

Republic and Gender

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Talk given by Sarah Brasch, National Convenor, to a study group at WEA examining the history of the republic campaign since the 1990s and why the 1999 referendum failed.

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Introduction

A republic, government by the people - women and men - is about complete, rather than partial, democracy.

Political and legislative equality is one of the essentials of a modern democracy, one of the most significant, and the most revealing, essentials.

At present, Australia is one of the few large, open, leading democracies that does not have constitutional or legislative recognition of equality between women and men, either in its Constitution or in a separate charter of rights.

Achieving formal, legislated gender equality will allow women take their place in Australian society as full citizens. This isn't the case now and requires much more attention to anti-discrimination and equity measures, together with the requisite policy statement in the Constitution.

I can't see a wholesale constitutional rewrite to address equality (and many other things) happening under our current constitutional monarchy. That, in itself, acts as a strong brake against change of this magnitude and its far-reaching consequences. Changes to our current Constitution have been few and far between since 1901. Many worthwhile and commonsense proposals, such as trial by jury and freedom of religion, have failed to reach the required majorities.

To achieve legislated equality of the sexes, therefore, can only mean the Commonwealth of Australia reconstituted as a republic - with a new (republican) Constitution. Women want to see their rights written down in order to know that they are guaranteed. Our experience of advances for women made since the 1970s is that they can be quickly reversed or removed without legislative protections. Because women want that, when it comes to equality, the Constitution is the best place to start because it provides both an overarching, national framework for our federal system of government as well as Commonwealth and state laws.

How Democratic is Today's Australia?

If the essence of a republic is true **democracy**: "How well does Australian democracy serve women right now?" That was the title of the study completed in 2007 by Sarah Maddison and Emma Partridge for the Democratic Audit of Australia, that operates out of the ANU.

The Australian Democratic Audit assesses the state of a democracy against four principles:

- a) popular control over public decision-making
- b) political control in exercising that control
- c) deliberative democracy
- d) human rights and civil liberties

Interestingly, the first three principles are about *participation* to which I return later.

Maddison and Partridge's conclusion was that things were going downhill - and rapidly - and that was in 2007. They considered then that a change of government (from Coalition to Labor) was unlikely to make much difference. Making that forecast, they commented: "Neither major party currently demonstrates much commitment to gender equality as an essential component of democracy and therefore as something that should be provided as a matter of principle". And, as we have seen in practice, they were correct.

When we become a republic, the Australian people will govern themselves completely. 'Government by the people' has to mean that women are fully part of the governing.

Are there gender issues in the concept of a republican system of government?

On the face of it, I don't think so. There are no overt gender issues in a republic. A modern republic isn't a gendered entity. By definition, it can't be, which is its greatest attraction for gender campaigners. A republic of itself, doesn't advantage or disadvantage women - or men for that matter - on the basis of gender, nor we would expect, any other group - unless to positively address issues of gross disadvantage, for example, that pertaining to First Peoples in Australia's case.

There are no clearly identifiable "women's issues" associated with a republic, thinking of things like health care, access to reproductive technology, paid maternity leave and the like.

Gender Issues in Participation

But when we come to **participation in a republic**, even participation in creating a republic, the gender issues become very obvious very quickly.

Where are the women's voices, the women's demands, the women's input and women's thinking about what our Republic will be like?

Let me digress at this point to say a couple of things about purporting to, or even having the responsibility of, representing the views of "women" in the republic debate.

"Women" are not a homogenous group, rather a group with multiple identities and interests – be they Indigenous or non-Indigenous; culturally and linguistically diverse, sexually diverse, able bodied or disabled, comfortably off or poor, mothers and

carers, employed or unemployed, executives or cleaners, the knowledgeable or the uninformed.

Thus, it's very difficult to formulate 'the women's view' on an issue like the republic. It is hard, very hard, to represent, in a single opinion, 52% of the population and a very diverse 52% at that.

The importance, however, of "a" or "the" women's view about our Republic is that it is a mirror held up to the views of the dominant formulators of constitutional change. And we have no reason to expect that those formulators won't be male, often men of considerable means and influence in politics and/or academia and parading expertise such as constitutional law.

The usual pattern is that men will talk about Australia's future government in the public domain, frame it, and occupy most of the important jobs and roles when it comes time to carry it out. It's time for that to change more than one hundred years into our federated Commonwealth democracy. That's the main reason why Women for an Australian Republic exists.

