

David Horkan,

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The Secretary,
Finance & Public Administration Committee,
Parliament House,
Canberra,
ACT 2600.

Plebiscite for an Australian Republic Bill 2008

Submission.

The republicans have failed to make a case.

No case has been made for the consideration for a change to a republic. In 1999 the people voted against such a move in every State in the Commonwealth. It seems odd that the question would be revisited unless it can be shown that there has been a fundamental change in public opinion or new evidence has come to light. This is not the case. The majority of reputable opinion polls indicate that since the 1999 referendum support for a generic republic has slowly but steadily dwindled, particularly amongst the young. The republican movement have said nothing new in the last ten years and as their arguments failed last time it is difficult to imagine why they should succeed now.

I submit that the conclusions of the '2020 Summit' on the issue of a republic should be entirely discounted. The views of the delegates to the governance forum were generally known prior to the event and the conclusion must be that they were selected to produce the result desired by the organisers. The extreme discrepancy between their almost unanimous support for a republic and the results of the 1999 referendum and subsequent polls is such that their views must be regarded as unrepresentative. The Constitutional Convention that preceded the 1999 referendum may be considered to have had some legitimacy as we 'ordinary people' were able to participate in the selection process. The '2020' summit has none.

The Australian Republican Movement and similar organisations have failed dismally in their efforts to inspire public support for their cause. This contradicts the view that there is a burning desire for change amongst the Australian people.

There is no evidence that a change to a republic is an important issue for the public.

Senator Brown states that "*the issue of Australia becoming a republic is an extremely important one for the Australian Parliament and public*" but provides no supporting

evidence. I am not aware of any indication that a change to a republic is a popular issue. Polls are conducted from time to time to determine the priorities of the public and to my knowledge a change to a republic has never featured in the top ten or even top twenty. I can't remember the last time I heard the issue mentioned in general conversation. The conclusion must be that people aren't interested. The limited time of Parliamentarians and the Public Service would be better spent addressing those issues for which there is a perceived need for action and some material benefit might result.

There is no justification for further public expenditure on a republic.

I see no justification for the spending even more taxpayers money in yet another attempt to force a republic on an apparently disinterested populace. It is a feature of republican organisations that they have never been able to fund their own campaigns and rely instead on the public purse and compliant politicians and celebrities to further their aim. This is not indicative of a popular cause. The republicans are entitled to run their campaigns, but not at my expense.

Pre-plebiscite campaigning will detract from the work of volunteer organisations.

It is inevitable that if a plebiscite is to be held there will be intensive campaigns from both sides of the argument. A large majority of people (in both camps) are active in other community groups, charitable organisations, service clubs, etc. They are providing important voluntary services for the benefit of the whole community. If they are to be distracted by a plebiscite campaign those benefits will be lost. The number of volunteer hours available is finite.

The proposed question has no meaning.

If I were to be asked if I would like a different car I would be unable to answer. It would be entirely dependent on the model on offer, and how it compares with my current vehicle. The same is true of a constitution.

A plebiscite would lead to years of political and constitutional instability.

If we were to assume purely for the sake of argument that a plebiscite received majority support then eventually a referendum would be required. Current indications are that that it would fail, probably more comprehensively than in 1999. By then we would have suffered years of uncertainty, argument, and instability before finding ourselves at the same point at which we are now. It all seems rather silly. The legitimate way of pursuing constitutional change is by referendum. If the republicans in Parliament are determined to proceed then that is the course that they should follow.

A plebiscite has no legitimacy.

It is easy to understand the appeal of a plebiscite to dedicated republicans. They would have little hope of success if the matter were to be put to a referendum.

However, I would hope that Parliament would consider the interests of the people as a whole above those of small sectional interests. I would prefer to see proper process followed. If Senator Brown, or anybody else, can formulate a detailed republican constitution for public scrutiny and successfully argue it's benefits over the current system then let them do so. The use of a plebiscite, or plebiscites, to start an interminable process of 'softening up' mischeivous and irresponsible.

The debate prior to the 1999 referendum was notably lacking in intellectual content from the republican side. It is questionable whether it can be termed a 'debate' at all. A glance at the Commonwealth 'Yes' and 'No' case booklet produced prior to the vote will confirm this. If we were to proceed with a plebiscite for some kind of theoretical and undefined republic I suspect that the standard of of argument would approach that of rival football supporters discussing the merits of their clubs. This would be of little use to the many voters who would prefer to be properly informed on the subject prior to a vote.

Lack of consideration for the States.

A referendum needs to be passed by a majority of voters in a majority of States. This has not come about by chance, but was formulated as an important safeguard of the interests of the smaller States. I understand that similar principles are applied Senate elections.

I am aware of nothing in the Bill under consideration that extends this protection to the proposed plebiscite.

Conclusion.

For the reasons given above I submit that the Bill proceed no further.

David Horkan.