

THE LOSE-LOSE REFERENDUM

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In a sour sort of way, I can't lose this referendum. If, on 6 November, 'No' wins the day, I'm sure that the people will turn on their political leaders for stuffing it up and demand a proper constitutional consultative process. If it's a 'Yes', our prosaic, inadequate century-old Constitution will unfreeze and over time, recreate itself. Either way, real reform is on the way, and that's why I'm a republican: a republic is more than the head of state.

There is, however, one way of losing an important referendum like this. So many fatheaded, opinionated politicians have shoved their oars into the debate, to the nigh-universal revulsion of the population that people might just abstain, and not care about the outcome. Then, there wouldn't be a second wave of reform. It is time for these inflated windbags to belt up.

I was a Victorian-elected republican delegate to the Constitutional Convention in 1998. Tim Costello's and my ticket was a new republic that protects the rights of the little person. During the grandstanding, bullying, bulldust and betrayals of that Convention, I realised at a very deep level how much a republic depends on ordinary people having a voice, no matter how inconvenient and 'silly' the professionals thought they were.

Moving towards a republic means starting on a thousand-mile journey to genuine constitutional reform. It's obviously about more than replacing our unhappy and overburdened English Queen with a local kingmaker. It's about reclaiming our dignity, as not only 'the ruled' but also the source of all power. Unless we reinvent ourselves it is my fear that Australian's cynicism about government will kill democracy.

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This referendum is more important than 'the model'. It's not perfect: it's not dangerous, either; it's timid. But it's a start.

A republic means government by people, not by experts or customer-focused businessmen (apparently the highest accolade given to Kennett) or political number crunchers, or well-born rich bastards. A real Republic is inspired and visionary. It includes ordinary people, in or out of paid work, with cheap dentures or titanium implants, supported by neighbours or none or powerful mates. A majority of Australians, up to 70% of us, who want to elect our 'president' see this as a symbolic, constitutional assertion that citizens' rights against the organised state are bed-rock solid and guaranteed. We want accountability, safeguards and protection against power misuse, environmental destruction, fear and injustice, and a Constitution that speaks of individual rights and the common good, not States' rights and trade.

We won't be voting for the kind of a republic I want on 6 November, but we will be voting for the first step towards it. If 'Yes' carries the day, we begin a constitutional reform process. Without 'Yes,' the process won't begin.

The cautious, minimalist change being put to us - with our 'president' chosen by a two thirds majority of the heartily despised denizens of both Houses of parliament, and a remarkably silly Preamble - wouldn't be many people's first choice. But to vote 'No', would be to freeze the reform process, as well as support some truly Looney royalists, my beloved mother among them. Sorry Mum.

There is an alternative. Vote 'Yes', AND add a message on the ballot paper. In 1982, 30% Tasmanians voters wrote, 'No Dams' on their ballot papers, beside their choice of candidate. Their votes were valid, and sent a powerful message to the gung-ho governments of Tasmania, and the Commonwealth, about what we care about. Reclaim your republic from the self-satisfied, self-seeking bankers and businessmen, politicians and pundits, by voting 'Yes . . . and more'. Write 'Yes' in the box, and add 'And More,' beside it. This will both

allow doubters to support the move, and show that they want what the 1998 ConCon almost unanimously agreed to: a new start. Its most important, near-unanimous recommendation was that within 2 to 5 years of the new republic the government must call a second, elected Constitutional Convention - a proper one this time - to review what we began, to discuss the matters we really care about - community, relationships, security, and trust: equality, reconciliation, electing the president, and a bill of rights.

We of the 'Yes . . . and more' coalition took our inspiration from the great US statesman, Thomas Jefferson, who said that all Constitutions should be reviewed at least every 30 years, or become dangerously irrelevant. Ours has been left untouched for a hundred.

If you want to make politicians listen to you, write two more words on your referendum paper . . . 'And More'. Do it for Australia. It's about more than who opens the Olympics.