The dominant voices and opinions in debate about constitutional change in our country now are men's, as they always have been. There were no women elected to or present at the Constitutional Conventions in the 1890s although New Zealand was represented. At that time, women, generally those married to or having connections with participating men, were the only ones with any chance of getting their specific objectives heard and included, albeit with some success. But they shouldn't have been confined to the backrooms and bedrooms then and women won't accept that today, however much men are unconcerned by the situation.

Women's Support for A Republic in the Latest Campaign

Polling data shows that women's support for the republic has lagged men's support by about 10 percent consistently since 1998. In the late 1990s, it ran at about 36% and has more or less sat on this percentage since, if anything heading downwards to match the general trend - if the polls are reliable (hard to compare them with each other and over time as they ask different questions using very small samples of 1000 to 1600 respondents, sometimes fewer, and having at least a plus or minus three percent margin of error; now a variety of polling techniques are being used including self-selected online respondents).

Women either support the republic or they don't. But their support is different from men's. Going to generalise here but men are less likely to be "royalists" and more likely to subscribe to the independence arguments: "no queen or king is going to tell me what to do". The magic of the monarchy, the gold and glass carriages, pomp and ceremony are far less likely to beguile them. They can't see the point of all that stuff. Interestingly, it is a plain and practical point of view, more usually the domain of women's decision-making.

What I most often hear from women who don't want a republic is a) timidity about making the change ("is it safe/wise?") or b) extreme hostility towards 'unstable or dangerous' republics ("we don't want to be like Zimbabwe"). A lot of women don't

like the term 'President' for the head of state – it's too American! It would, of course, be quite acceptable, and probably well accepted, for our head of state to be called Governor-General but no one thought about that in 1999, nor has it been publicised since.

Thus, women appear to have definitely been prime candidates for the campaign run by the NO case for the referendum and, as a result, we've spent the 12 years since then agonising over the relative lack of women's support for the proposition: if it had been higher, would the republic have gotten over the line in 1999?

Did the Low Female Vote cause the Republic Referendum to fail?

There is no reliable data demonstrating that it was women's lack of support that failed to carry the referendum. I actually think that supporting an Australian republic is most likely to be related to formal education and breadth of experience, for example, things like overseas travel, but I've never seen any polling on that. Have a hunch, however, those data *may well* correlate with gender differences in support for the republic.

There was, however, some interesting data put out just before the November 1999 suggesting that there were some crucial softspots in women's views about the republic. One thing that would have helped in 1999 was a campaign in the popular media that was better targeted at "women", as well as people with lower levels of education and a greater variety of women speaking in the public domain in favour of the republic in terms that most women (people) could understand, explaining the elements of the proposal clearly and simply.

It was a huge fault of the 1999 campaign that the second republic bill, the Presidential Nominations Bill, providing for nominations for the head of state from the public, was never mentioned by the YES case (...do have to wonder whether the celebrity spokespeople and former politicians like Bob Hawke and Malcolm Fraser even knew about it). There wasn't enough detail/fact in the YES campaign setting out the nuts and bolts of the change. The television advertising was emotional, designed around children running free in the fields and a catchy tune, all in soft focus. Curiously, it was almost identical to the adverts run by the NO campaign and it was quickly obvious that the expensive PR firms didn't understand what a republic was or meant - or if they did, they couldn't explain it in simple facts to the electorate.

It is a matter of great regret to WfaAR that the 1999 debate became very polarised, very quickly and degenerated into a shouting match over a very small number of highly emotional and damaging slogans about the safety of a republic (if it ain't broke don't fix it), its design (the politicians' republic) and the selection of the President, that hardly represented what being a republic was all about. Even as far as the selection of the head of state was concerned, public understanding generally didn't comprehend the full picture of what was being proposed to be voted on at the referendum.

The concept of the republic was poorly explained in 1999 and became a open conflict merely about the way to select the head of state. If the majority female view in 1999 had been: "we don't understand this, is this something else that the boys are

organising to suit themselves?”, then they would have tended to vote against the proposition. Because this question was there to be asked. It’s no surprise that women were turned off by the nature and aggression of the public debate; the incorrect information that was put out by the NO case (that was not answered or addressed by the YES case) and the effective slogans aimed at the waverers.

I am certainly not in the business of accepting that women are to blame for the republic not getting up. It’s just too convenient to blame the nearest woman instead of really looking for the reasons that the 1999 referendum failed. In hindsight, of course it should have failed: the people got the right answer, however they arrived at it – that’s always been WfaAR’s view.

