

January 28, 2009

The Standing Committee on Finance and Public Administration
The Senate, Parliament House, Canberra, ACT 2600

Re: Plebiscite for an Australian Republic Bill 2008

This is to express my opposition to the proposal for a plebiscite on whether Australia should become a republic, on the grounds that it will be costly and divisive and is inappropriate and unnecessary.

Costly: The estimated cost of this proposal has been put at about \$10M. At a time when all agree that we are facing an unprecedented economic downturn there surely will be much more pressing needs for this money.

Divisive: In the crises that are anticipated for the world and our nation in the next few years, the more we can develop a sense of national cohesion and purpose, the better-off we will be. We are certainly not facing a time when we can afford to indulge in exercises that polarise the population and constantly remind us of the things that divide us. If successful, the plebiscite would leave the constitution in a kind of limbo until the republican issue was settled at a subsequent referendum (perhaps four years later, to coincide with the next general election). Should a constitutional crisis occur in the meanwhile, in which the Governor General was forced to exercise her powers and intervene in the functioning of the Parliament, then those opposing her actions would argue that the outcome of plebiscite constituted a *de-facto* mandate for declaring her authority invalid and anarchy might ensue.

Inappropriate: The issue is not whether Australians are attracted to the idea of a republic in principle and an Australian Head of State in particular – its clear that the concept is popular and is one of the few things that both the current Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition agree on. However we already have an Australian Head of State, her name is Quentin Bryce. The previous Republican Convention showed there was considerable disagreement about the implementation of an Australian republic and so the crucial issue now is whether it is actually possible to develop a specific republican proposal that can attract enough support to pass a referendum. If at some point we again choose to spend time and money on this issue then the process used on 1999 was entirely appropriate – develop a detailed republican model and put it to the vote.

Unnecessary: This was proven in the constitutional crisis of 1975 in which the Australian Prime Minister was dismissed from office by the Governor General, an action that was thoroughly endorsed by the subsequent general election. Mr Whitlam, who felt himself the aggrieved party at the time, later said that the only party which behave impeccably through this crisis was the Crown. Clearly the current system served us well and has been proven to work well in practice as well as in theory. Whatever the motive for wishing to change to a republic, it is clearly not because of any deficiency in the current system. The proposal for this plebiscite is driven by emotion, not need, and as such it cannot be described as rational behaviour. History has proven that change for change's sake is usually disastrous.

Yours sincerely,

Kevin Healey