

Letter to The Canberra Times
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Dear Editor

Frank Cassidy should know ("Act Swiftly on Republic", 20 December, page 14) that Australian referendums must specify the changes to be made to the Constitution even if the final question is a Yes/No answer as in "Do you agree" etc. This was the case in the republic referendum in 1999 and therein lies both the detail and the devil.

That is why it will be more useful and, certainly, more efficient to hold at least one advisory non-binding vote in order to find out what voters think about several aspects of the change before any referendum is held.

Neither the Prime Minister nor the current ARM chair, