

SENATE LECTURE

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THE TRAJECTORY OF THE AUSTRALIAN REPUBLIC DEBATE

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Introduction

The trajectory of the Australian republic debate since the 1999 referendum has been generally flat with occasional spikes and dips.¹ That has continued despite the election of the republican Rudd Labor government in November 2007. Monarchist critics of the proposed constitutional change can point out that there has not yet, a decade later, been a repeat of the unsuccessful 1999 referendum and that support for an Australian republic may be now below its peak levels. Supporters can point out that despite a barren period during which a long-serving prime minister made no secret of his personal opposition and was determined not to allow the issue to thrive, republicans still outnumber monarchists by about three to two in Australia. Republicans can also point out the failure of monarchists to gain any ground with the younger generation and to a new emphasis on the future of the monarchy post-Elizabeth II.

The debate has changed in character since 1999 despite the continued presence of some key elements, such as the comparative merits of tradition versus constitutional change, monarchy versus republicanism and the relevance or otherwise of the British monarchy to Australia's needs in the 21st century. There have been important new developments in the way the issues are argued. These include the emphasis on a plebiscite-driven process prior to a referendum, new and greater emphasis on the role of the Governor-General vis-à-vis the monarch, increasing attention given to Prince Charles as future King of Australia, and tying the timing of change to the passing of Queen Elizabeth II.

The debate has also largely not been conducted by those who took centre stage in 1998-99, though John Howard's opposition has framed the debate until recently, Malcolm Turnbull's identification with the republican cause remains, and some politicians active in 1999, like Senator Nick Minchin, have continued to express their views. Most of the delegates to the Constitutional Convention in 1998, on all sides, have moved on to other questions and some key figures, such as Donald Horne, Richard McGarvie, Clem Jones, and George Winterton have since died.

Debate is both specialized and popular, being about both constitutional law and appeals to public sentiment. It is conducted in the community, in the popular media, in specialized magazines and in parliaments as well as at functions arranged by the protagonists. The contours of the debate can be difficult to track as there is also a subterranean element that rarely sees the light of day.

The overall contention of this lecture is that the Crown in all its non-constitutional aspects is in continuing decline in Australia in terms of public attention, public affection and its reflection in Australian symbols. Furthermore, the arguments used by defenders of the status quo in public debate against moving to a republic, involving deliberately diminishing the role of the Queen, contribute to hastening this decline by switching emphasis away from the monarchy in Australia.

However, despite the continuing decline of the monarchy in Australia the odds are against Australia moving to a republic in the short to medium term. A republican Australia remains possible but certainly not inevitable. It may happen within the next twenty years but the odds are that it will not. Australians remain republican in spirit but an increasing number of young Australians are disengaged from the issue. Furthermore many leading Australians who are republicans have a timid approach to the question for a variety of reasons. By the time change occurs, if it does, the majority of those voters who take part in the referendum may have had little or no experience of meaningful monarchy in Australia.

Relevant Developments since 1999

The spikes and dips in interest have followed a very mixed bag of issues and events. They include broader political events, specific community and parliamentary efforts to lead republican debates and relevant and irrelevant aspects of the life of the British Royal family.

First, John Howard won the next two elections after the referendum to consolidate the Coalition government in office. This inhibited public debate. From July 2005 the Coalition also controlled the Senate, putting further Senate efforts by Labor, the Democrats and the Greens to popularize the republic off the agenda, particularly as the Liberal Senate leadership (Nick Minchin and Eric Abetz) were determinedly monarchist. However at that same 2004 election that gave the Howard government control of the Senate the republican leader in 1999, Malcolm Turnbull, entered parliament and raised the hopes of republicans that he would contribute to reinforcing republican numbers and voices within the Liberal Party.

In 2007 Howard was defeated and left the Parliament, followed shortly afterwards by another prominent monarchist, Alexander Downer. While Howard's initial successor, Dr Brendan Nelson was also a royalist-cum-monarchist, Turnbull eventually defeated Nelson to become Liberal leader in September 2008.

