

SUBMISSION TO THE SENATE COMMITTEE OF INQUIRY INTO AN AUSTRALIAN REPUBLIC

Rodney C. Kendall
Hill End.

INTRODUCTION

On 3rd July, 1893, a public meeting was held in the Sydney Town Hall to establish an Australian Federation League to promote the cause of federation.

At that meeting, possibly a majority of those present supported the view of William Guy Higgs, who argued that federation should go further. He said:

“It would be possible to build up a mighty republic whose liberal institutions and munificent laws might be an example for the whole world to follow.”¹

Edmund Barton, campaigning for federation and seeing distinct difficulties in securing agreement among the six colonies for federation, let alone a republican federation, spoke against it:

“A federation properly constituted – on broad and democratic lines – would be enabled to work out its own destiny. The question as to whether this nation was to occupy its present position in relation to the English Crown (‘No, no’) or whether it should be an independent nation (‘Yes’) could not be settled by half a dozen separate colonies, but it would be settled one way or another by united Australia.”²

Now, 103 years after Federation, and the task of creating a “mighty republic” by a “united Australia” still awaits completion.

THE PROCESS

¹ Bolton, Geoffrey, *Edmund Barton*, Allen and Unwin, 2000, p. 114.

² *Ibid*, p. 113.

Various submissions supporting a republic will argue for combinations of plebiscites and conventions and the final referendum.

This submission focusses on Questions 26 and 27 and argues strongly that the most important and historically demanding first step is a plebiscite on the threshold question of whether Australians want to become a republic.

This question must be held clear of the encumbrances of any other questions or side issues.

“Do you agree that Australia should become a republic with an Australian as head of state to replace Queen Elizabeth and her representative in Australia, the Governor-General.”

This single question has the power to create a new dynamic in Australia.

It would signify an act of faith and trust in the people’s judgment as to the pathway they wish their nation to take.

(The referendum of 1999 was the product of a political tactic made during the 1996 federal election campaign. Then Opposition Leader John Howard’s election promise of a constitutional convention was made to placate republicans and take ground from Prime Minister Paul Keating. The resultant convention, which almost didn’t happen, was channelled towards producing a single model in ten days or shelving the republican idea. The referendum was therefore a vote on a particular model, not on whether Australia should be a republic. The ground for a move to a republic had not been prepared. The people had not been asked if they wanted to go that way.)

Following the plebiscite on the threshold question, a second one should occur where the people decide which model should go forward to a referendum.

Some will argue that the models plebiscite should be held at the same time as the threshold question. The main reason put forward is to avoid the argument of the blank cheque: what kind of republic is being voted for in the threshold question.

But the danger is that the threshold question will be lost in the models debate. Each should occupy its own field of discussion.

The blank cheque argument can easily be countered by arguing that the threshold question is but the first step along the road to a republic, that the next step will be the debate on the type of republic, that the people will decide at every step and that the final step, the referendum, is the only one that can bring the republic into being. There could also be legislative guarantees of the steps (other plebiscites, conventions, referendum) that would follow an affirmative vote on the threshold question.)

Prior to the plebiscite on the models it is essential that sufficient time be allocated for public discussion and debate on the choice to be made.

In that context, there is a solemn obligation on the federal government of the day to conduct an extensive and thorough information campaign to provide the

Australian people with the data they require to enable them to make an informed choice on the model for an Australian republic.

A failure to mount such an all-encompassing information campaign would be a betrayal of the people's judgment in the first plebiscite (were they to vote to head down the road to a republic).

The public discussion, debate and votes on the threshold question and subsequently the models would revitalise and reinvigorate our body politic.

A successful second referendum would therefore be the end result of a dynamic process which in turn would produce a more dynamic society, willing to tackle more vigorously other issues of a constitutional and non-constitutional nature.

CONCLUSION

The first element of the process to create an Australian republic must be the single, stand-alone plebiscite question on whether Australians want to be a republic.

Without that there will always be claims and doubts as to whether the debate should even be occurring. Monarchists already claim that the 1999 referendum result says Australians don't want a republic. As has already been pointed out, this is a completely false position as the 1999 vote was on a particular republican model, not on the question of whether we want to be a republic.

The single, stand-alone threshold question engages the Australian people and empowers them to shape Australia's future.

The single, stand-alone threshold question provides the legitimate foundation for all future actions: the information campaigns, the discussions and debates on models, other plebiscites, conventions and ultimately the second referendum.

The republic is a dynamic goal for Australia which in turn will serve as a catalyst for a more dynamic Australian society.