

Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee

26 August 2019

My name is Dr Benjamin T Jones and I am a historian at Central Queensland University in Rockhampton. I am primarily an Australianist and my particular expertise is in republicanism and national identity. I offer the following submission to assist the Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee with its inquiry into nationhood, national identity and democracy.

In 2018 I published a book titled *This Time: Australia's Republican Past and Future*.¹ I have attached chapter three as part of this submission. It is titled 'Old and New Australia' and it outlines the radical transformation of national identity that occurred during the twentieth century. Considering episodes such as the awkward debates about the anthem, what to name the currency, and whether to have our own honours system, it argues that the change in Australia's national identity was so dramatic it should be conceived of as two separate nations.

The idea that Australia became an independent nation on 1 January 1901 is the biggest myth in Australian history. Australia in 1901 had no national flag (the Blue Ensign was a flag of government until 1954), it had no anthem (Advance Australia Fair only became the national anthem in 1984), nor did it have citizenship (Australian citizenship was created as a legal category in 1949). In the first half of the twentieth century Australians were legally British subjects and culturally British. This cultural homogeneity was enforced by the overtly racist white Australia policy. In 1954, during the euphoria of the Queen's first visit to Australia, the *Sydney Morning Herald* declared that "Australia is and always will be a British nation".²

One of the remarkable and strange features of our history is that Australia transformed itself from a British dominion to an independent nation not only without bloodshed and revolution but without any fanfare or ceremony at all. We know Australia became independent at some point because the High Court ruled in 1998 that the United Kingdom was considered a foreign power under Section 44(i) of the constitution. But when did this happen? From a legal perspective, Pr Anne Twomey argues convincingly that it was with the passage of the Australia Acts on 3 March 1986.³ From the vantage point of nationhood, national identity and democracy, it is extraordinary that Australia achieved independence so recently and yet the date and its significance is almost completely unknown by its citizens. Why is there no public holiday? Why does the government, like previous governments, make no attempt to celebrate this momentous occasion? Australian national life is poorer for its lack of reflection on this extraordinary and peaceful transition from dominion to nation.

While the language of Britishness has retreated, the privileging of Britishness remains. Australia's flag, national holiday, parliamentary oaths, as well as many public monuments and names, honour Britain, British royals, and British achievements. Australia's national

¹ Benjamin T Jones, *This Time: Australia's Republican Past and Future* (Melbourne: Redback, 2018).

² 'The Queen and the Commonwealth', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 February 1954.

³ 'We only became independent of Britain on this day in 1986', *Australian*, 2 March 2011.

symbols reflect a British dominion rather than an independent, multicultural nation in the Asia-Pacific region. This represents a failure of imagination and leadership.

Australia radically transformed its concept of nationhood over the course of the twentieth century. In the twenty-first century, new symbols are urgently needed to reflect the independent, multicultural nation that we are not the white British dominion we were. Modern Australia champions values such as democracy, egalitarianism, and community. These should be reflected in national ceremonies and in the constitution. On 2 April, the young Australians who took part in the 24th National Schools Constitutional Convention tabled their recommendation for a new preamble in the federal Senate.⁴ This should be given full consideration and held up alongside the current preamble with its obsequious language.

It is in the national interest to reopen, not only the republic debate but to instigate wide ranging discussions on national symbols, a new constitutional preamble, the national holiday, the flag and other related issues. If we accept Pr Twomey's date of 1986, then Australia is 30 years overdue for a serious national discussion on its national identity and how it can be expressed for both domestic and international consumption.

Reassessing Australia's national symbols is not an attack on our history or our heritage. It is a simple act of recognition: first that we are not a British dominion but an independent nation, and second, that our national values celebrate democracy and diversity rather than privileging Britishness. In a globalised world, it may appear that the importance of the nation-state is waning. Imagined or not, nationhood and national identity still holds great emotional power. As such, crafting national symbols and updating the constitution to reflect the national values is a project worthy of pursuit.

Perhaps most importantly, updating the constitution and the national symbols is an important act of decolonisation. Modern Australia belongs to its citizens be they First Nations or immigrants from around the world. The privileging of Britishness isolates those without British heritage and undermines the concepts of Australian independence and multiculturalism. Australia will be best served in the twenty-first century with a constitution and national symbols that espouse the values we seek to promote in the world.

Your sincere well-wisher,

Dr Benjamin T Jones

Lecturer in History
School of Education and the Arts
CQUniversity

⁴ Benjamin T Jones and John Warhurst, 'Young Australians champion 'democracy' and 'freedom' in designing constitutional change', *The Conversation*, 17 June 2019.