The arrival of the Rudd government raised republican hopes given Labor policy, but there has been little or no action. However, indirectly, the 2020 Summit in April 2008 did give a vote of confidence to a republic with overwhelming support among delegates, both in the Governance stream and in the summit at large.²

Prior to this the appointment by the Howard government of Archbishop Peter Hollingworth as Governor-General in 2001 eventually brought the position into disrepute through his forced resignation which highlighted to the public the method of appointment by the Queen on the recommendation of the Prime Minister. The appointment of an Anglican Archbishop as Governor-General also led to critical discussion of church-state relations involving the implications for Australia of the British Monarch's role as head of the Church of England.

Secondly, there were peaks of activity and publicity to keep the issue alive associated with specifically republican community and parliamentary activities. An important theme since 2001 has been discussions of the best process by which the question might be moved forward.

During that year Senator Natasha Stott Despoja on behalf of the Democrats moved a bill to hold a plebiscite on the question. Later that year in December a large community Conference was organized in the town of Corowa by former Victorian Governor Richard McGarvie, the proponent of the Council of Elders type republic at the 1998 Constitutional Convention. This big experiment in community engagement drew together many established republican leaders and new ones such as Tim Fischer. The so-called Royal Hotel Resolution brought together these republican spokespersons behind an agreed process, including plebiscites.³

Then in 2003- 2004 a Senate Enquiry by the Legal and Constitutional References Committee was chaired by Senator Nick Bolkus with Democrat and Liberal support. This non-partisan public enquiry maintained republican momentum but, not unexpectedly, brought no government reaction at all. It recommended constitutional education and plebiscites as the best way forward.⁴

A little later, in December 2005, republican MPs from all parties launched Parliamentarians for an Australian Head of State in the federal Parliament as yet another way of building consensus and trust across party lines.

In 2008/09 a Greens Bill calling for a plebiscite at the next federal election has led to another Senate enquiry which is currently under way, having taken submissions. Public hearings will follow shortly.

Throughout this time regular debates about issues like the Queen's Birthday holiday and Australian national identity generally have helped keep the focus on the republic. Liberal Senator Guy Barnett, for instance, has argued that the Queen's Birthday is an inappropriate day on which to present Australian Honours awards.

Earlier this year Australia Day debate initiated by new Australian of the Year Mick Dodson suggests that Republic Day has considerable support as a new public holiday if Australia Day is ever moved from 26 January.

Thirdly, the major development in Britain has been the marriage of Prince Charles and Camilla Parker Bowles in April 2005 and subsequent public acceptance of their relationship, which focused attention on the succession process in which Australia can play no part. Well-publicised surveys have demonstrated the relative unpopularity among Australians of Charles as future King of Australia compared to his mother and thus generated further republican/monarchist debates.⁵

There were also the regular shenanigans of the next generation of the British Royal Family, William and Harry, to amuse the Australian tabloids and to demand responses from republicans and monarchist representatives alike. Such media debates rarely advanced sensible debate but they could not be avoided.

It should not be forgotten, however, that for every republican spike there has been a “crowding out” effect of other issues like reconciliation, refugees, climate change, a bill of rights, and an apology to the stolen generation on the one hand, and global financial crisis, the Iraq War, and the war against terror on the other hand. In this context republicans become distracted and/or apologetic about raising the issue. Monarchists confidently play ‘the time is not right’ card and regularly compare purported costs of constitutional referenda with popular social services and other government spending possibilities.

Finally it should be noted there has been no other attempt to achieve constitutional change through the referendum method over the past decade (In fact there has not been a successful referendum since 1977). The republic is not alone if it is on the back burner.

The Interested Groups

The contribution of interest groups to the debate must be put in context. They are smallish groups rather than large social movements. This means that debate is conducted in the media and in specialized forums by a relatively few individuals rather than through large public events. Republicans have never had the large numbers or the campaigning style to march or demonstrate for their cause in the same way, for instance, as the reconciliation, anti-war or environmental movements. This has always been the case except for a short period in 1999 when the Yes and No sides received government funding producing a campaign atmosphere. The British media, in particular, continue to be bemused by this, seeking something that is just not there. Many of the main protagonists are also ageing and organizational regeneration will soon become a major dilemma on both sides of the debate if it is not already.

