be satisfactorily answered at this stage, but without such an answer the smaller States would – as Senator Brandis has predicted - be likely to come out on the negative side. And even if the plebiscite were to be carried, what then would happen? The earlier Senate Committee report favoured five ‘models’, each of them with serious flaws. Would the citizenry ultimately be forced to choose from a range of flawed models?

I acknowledge that this submission has had to be lodged at a time when there are still considerable gaps in the relevant information available to the public. The Government’s long-awaited response to the report of the 2020 summit has not yet appeared, and none of the submissions made to your inquiry are yet available. Therefore, if in the months ahead the Committee would like me to visit it to discuss the implications of new information for the contents of this submission, I would be honoured to do so.

John Power
Professor Emeritus of Political Science
University of Melbourne