Alternatively, we could just as easily say that the percentage of the women’s support for the republic remaining around 35% from the late 1990s presaged the uncertainty about the proposal more evident today and that women led in being cautious, with some justification in hindsight, about what a republic would mean in practice and whether it was a wise and safe course for Australia’s future governance. No one had convinced women otherwise or to back it, either then or now.

Perspectives in Hindsight

It is, of course, extremely unfortunate for republicans that the 1999 referendum failed because, from a political perspective, you need to take your chances when they are on offer. Often there’s only one shot, one time, one opportunity to get something through and onto the statute books. It wasn’t as if it wasn’t the right time or the country wasn’t ready to become a republic. By 1999, it was and we were.

A fortnight after the vote, Susan Mitchell wrote an article in ‘The Australian’ that was pretty accurate from the point of view of women voters. She said that it was obvious in hindsight that blokes were telling women what to do, that the campaign consisted of silly old blokes engaged in willy waving; that the republican women were nice and pretty – they were the wives of political leaders or influential men but had little in common with most women (unlike Kerry Jones, Executive Director of Australians for a Constitutional Monarchy and Jocelyne Scutt of Women for a Real Real Republic, both stridently supporting the NO case and Pauline Hanson, leader of the One Nation Party who thought the country had better and more important things to do.....), that the YES republicans had no female leaders to speak of and finally, “that women smelled the blokes, their arguments and power games a mile off and weren’t buying them”.

Ian McAllister, too, had an interesting article published in 2001 in the Australian Journal of Political Science based on the 1999 Australian Constitutional Referendum Study by Bean, Gow and McAllister funded by the ARC. This suggested that the attachment to Britain may have been a bigger factor in support for the republic than previously thought. Although there’s no gender disaggregated data in the study (more’s the pity), this also points in the direction of another soft spot in the women’s vote. There is something about women’s attachment, whatever their ethnic background but especially those of Anglo-Celtic origin, to Britain and to the British Royal Family, ‘the Women’s Weekly factor’ as I termed it after the referendum (ANU seminar December 1999) that persuades them that it mightn’t be such a good idea to

forego the country's formal ties to the British monarchy. It's hard to put a finger on what it is precisely, but I expect that we are stuck with this factor, increasing rather than decreasing in popularity, for the foreseeable future.¹

The pity of it is that the attachment to the British Crown would have been weaker in the late 1990s after the death of Princess Diana than it is now, over ten years into the 21st century. Regrettably, we may be waiting for Elizabeth II's death to see this inexplicably strong attachment and respect (manifested as a failure to act to sever the ties, to even entertain the notion, or overwhelming inertia in the face of conservatism/greatness) fall away again although there is no logical reason why this event, in itself, would or should trigger massively increased desire and immediate processes leading to an Australian republic. And these days, feelings in favour of a British constitutional monarch, based on sixty years of 'devotion, respect and stability' under Elizabeth II are likely to also be stronger among men, rather than being a factor that only affects women's support for a republic.²

In practical terms, the inability to pull away from the British monarchy appears to translate into thinking along the lines: "a government headed by the British crown has worked well and, therefore, is stable and desirable". Of course, this isn't true, merely deceptive. This easy, shallow analysis fails to recognise that it is the way that our government works with its Westminster features and based on the commonsense of the Australian people and its elected representatives, not the role of the British monarch at its head, that makes the Australian version of democracy 'stable and desirable'.

Ultimately, the Australian republic will be ours, women's and men's, so that we can have a complete democracy. Both genders have to make it happen, participate in its creation and jointly administer under its freedoms and principles.

¹ In 1957, Richard Hoggart referring to the British and the monarchy wrote in "The Uses of Literacy" that the monarchy was "scarcely thought of by the working classes; they are not royalists by principle. Nor do most harbour resentments against it...." Mature working class women "think of the members of the Royal Family as individuals caught up in a big machine manipulated by 'Them'.... and thus feel "well disposed" towards these unfortunates. Quoted in *The Reinvention of a Monarchy* by David Hayes, Deputy Editor of *openDemocracy* and published in *Inside Story*, June-July 2012

² For instance, leader of the YES campaign in 1999, Malcolm Turnbull (now a federal Liberal MP) was the first reported person to say, in February 2007, that the Australian Republic would now have to wait until Queen Elizabeth II's death. This statement has since become entrenched in Australian political discourse as the convenient and irrefutable excuse for the Australian Government (Labor since December 2007 despite having a republic policy in its platform) not pursuing a republic.