

THE REPUBLICAN REFERENDUM

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It takes a powerful imagination to make a case for voting 'No' on 6 November, that this would protect a Prime Minister from being dismissed by a President, as Whitlam was by Governor-General Kerr.

I was elected to the 1998 Constitutional Convention as a republican. As a life-long human rights advocate, a small 'd' democrat, I believe a republic is the vehicle for constitutional reform. Throughout the Convention I advocated a direct election model: in a real republic power comes from the people, not those born to rule. I am still a proponent of direct election. But I am voting 'Yes' to this Republic: Yes . . . and more.

The 'more' is the second Constitutional Convention. The First Convention sent a package of reforms to the people, including a second chance to consider the core issues that the elites stopped us from discussing - a bill of rights, improved and equal participation in government, protecting the quality of our lives - the real things. A year after 'Yes', the education program was to begin. The Convention must meet within 3 to 5 years of the republic's start with 75% of its delegates popularly elected. Finally, this week, the ARM and the ALP are calling for it. We in the 'Yes . . . and more' campaign have always demanded it.

Only the monarchist Prime Minister is silent. Think about why.

Some of my former republican allies are advocating 'NO'. They have become the fifth column of the Australians for a Constitutional Monarchy, the major stumbling bloc at the First Covention (it wouldn't exist at the Second), and the sneaks and Gollums of this campaign. The ACM don't want a Republic. They

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want no change. My friends, republicans who so badly want a directly elected president that they will defeat any other models, are doing their work.

The 'Yes . . . and More' movement wants the Australian Constitution renovated. 'YES' is the vehicle. Our Constitutional arrangements are paternalistic, authoritarian, and dishonest. True political power vests in the Prime Minister, his Cabinet, and the political parties. Our Constitution doesn't even mention them. It says that the Governor General runs the joint, for the Queen. He doesn't. The whole political system operates on unwritten conventions. It is disingenuous to pretend that another Governor General could sack a Prime Minister: after Kerr, he wouldn't dare. Under the new model, another Kerr could not even be appointed.

On November 6, Australians who vote 'YES' will unfreeze the Constitution. If they vote 'No', they will never elect a President: they will support the status quo. Who benefits? Look closely at the tactics and arguments of the NO case before you decide.

Their key argument was that under the new arrangements our President would be the Prime Minister's puppet, because he could dismiss him. Scutt now says that it is the reverse: the President could sack the PM under the Governor General's 'reserve powers'. Under both our current system and the proposed model, the Queen's man and the President both could dismiss an elected government, on the spot - the Queen's man did, in 1975. Neither is a democratic high point. We must codify the head of state's powers, and then we can elect our head of state. We need the second Convention, to do that. We need 'Yes', to get that.

I share the frustration of the NO Republicans at the manipulation which led to the particular question for November 6. I am dismayed by the superficial 'YES' case ads, appealing to vegemite nationalism rather than our intelligence. ARM spokesmen are inept to tell the people that they 'don't really' want to elect their head of state or, even if they do, that they don't

understand what's best for them. Democracy is about listening to the people. Last weekend's deliberative poll showed that ordinary people are very savvy, if we take the time to talk things through.

If this referendum is defeated, that manipulation and elitist managing will continue. The Monarchist minority, concealed behind our Republican NO-sayers, will use its power in the political, business and cultural establishment to thwart any effort to look at a republic again.

If the referendum is carried, we can push on the second Constitutional Convention. There will be no Monarchist bloc, because the decision will have been taken. We will focus directly on democratising our colonial-era Constitution, preserving our rights, making government accountable, and the popular election of a President with reduced, codified powers.

The NO Republicans say they don't want they monarchy, but they pin their hopes on a popular revolt, if the referendum is defeated. How Seventies. They believe that the republic issue would quickly go back to the people in the next election. On what evidence? We were fired up over reconciliation, but the 1998 General Federal Election was all about the GST. The Republic, if defeated this November, will not be the central issue of the 2001 Federal Election.

If the referendum is defeated, the PM will say he has kept his word, the people had their chance, and the decision was NO. The NO republicans hope for a republican revolt in the Federal Cabinet. Do they really believe that Reith will champion their cause, once his 'NO' saying has improved his chances at the top job? After 'NO', the republican cause will splinter, the monarchists will snigger. And the 'No' republicans accuse us of being naive!

Vote YES AND MORE at the Referendum. Demand the second Convention. Vote for it, on your ballot paper. Tell your MP.

Maira Rayner represents the Yes . . . and More campaign. She was an elected republican delegate to the Constitutional Convention. She is a lawyer and author. Her books include Rooting Democracy - Growing the Society We want (1997) and (with Joan Kirner) The Women's Power Handbook (1999)