

Australia's "Republic" referendum reveals mass disaffection

Mike Head
4 November 1999

The longer the official campaign has gone on, the more obvious it has become that the November 6 referendum on whether Australia becomes a republic, dispensing with the British monarchy, gives the broad mass of people no choice at all.

With the government-financed \$300 million campaign in its last days, media opinion polls and surveys indicate widespread disgust toward the entire project, and deep disenchantment with the political system as a whole.

One poll last week showed that support for a “yes” vote fell by 10 points to 33 percent over the previous fortnight, with the number of undecided voters rising 12 points to 26 percent. The “no” vote remained at 41 percent. Other polls show that only a small minority—some 10 percent of intending “no” voters—actually support retaining the services of the British royal family.

Yet these are the only options on the ballot paper. A “no” vote will continue an hereditary British-based monarchy with its ancient and unspecified “reserve powers” held in the hands of a Governor-General who is appointed purely by the Prime Minister of the day. A “yes” vote will simply transfer the potentially dictatorial powers of the Crown—including the right to dismiss governments and dissolve parliaments—to an unelected President.

Under the republican scheme cobbled together by last year's undemocratic, half-elected Constitutional Convention, the President would be selected by the Prime Minister, in an agreement with the Leader of the Opposition, with the appointment to be rubberstamped by a two-thirds majority in parliament. This scheme has become notoriously known as the “politicians' republic”.

The opinion poll results indicate almost certain defeat for the referendum. In order to win, the proposed republican model must be approved by not only a majority of those voting nationally but also by majorities in four of the six Australian states. Although voting is compulsory, a high abstention rate is possible, giving an added advantage to the no camp.

The campaign has underscored the immense gulf that exists between the ruling elite and the mass of working people. Vast financial and media resources have been used to push a yes vote. Day after day, every daily newspaper has promoted the cause with headlines, polls, special supplements, editorials and pages of reports seeking to stoke nationalist fervour. “Queen or country” is the theme in the media outlets controlled by Rupert Murdoch. Visiting the country this week for the Melbourne Cup, Murdoch was afforded a front-page interview in his own newspaper, the *Australian*, declaring that a yes vote was vital for Australia's “self-respect”.

Those out stumping for a yes vote include the last four prime ministers before John Howard (Gough Whitlam, Malcolm Fraser, Bob Hawke and Paul Keating), two former Governors-General, leading business figures and politicians from all the establishment parties—Liberal, National, Labor, Australian Democrats and Greens. And, as the *Australian Financial*

Review emphasised on its front page last week, corporate chief executives overwhelmingly advocate a yes vote. Its survey found that 47 out of 49 respondents endorsed the switch to a republic, including ANZ bank chairman Charles Goode, Reserve Bank of Australia board member Dick Warburton and Pacific Dunlop managing director Rod Chadwick.

In recent days this publicity effort has gone into overdrive. In a last-ditch effort to woo doubtful voters, the Australian Republican Movement (ARM) unveiled a team of more than 500 celebrity ambassadors, led by such luminaries as comedian Mikey Robins, the Reverend Tim Costello and media owner Steve Vizard. According to the ARM, these high-profile TV stars, entertainers, sports people, business chiefs and current and former politicians “represent the broad sweep of life and achievement in Australia”.

But the mobilisation of elite opinion behind the republic appears to have backfired. Polls show a bitter social divide. Among those earning over \$50,000 a year (the wealthiest fifth), 70 percent plan to vote yes, but below \$30,000, the vote is less than 40 percent. Surveys indicate that 85 percent of professionals—lawyers, accountants, management executives, etc—will vote yes, but that working class and rural voters are either antagonistic or indifferent.

This debacle is looming despite a decade's work by key sections of big business. The issue of a republic did not arise from any popular movement. It first emerged when millionaire investment banker Malcolm Turnbull and other corporate high-fliers formed the ARM in 1991. In the mid-1990s it was given prominence by the Keating Labor government.

The concerns of the business and Labor leaders have been two-fold. By the early 1990s, the demise of the post-war order and the globalisation of world markets required a more distinctive and aggressive assertion of Australian corporate and strategic interests in the Asia-Pacific region and worldwide, freed of all remaining ties to the old British Empire. As the current Labor Party leader, Kim Beazley put it last week, Australian business needed a new “brand name” and “the brand name you trade under is your national name”.

Domestically, the monarchy no longer commands respect, a cause for concern under conditions of growing social tensions over deteriorating living standards and ongoing cuts to health, education, welfare and housing. One of those most conscious of the potential danger is the Howard government's chief budget-cutter, Treasurer Peter Costello. Last week he warned that the monarchy was no longer even useful for ceremonial occasions such as the opening of next year's Sydney Olympic Games, because “something gnaws at its credibility and its believability”.

In the official “no” campaign, the royal family has hardly been mentioned. Among the straight-out monarchists, the most prominent is Prime Minister John Howard. Having utilised the present political structure for 100 years since Australian Federation in 1901, they are anxious lest a change provoke wider political unrest. “If it ain't broke, don't fix it,” is their slogan.

But the polls show little popular support for that proposition. Some 50

percent reportedly favour dropping the monarchy in favour of a directly elected president. As a result, the monarchists have formed a marriage of convenience with various “direct election for president” advocates, with whom they share control over the official no campaign.

