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Submission to the Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee **Plebiscite for an Australian Republic Bill 2008**

January 19, 2009

RIGHT IDEA, WRONG QUESTION

1.1 'Do you support Australia becoming a Republic?' It seems like such a simple question. Yet the research for my constitutional education and awareness book, *The Consensus Artifact*, and the audience feedback I have received from public lectures I have given, convince me the question is anything but straightforward. In fact, for many people the question is far too abstract. Yet how can something apparently so clear, confound Australian voters?.

1.2 Firstly, a significant number of Australians don't really believe that fundamental change is possible and are disconnected from the political process. The question, 'Do you support Australia becoming a Republic?', contains no promise of public participation, no indication that the public will be consulted in any way. Nor does the question guarantee that any move towards a republic would not be high-jacked by the very people the public have come to deeply distrust (politicians, big business, religious zealots, lawyers, bureaucrats, lobby groups and think-tanks).

1.3 Secondly, the word 'support' is vague. If people say they will 'support' something, there is no guarantee they will vote for it. As an example, when people say they 'support' a charitable cause, it does not mean they actually give money to it or volunteer to help out. 'Support' in a lot of people's minds is simply the opposite of 'dislike' or 'disapprove', rather than any indication of personal commitment.

1.4 Thirdly, the word 'republic' is imprecise. While bikers, Formulae 1, and rally drivers will all consider themselves 'motoring enthusiasts', each group is quite distinct. Likewise, republics come in a variety of styles and types. While the dictionary says they are states where sovereignty belongs to the people and not to a hereditary ruler and where people elect representatives to create laws on their behalf, they are not necessarily democratic. Some are actually totalitarian regimes.

1.5 This lack of clarity about what type of republic is being proposed, results in people being quite cautious in their decision-making. I believe it is too big a gamble to assume the public will trust in their elected representatives to come up with an inclusive republican model they will be happy with.

1.6 Finally, the format of the question makes its purpose obscure to the voter. No doubt there will be associated media coverage, Australian Electoral Commission information brochures and political propaganda that will accompany any plebiscite. However, when the average Australian is standing in the polling booth alone, with their pencil poised above the ballot paper, the question as it is currently drafted, does not lead them to understand if their response will be used to:

- Gain a public mandate to move forward on a Republic.
- See whether support has increased or decreased since the last referendum and polls.
- Break the stalemate between Republicans and Monarchists.
- Prove to the government that the republic issue is a priority in the minds of the public.
- Determine which electorates are for or against, so political campaigning can be better targeted.

1.7 If there is even the slightest doubt in the mind of the voter as to what is being asked and why it is being asked, the chances are good that the vote will be a resounding 'No', again.

1.8 In August 2004, The Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee tabled its report into the process Australia should adopt in order to become a republic called, 'The road to a republic.' The Committee received over 700 submissions and listened to over 50 witnesses in public hearings conducted all round Australia.

1.9 Among their recommendations, they observed that any question put to the Australian public would be more effective if it were focussed on a specific proposition, rather than something in the abstract. One of their key recommendations (Number 14) stated that, 'the wording of the initial plebiscite question should enable Australians voting Yes to cast that vote ON THE CONDITION that a future plebiscite would be held, where the type of republic would be decided by a majority of Australians.' The Senate Committee clearly saw the need for a second plebiscite to determine the type of republic that would be voted for.

1.10 Given these recommendations and the previous arguments I have outlined, I believe a more appropriate plebiscite question would be:

'If a future plebiscite was held and you were presented with a new Republican system of government for Australia, which had been determined by the Australian people in a nation-wide, inclusive, informed, democratic and publicly driven process, would you vote for it?'

1.11 However if a second plebiscite was not envisaged, I would propose the following alternative:

'If a nation-wide, inclusive, informed, democratic and publicly driven process created a new Republican system of government for Australia, would you vote for it?'