The two main specialist groups remain the Australian Republican Movement (ARM), based in Canberra, and Australians for Constitutional Monarchy (ACM) based in Sydney. Both are non-government organizations without any government funding.

ARM, now chaired by Major-General Michael Keating, has moved forward with a new democratic emphasis, considerable generational change, and, recently a new green and gold image. It is robust, but a smaller organization than it was at its peak in 1999. It has

no tax deductibility to encourage financial support. Since early this century it has concentrated its efforts on a plebiscite-driven process and a facilitation role in public debate. It is open to any responsible model supported by the Australian people and is not at all committed to the defeated 1999 model.

ACM remains a vocal organisation with Professor David Flint its indefatigable hard-line public voice. Its biggest achievement, with tax deductible status, is the creation of Constitutional Education Fund-Australia (CEFA) with Kerry Jones, the leader of the NO campaign in 1999, in a new role as its CEO.

There are other smaller organizations on both sides that play a part in media-generated debates. The spokesman for the Monarchist League, Philip Benwell, is a regular, gentler participant in media debate and has been known to disagree publicly with the views of the ACM.

Among republicans the Clem Jones team, now led by David Muir, has inherited a large bequest from Mr Jones that will be used, on behalf of direct election, in any future republican campaign. Women for an Australian Republic is a thoughtful contributor to parliamentary enquiries and to the gendered aspects of republican debate within the women's movement in particular. The Democracy First group led by stockbroker Jim Bain has good political connections. Many of these republican groups have demonstrated their desire for unity by participating in regular conferences under the banner of the Republican Gathering since August 2005. But republicans remain divided on key issues. The Republican Party of Australia remains a determinedly idiosyncratic outlier.

But a number of republican bodies active in 1999 have all but ceased to exist in any real operational sense despite attempts to engage them in debates. These include Conservatives for an Australian Head of State, organized at the time by the present Liberal shadow minister Andrew Robb, and A Just Republic, committed in 1999 to a Yes vote with an eye on a subsequent move to a directly elected President. They represent important segments of republicanism and may revive should another referendum be held.

The number of other interest groups that participate in the debate is patchy and limited. Should there be a second referendum it will be important how some of them decide to jump and with what energy and resources. The biggest groups, like the business community and the trade union movement scarcely raise their heads on this issue.

The Returned Services League has exhibited a diminishing interest. Get Up, the grass roots organization, has not yet taken the issue on board in a serious way. But debates occur elsewhere. The government-funded National Schools Constitutional Convention, for instance, considered the issue last year in a referendum-style format and narrowly supported a republic.

For many leaders in public life the issue is too difficult or too complex for them to make a public contribution. Some are deterred by the protocols of their public role as corporate heads, public servants, judges or military officers. Some would like a more radical edge

to the debate, incorporating broader issues such as the national flag or Indigenous reconciliation, while others are worried by any support for popular election.

The Political Parties

Ultimately debate has to be led by the political parties. Interest groups can encourage a groundswell and strive to speak for the popular view, but it is governments who can take action.

But political activists overwhelmingly give priority to their political party allegiances over issue concerns. To date this has benefitted monarchists. One of the tasks of republicans is to change that so that party leaders come to recognise the positive electoral benefits rather than the potential risks of backing constitutional change.

Labor has continued to advocate a republic with an Australian head of state as a matter of party policy.⁶ Their enthusiasm is sporadic. State Labor leaders prominent as republicans in 1998-1999 have been all talk but no action once in office. There is internal division within the party over the most appropriate type of republic. Most significantly of all, despite the contribution of MPs like Bob Debus and Mark Dreyfus, Labor has failed to produce a true champion of republicanism from within its ranks as there have been champions of other issues.

Liberals are divided broadly between conservatives and liberals on the question, although there are exceptions to this general rule. The party membership is probably more monarchist in inclination than the federal parliamentary party, which puts pressure on republican MPs. There have been bravely outspoken Liberal republicans over the past decade nevertheless, such as Senators Marise Payne and Amanda Vanstone.

Notably, there has been a decisive change in the balance at the senior levels of the parliamentary party recently. Of the five candidates for leadership after the 2007 defeat, for instance, only one, Nelson was not a republican. The others were Turnbull, Julie Bishop, Christopher Pyne and Robb. To that latter leadership group can be now be added another republican in Joe Hockey, now the Shadow Treasurer. This is a significant development in internal Liberal politics, although whether it is a trend or just cyclical is hard to predict.

The Nationals, an officially monarchist party, are an enigma in this debate with the formal position masking some quiet republican support among its leaders and members. Since 1999 one former leader, Tim Fischer, has enthusiastically advocated a republic, in the spirit of other former leaders Ian Sinclair and Doug Anthony, but the party has not altered its position.

Both the Australian Democrats and the Greens have played a more considerable role in the debate beyond what their numbers might suggest. They have moved bills at critical stages and often urged the major parties to get moving. As the Democrats, who have had

more active republicans in their parliamentary ranks than any other party, went into decline from 2004 onwards the emerging Greens took up the slack.

Federal Elections and Prime Ministerial Opinions

Generally the republic has not been a major issue in any of the three federal elections since 1999, despite the efforts of minor parties. It was up to the Labor Party to put it there and that they have not done so says a lot about how the question has been framed. The issue was perceived to be a potential liability. Each Labor leader, reflecting party policy, has promised a plebiscite followed, if successful, by a referendum. Nevertheless there have been nuances in the approach of the three Labor leaders who have taken the party to an election during this period.

In 2001 it was probably too early to expect too much urgency from Kim Beazley. In 2004 Mark Latham thought speed was of the essence and promised a referendum within his first term. He also presented the republic question attractively as part of a larger story about new politics. In 2007 Kevin Rudd emphasized his personal republican beliefs and his party's policy but tried to hose down enthusiasm by declaring the republic to be a second-order issue.

Since his election Rudd has always spoken cautiously even at times such as the 2020 Summit when other Labor ministers like Debus called for a plebiscite in 2010. A typical example of Rudd's stance came in April 2008 in London, when he told BBC One: "Our position as a party is clear-we are committed to an Australian republic. I am a republican and that is what we will work towards over time, but it is not a top-order issue just now."⁷

On the day Turnbull was elected Liberal leader Rudd offered him a bipartisan approach to the republic, suggesting the Government would work with the Opposition on a timetable.⁸ But, if it was a genuine offer it was a clumsy one that appears not to have been followed up yet.

Public Opinion and Social Surveys

The purpose of the debate is to win the support of the public at large. But among the public there is one segment among which a clear majority has emerged. Australians holding senior office in the public and private sectors are very strong in their support for a republic. Any random selection would confirm this. The 2020 Summit was neither rigged nor unrepresentative in this regard (though 98.5% support for a republic in the Governance section was a remarkably high figure). Such summits are drawn from professionals, higher income earners and the better educated and support for a republic grows stronger as income and education increase.

What of the public at large, the ones who ultimately matter? There has been no shortage of opinion polls and social surveys since 1999; that in itself is an indication that the question is seen to be a live one. The polls generate debate and commentary, often

placing republicans on the defensive whenever public support appears to have fallen. But the question is complex, and there is little or no agreement as to how the survey question should be phrased. The polls differ and generate different responses as a consequence (see below).

For instance, three polls taken in April-May 2008 around the time of the 2020 Summit showed contradictory results and the contradictions were glossed over in media reporting.

A Morgan Poll reported that “Now only 45% of Australians want a republic with an Elected President (Down 6% since 2001)”. This generated media headlines such as “Republic support lowest in 15 years”. 42% supported the monarchy. Notably, support for the monarchy fell 10% to only 32% should ever Prince Charles become King.⁹

The Sun-Herald/Taverner Poll about the same time reported that 49% favour Australia breaking ties with Britain and becoming a republic now compared to 42% support for the status quo. This generated media headlines such as “The last of the Royals”. Notably again, in this poll support for the status quo fell 16% to only 26% once the Queen’s reign ends.¹⁰

An Advertiser Poll reported 51% of South Australians supported a republic while 40% opposed change. At the same time 81% believed a republic is inevitable. The Advertiser headline was “Voters want to dump the Queen”.¹¹

Now consider two large surveys. The Australian Election Survey has studied the issue at each election since 1987. The investigators at the Australian National University conclude that support for a republic has remained at about 60% over the past ten years, since before the referendum.¹² That was the figure in 2007. The question asked is “Do you think that Australia should become a republic with an Australian head of state or should the Queen be retained as head of state?”. In the same survey 64% thought that the Queen and the Royal Family are not very important to Australia. Only 11% thought they were very important (presumably the same people as the 10% who strongly favour the monarchy).¹³

UMR Research reported in November 2008 that, in answer to the simple question “Do you support or oppose Australia becoming a republic? 50% said Yes and 28% said No. Men favoured a republic by 58% to 24%, while women (43% to 32%) were not as convinced. That gender difference has long been the case.¹⁴

Overall all polls show more republicans than monarchists (a plurality) and most polls show a republican majority of the whole population. Republicans have strong support and should win a general plebiscite. But realistically they need to increase that support to be confident of achieving a double majority in a referendum.

One continuing weakness of republicans has been the relatively low intensity with which a republic is supported. To take the AES survey, for instance, only 31% of respondents strongly support a republic, about half of all republicans. On the other hand only 10% of

monarchists strongly favour retaining the Queen, which is only about a quarter of all monarchists.¹⁵

Another continuing weakness of republicans is internal disagreement about the type of republic, one of the key problems in 1999. In the AES survey 80% favour election of the head of state by voters (50% strongly favour so-called direct election).¹⁶ In the UMR survey exactly the same figure (80%) want the president elected by the people.¹⁷ These figures send a strong message.

Another way of measuring the trajectory of public opinion is to investigate the opinions of younger people, who didn't vote in 1999. Here opinion is divided. The Morgan Poll mentioned above reckoned that younger Australians favoured the monarchy rather than the republic, but that is not the general view.¹⁸ UMR Research reported that those under 30 favoured the republic most clearly (49% to 18%)¹⁹, but, as other polls like NewsPoll have also reported, not because they were more republican than the rest of the community, but because of two other factors. The first is that younger Australians are less monarchist than older age groups and the second is that a much larger percentage of the younger electorate is undecided either way. In a January 2006 NewsPoll 29% of younger Australians were undecided.²⁰ There is no joy here for monarchists. At the same time there is plenty of work for republicans to do in connecting with those under 30.

Media Coverage

The coverage has been patchy, but, not surprisingly there has generally been less than during the 1999 campaign. Perhaps the media was bruised by that experience. The debate is hampered by the apparent lack of new developments to report. But there is still a great deal of coverage, often stimulated by the publication of opinion polls or by the various developments discussed earlier, including the 2020 Summit. Major speeches by protagonists such as Senator Nick Minchin or Alexander Downer are reported as are the speeches of those in high office when they choose to declare their hand as republicans, such as the South Australian Governor, Kevin Scarce or Justice Robert French then of the Federal Court, now Chief Justice of the High Court.²¹

A lot of the debate which does occur takes the form of 'cheap' media beat ups, usually relating to members of the British Royal family other than the Queen. Both monarchists and republicans are trotted out by the media for meaningless rituals which only obscure the important aspects of the debate. But they are opportunities that neither ACM nor ARM can refuse because they are valuable chances to address the bigger picture.

Changing Emphases and Strategic Moves

The debate has changed in character since 1999. Certain approaches to the question still have bite, including general arguments for or against monarchy/republic as well as the nationalist appeal of a republic in Australia and the cost to the public purse of constitutional change. But there are a number of new developments that have altered the character of the debate over the past decade.

Before addressing these new issues there is one thing that republicans and monarchists alike do agree upon. That is the prevailing ignorance within the Australian community about constitutional matters, such as those in question here, that hamper any debates. That has long been the case and was to be addressed by the Civics Expert/Education Group in the 1990s. It called into question the depth of the debate during the referendum. Addressing this issue was a major element of *The Road to a Republic*, the 2004 report of the Legal and Constitutional References Committee of the Senate. In order to build “increased awareness and understanding within the community of our constitutional system” the committee called for a Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee on Constitutional Education and Awareness.²²

Just last month the National Civics Assessment Report on civics and citizenship in Years 6 and 10 reported disturbing results about the continuing lack of basic knowledge among Year 10 students. Only 34% could identify the correct answer (“The framework for the ways Australia is governed”) from four alternatives to the basic question “What is the Australian Constitution?”. There remains a great need for community education as identified by the Senate Report for the debate about a republic to be better informed.²³ It is the obvious place for any government to start.

The inevitable first new aspect of the debate has been about the meaning of the 1999 referendum result. An important thread of monarchist argument, often picked up in popular contributions to debate like letters to the editor, has been that the matter has been decided because the people have spoken. Republicans have had their chance and should cease the debate (or as Kerry Jones once put it, the republicans had their chance and they blew it).²⁴

This argument has no substance at all other than as a debating point. The referendum was won by a coalition of monarchists and direct election republicans. The No Committee was constructed in this way with the participation and support of key republicans including Ted Mack, Phil Cleary and Clem Jones. The slogan was “Say No to this Republic”, implying a further referendum if/when this one was defeated. Furthermore the most comprehensive study of the referendum demonstrates conclusively that republicans actually carried the No vote over the line. Indeed, even a majority of the 55% No voters declared themselves to be republicans.²⁵ Whether or not a second referendum can be carried is another matter.

Secondly, both the ARM and the Labor Party have switched from supporting a particular type of republic in 1999 to a plebiscite-driven process by which Australians themselves would choose which type of presidential selection process would be included in the referendum. This is a change from a top down to a bottom up approach. There would be two plebiscites, one asking a general Yes/No question and the second asking a choice between types of republic such as parliamentary appointment or popular election.

Monarchists have attacked the plebiscite approach on various grounds. These attacks have included questioning the constitutional propriety and/or cost of the exercise and daring the ARM to declare its preferred model. But this method of ascertaining public opinion is quite a respectable one and has been used in Australia previously in the matter of the choice of the new National Anthem to replace God Save the Queen.

There has been a considerable hardening of the position of ACM that the Governor-General is the Head of State of Australia. The burden of this argument has been provided by Sir David Smith, former Official Secretary to various Governors-General, but taken up enthusiastically by others in the ACM and its supporters. In a recent speech, Senator Nick Minchin claimed that it was a “lie” to describe the Queen as the Australian Head of State.²⁶

This strategy followed a period when monarchists began to argue that head of state was not a constitutional term, therefore it was inappropriate to use it at all in the republican debate. The new position is an arcane argument that moves away from the more sensible position adopted by the No case in 1999 that the Queen is the official Head of State, while the Governor-General is a de facto Head of State carrying out the role as the Queen’s representative in her absence. This new strategy has probably been a short-term winner for monarchists in muddying the waters about the central republican claim that only a republic will give Australia its own head of state. But it is a longer term dead end for monarchists as it reduces the Queen to the much vaguer position of sovereign reigning over Australians. This vastly underestimates the continuing social and cultural role of the Queen and her successors in Australian public life. It will only accelerate the eventual disappearance of the Queen from Australian life.

The most recent development in the debate, though it has a long history, is the suggestion that Australians should wait for the Queen to die before pursuing the issue further. Former prime minister Bob Hawke was of this view. Now it is gaining more general currency. Another former prime minister Gough Whitlam has apparently recently become an adherent. Public opinion polls suggest an electoral logic for this view, given that Prince Charles is far less popular than the Queen.

Malcolm Turnbull, leader of the Yes case in 1999, now holds this view too.²⁷ This sincerely held belief enables him to reconcile for the time being his republican sentiments and his uncomfortable position within the Liberal Party which remains divided on the question. But no one who holds this position, including Turnbull, has fleshed out what it might mean in practice in Australia.

It is an ill-thought-out soft option that should be unacceptable public policy, certainly to republicans and even to monarchists. Does it mean the end of public discussion about monarchy/republic until the death of the Queen, whenever that might occur? Does it mean that the necessary public consultation, including perhaps a general plebiscite on the question, so that the nation should be in a state of readiness, should not proceed? We await answers.

Conclusion: The Trajectory

My overall conclusion is that the odds favour the status quo. Republicans have a reasonable chance of success, perhaps one in three, but the odds are not in their favour. A republic is certainly not inevitable. Republicans need to take their chances, which is all any movement or group seeking change can expect. The same could be said of many other proposals for reform.

The visibility of the monarchy in Australia is, nevertheless, likely to continue to diminish in many non-constitutional aspects of Australian life whatever the fate of the movement for an Australian Republic. This outcome may be small comfort to republicans. In large part this development has been encouraged by the defensive strategy of monarchists to downplay the role of the monarchy. While some monarchists may be happy with such an outcome if it preserves the constitutional status, those who would like the British monarchy in Australia to play anything like the broader social role that it does in Britain will be disappointed. It will ensure a hollow constitutional monarchy in Australia.

In the short term it is more likely than not that the Rudd government will choose not to act even should it win a second term. In this first term other issues, like the Bill of Rights consultation, have been placed ahead of the republic in the government's crowded pecking order. But a statement of intent during the 2010 election campaign remains possible.

The medium term, five to ten years, is harder to predict. But should Turnbull become Prime Minister prior to the end of the reign of the present monarch it is more likely than not that he too will choose not to act. It is an intriguing question, however, whether a future republican Liberal PM like Turnbull might be more likely to forge a non-partisan republican consensus than a Labor PM like Rudd.

There is, however, a great deal of unpredictability in any scenario about the future trajectory of the debate. Within Australia the major unpredictability is the future path of party politics in terms of leadership and election outcomes. Outside Australia there is the uncertain longevity of Queen Elizabeth II. There may be other triggers but triggers, like the Bicentenary in 1988 and the Centenary of Federation in 2001, have not proved enough in the past. They have limited power.

Should Australia not become a republic over the next twenty years or so then it may be because of disinterest rather than active and informed support for the status quo. Disinterest is enough for a monarchist status quo to prevail. The necessary clear majority of the population, while republican in principle, may not believe that the constitutional change required is worth the effort. The task of republicans is to convince them that it is, while the hope of monarchists is that the limited appeal of the status quo will prevail.

The task of republicans is to turn the majority support that undoubtedly exists among leading Australians (known dismissively as elites) into the sort of popular majority that

would carry a referendum. The task of defenders of the status quo is to prevent that or to hope that it doesn't happen.

Is there more that the republican movement can do? Some republicans certainly have advocated that a change in strategy is in order. The movement does have at least two strategic options that have been raised in debates over the past decade.

The first is to broaden the agenda of constitutional change. The suggestions have included linking the republic to Indigenous Reconciliation.²⁸ The second is to revert to supporting a model, but on this occasion to support direct election rather than parliamentary appointment. Research suggests that this may be the second preference of many monarchists anyway and it is extremely popular in the wider community.²⁹

My personal view is that the movement should not be tempted by either option at this stage. The single issue of the republic is big enough on its own. And the best role for the Australian Republican Movement is to be an umbrella under which all republicans can be comfortable and from which position ARM can facilitate rather than determine the choice of the community. But the longer the debate continues it is likely that strategic options like these will be given considerable attention.

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- ²⁹ J. Pyke, "The republic: has Labor got the perfect wedge?" *IPA Review*, May 2008, pp 40-41