



Australian Republican Movement Submission to the Inquiry into the Plebiscite for an Australian Republic Bill

1. The Australian Republican Movement (ARM) welcomes both the opportunity to comment on the Australian Republic Bill 2008 and the inquiry into the Bill by the Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee.
2. The ARM has been advocating for an Australian Republic since its inception in 1991. We are a nationally based organisation with a large membership committed to the cause of an Australian Republic with an Australian Head of State.
3. An Australian Republic is about Australia's future. It's about our shared identity and place in the world. It will have a Constitution that reflects the sovereignty of the Australian people so that any Australian citizen can aspire to the highest office in the land.
4. Nearly one decade after the 1999 referendum, support for an Australian Republic remains higher than support for our current arrangements (see Nielsen Poll, September 2008). A recent opinion poll by Essential Research also shows 52% support for Australians being given a vote on the republic within the next few years with only 24% opposing (Essential Research–Sydney: February 2009). It is now appropriate that the nation reconsiders this important national issue.
5. Last year, the Australian Government's 2008 2020 Summit supported an Australian Republic as one of its big ideas. Current Labor Party policy also supports a republic, to be achieved through two indicative plebiscites followed by a referendum. The 2004 Senate Report, *The Road to a Republic*, also supported this approach. Clearly there is broad and significant support for a republic in the Australia community and parliament.
6. The ARM believes that the democratic will and sovereignty of the Australian people must be paramount in achieving a republic. Therefore we support the nation holding an indicative non-binding plebiscite on whether Australians support a republic with an Australian head of state as outlined in the Bill.
7. A staged plebiscite and referendum process allows for the Australian people to have a full conversation about the type of republic they want. It avoids the pitfalls of the 1999 republican referendum where many of the Australian people felt their voices weren't heard.
8. An initial indicative plebiscite is a necessary first step in determining the overall level of support for an Australian Republic among the Australian community. It also allows for a process which ensures Australians have the maximum possible level of choice, involvement and sovereignty in determining our republic.
9. The ARM advocates a three step process towards achieving a republic as detailed below. The proposed Bill accords with the first step of our policy.

- a. A non-binding plebiscite on the threshold question of do you want Australia to become a republic with an Australian Head of State?
- b. Following the full development of potential models by an expert drafting committee for public comment, a second non-binding plebiscite on which republican model should be put to a referendum.
- c. A referendum on an Australian Republic according to the model preferred by the Australian people voting at the second plebiscite.

10. There is a pressing need for greater community education and information around our constitutional arrangements, as recognised in the Australian Senate Report, *Road to a Republic*, of 2004. An initial plebiscite needs to be combined with the full level of public consultation and education necessary to ensure that Australians are fully informed and involved in this important decision about our nation's future.
11. There should be consideration of whether any further legislative or policy initiatives are needed in conjunction with this legislation to support these education and information objectives.
12. Section 5 of the Bill frames the plebiscite question as "Do you support Australia becoming a republic?". To make the question clearer it may be better worded as: "Do you support Australian becoming a republic with an Australian Head of State?". This makes it clear to the Australian public what the key change will be if Australia becomes a republic: an unambiguously Australian head of state and full Australian sovereignty.
13. The ARM supports the plebiscite being held in conjunction with the next House of Representatives election. This is an appropriate time to reconsider this issue given it should be around one decade after the 1999 referendum. Opinion polling still shows more Australians support a republic than a monarchy (Nielsen Poll, September 2008) and it is now time to give Australians the opportunity to reconsider this important matter. Holding plebiscites with general elections also minimises any costs.
14. If the plebiscite is held at the next election it is imperative that community education, information and consultation strategies begin now so as to ensure the Australian electorate is properly informed around these issues. This is even more urgent considering that the Australian federal electoral cycle is unpredictable and early elections are not uncommon.
15. The ARM would like to stress that multi-partisan and Government support is crucial to achieving a Republic. Therefore we encourage Senator Bob Brown and the Greens to work closely with the Government on this Bill and also to consult widely with Coalition and independent members.
16. In conclusion, the Australian Republican Movement supports the intent of this Bill with consideration of the above suggested amendment. We fully support an initial non-binding plebiscite at the next election on whether Australia should become a republic with an Australian head of state.
17. We encourage all members of the Australian parliament who support a republic to work with Senator Bob Brown to ensure this Bill is successful and receives any amendments that will ensure widespread support by our nation's representatives and ultimately by the Australian people.