The direct electionists—an amalgam of key government ministers including Industrial Relations Minister Peter Reith, traditional conservative “independents” such as Ted Mack and “left-wing” nationalists like Phil Cleary—have tried to assume the mantle of democracy, appealing to anti-establishment sentiment.

But they share a common objective with both their monarchist and ARM counterparts: to maintain the existing order under conditions of mounting discontent. The real test of their position came at the Howard government's February 1998 Constitutional Convention when they voted, with all the other delegates, to hush up the continued existence of the “reserve powers” of the Crown.

These vague, undefined powers were deliberately entrenched in the 1901 Constitution by the Founding Fathers of Federation to deal with threatening political crises. The Constitution itself allows the Queen's representative to dissolve or prorogue parliament (Section 5), reject legislation passed by parliament or reserve it “for the Queen's pleasure” (Section 58) and assume command of the military (Section 68). The reserve powers, which are not even mentioned in the Constitution, go further. The Crown can dismiss governments, refuse requests for elections, reject ministerial appointments, mobilise the armed forces and take control of the country in periods of political crisis.

Lawyers, politicians and media pundits claim that “constitutional conventions” prevent the reserve powers being used without the advice of the government of the day. Yet these powers have been used twice this century to sack an elected government. In 1931 the Governor of the state of New South Wales dismissed the Labor Party government of Premier Jack Lang at the height of the Great Depression. More recently, in 1975, Governor-General Sir John Kerr ousted the federal Labor government of Gough Whitlam and placed the army on alert.

Like their forebears of a century ago, last year's Constitutional Convention participants rejected any move to restrict or even codify, let alone abolish, the reserve powers. If the referendum passes, these powers will be transferred to the President. Far from limiting the reserve powers, the amended Constitution would allow for them to expand. Buried away in Schedule 3 of the *Establishment of Republic Act* is a clause 8 that states that the Act “does not prevent the evolution of the constitutional conventions relating to the exercise of the reserve powers”.

Clause 8 literally means that the reserve powers can be re-interpreted to meet the changing requirements of the ruling elite, particularly in times of political emergency. The last time these powers “evolved” was in 1975. Right up until Whitlam's dismissal, media commentators said no Governor-General could sack an elected government that continued to hold a majority in the lower house of parliament.

In another exposure of their opportunist politics, the “direct election” groups have split into two camps, with both the official yes and no teams counting on them to deliver the votes they need to carry the day. On one side, the “Yes and More” organisation is playing a key role in the official yes campaign. On the other, Mack, Cleary and Co are in charge of the advertising campaign arguing for the rejection of “ **this** republic”. Both wings are holding out the prospect of a second referendum sometime in the future to vote on direct election.

This unedifying spectacle only demonstrates that despite all the hoopla about strong economic growth and prosperity, the entire political framework is fast losing its credibility.

The ruling establishment desperately needs a new ideological cement to bind the widening cracks in its system. One hundred years ago the nation was founded on “White Australia” racism, an ideology supported by the employers and Labor leaders alike. With Australian companies heavily

dependent on Asian markets that outlook is no longer viable. So the referendum includes a vote on a Preamble to the Constitution that strives to inculcate a new sense of national identity, appealing to “the common good”, “national unity” and “national spirit”.

Despite near-unanimous backing for the Preamble from all the parliamentary parties and media outlets, this proposition too seems headed for defeat on November 6.

The disaffection revealed by the referendum is just part of the alienation and discontent that has built up over the past two decades with the entire political and social system. The vast majority of people have suffered a decline in their living standards for the first time since the Great Depression of the 1930s, while a small privileged layer has accumulated fantastic wealth. This social chasm will widen further next year when the wealthy start receiving \$60-a-week tax cuts under the new Goods and Services Tax regime, as well as halving their capital gains tax payments under the government's new business tax plan.

Having failed to generate enthusiasm for the republic, Murdoch's *Australian* sent journalist Nicholas Rothwell on a month-long tour of the country to assess the mood. He described a mixture of “rage” against the establishment, a deeply-felt belief that a change would do nothing to relieve unemployment and poverty, and a widespread demand for any president to be elected, rather than appointed by politicians.

Rothwell observed: “Above all, what seems clear is that the deep disenchantment of a broad section of the community from the political process remains a fundamental factor shaping national life.” Referring to the 1996 landslide against the Keating Labor government, the 1997-98 rise of the extreme rightwing One Nation party and the 1999 defeat of the Kennett Liberal government in the state of Victoria, he wrote: “Anti-politics cast out Paul Keating's new-look Labor, raised up One Nation and helped toss out Jeff Kennett. Now it seems poised to sweep aside the dream of an imminent Australian republic, and to preserve in office that most distant bearer of national authority, the Queen.”

These bitter ruminations help explain why such close attention is being paid to protecting the vice-regal powers and placing them, without discussion, in the hands of a new Head of State. Ultimately, ever-worsening social inequality is incompatible with democracy. Increasingly, more brutal methods will be needed to suppress unrest. For working people to meet their basic needs and aspirations, a fundamental reorganisation of society is required, along genuinely democratic, egalitarian and socialist lines.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact