

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS BY SENATOR MARISE PAYNE, DEPUTY CHAIR

1.1 The Committee's inquiry into an Australian republic has facilitated a valuable discussion about how Australians see the future of their nation. The inquiry has explored ways to make that discussion an ongoing and continuing part of our national debate, and has proved to be a constructive role for the Committee to have undertaken.

1.2 I fully support the Committee's findings that there is a need for an ongoing and extensive information and education program, to enable Australians to be as fully informed as possible about their system of government, and about any constitutional reform that may be proposed. Should Australia proceed along the path towards a republic, it is vital that Australians are able to make informed choices. The Committee's proposal for a Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee on Constitutional Awareness and Education is an important initiative to engage the members of the Australian parliament itself in this key aspect of our democratic processes.

1.3 I would like to make some additional comments regarding a process that may form part of any future moves towards an Australian republic. I agree that it is imperative that Australians are given the opportunity to voice their opinion on the fundamental question of whether or not Australia should become a republic. It is essential that this question be answered before any further effort or resources are expended, and I therefore support conducting an initial plebiscite.

1.4 As noted in the main report, the process should not be tied to an arbitrary time frame such as a single electoral cycle.

1.5 On other aspects of the process, I am unconvinced about proceeding to conduct a second plebiscite asking Australians about their preferred model for a republic, as detailed particularly in Recommendations 15 to 19 of the Committee's report.

1.6 I am concerned that a second plebiscite may be pursued while there is still a great need for serious political dialogue about the phases of the process subsequent to the initial plebiscite. In sounding this quiet bell of caution, I emphasise that I firmly believe that Australians have the right to be actively involved in making decisions about future directions for the nation, and that I want Australians to 'own' their republic. I remain to be persuaded that a second plebiscite with a choice of republic models is the best way forward.

1.7 I note at this juncture that Australia's constitutional future is not the sole property of one side or another of the political divide and it should not be treated as such. That will undoubtedly ensure failure. It is assuredly not the property of politicians either. It is ultimately and fundamentally a matter for the Australian people, who at the least, look to their political leadership for direction on such matters. It would be very damaging if a second plebiscite and more particularly, a referendum, were to proceed without the fullest possible engagement and support across the

political spectrum. I emphasise that I do not believe we can commit to a second plebiscite and ‘hope for the best’. I want this process to work and I do not want to risk the result.

1.8 I make these observations as a strong republican from a political party where the issue of constitutional change remains a matter of individual choice, not party policy. Through the months of hearings and numerous submissions received, in my view it has become clearer than ever that we will not achieve constitutional change in this country, on this issue, without multi-partisan support for that change. The only way to ensure multi-partisan support is to equally ensure multi-partisan engagement. And so the spectre called up by some witnesses, of the ‘conservative republican’, does hover over this process and this inquiry. I note also for the record, that not all conservative republicans are believed to be located in the Coalition parties!

1.9 In short, proceeding to an Australian republic obviously means actively engaging as many republicans as possible, conservative and radical. Although there was considerable involvement of ‘conservative republicans’ at the time of the 1999 referendum, in the current republican discussion there is limited engagement of the full breadth of the political spectrum in Australia, notwithstanding the level of support for change across that spectrum. This is an important element of ensuring success in moving forward. However, without the involvement of so-called ‘conservative republicans’ and their support for the process that is eventually adopted, over and above the redoubtable efforts of even those such as constitutional lawyer Professor Greg Craven, it will be very difficult to advance successfully the proposals for change.

1.10 I also note the evidence given to the Committee by Professor Craven, suggesting that a second plebiscite with a choice of four or five republic models would encourage shallow consideration of the options. According to Professor Craven, this would be in part because with several choices on offer, there would be insufficient opportunity for full consideration by Australians of the options. In part it would also be because, with the knowledge that the plebiscite vote would not be binding, many may give only superficial consideration to their vote. As a consequence, he suggests, this would mean that there will be far less time and opportunity for the flaws of any of the proposals put to plebiscite to be exposed and discussed.¹

1.11 Whilst it could be argued that Professor Craven's views are somewhat pessimistic, I take those views seriously, as reflected in my observations above. In my view his concerns, which he suggests are broadly representative of a significant group of republicans, merit further scrutiny in determining how we should proceed. Given these concerns, and the need to ensure the multi-partisan engagement referred to previously, rushed commitment to a second ‘models’ plebiscite is unwise and is why I am not supporting the recommendations on this aspect of the process.

¹ *Submission 167*, p. 11.

1.12 As this enquiry has shown, moving towards a republic for Australia continues to be a complex and challenging process. Every Australian has the right to be involved in that process, and I trust the deliberations of this committee may have gone some way to strengthening the Australian republic in coming to fruition.

Senator Marise Payne

Deputy Chair

