

Submission to the Senate Enquiry into the Plebiscite for an Australian Republic Bill 2008

Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee

from: Gordon Drennan

1. Ask the voters whether they want to change their local member.
2. If the answer to 1 is "yes", tell the other parties to go away and choose candidates, then tell voters whichever the most of them vote for is the new member. Even if he would have gotten fewer votes than the old member. Or worse let a group of people who think they know best go away and decide who the new member will be, and what policies he/she will have, then tell the voters that they either have to rubber stamp that decision, or they are stuck with their present member for a very long time.

That's not how we hold elections here in Australia.

And its not how we should be deciding the form of government this country will have for the next century.

We got it wrong once - and I only use the word "we" out of generosity toward the good intentions of the people involved in the 1999 debacle - so it would take incredible stupidity for us to do the same again. But it looks like we are if this crazy idea of an indicative plebiscite followed by a referendum actually happens. Doing it that way guarantees that a very large number of Australians won't feel they are being asked what they want, but being railroaded into rubber stamping what some people think is good for them. **The one thing that is more important than the result is that Australians will own that result.** And the mechanism proposed guarantees they won't.

When the public has already rejected a republic once, not because they didn't want a republic but because they didn't want the head of it decided for them, it would be asking for a revolt to have the form of the republic they are going to have to vote for decided for them.

This country has an excellent and pretty much universally accepted method of, in a single step, determining what the consensus view on complex matters like the status quo versus a number of alternatives that the republic issue is an example of. We use it at every election. It is the preferential voting system. Its a great system precisely because people feel their vote has counted, even if they lost, and it lets the voters give a very nuanced message to their politicians.

The republic issue could be resolved in a single step that would both allow a range of alternatives to be put to voters, but not split the republic vote, and at the same time let people who didn't want a republic have a say in what form it would take should they lose. You just put together a list of alternatives, discard the ones that have little or no support, and offer the ones that do have significant support, plus option to maintain the the status quo, to the public in a preferential vote.

And even if for constitutional reasons that vote couldn't be the final one, that there had to be a confirmatory yes-or-no referendum to make it legal, it would be clear from how people voted in the preferential vote what the form of the constitutional change to be put to the public should be, and to the voting public that what was being put to them was actually what the majority would be happy with.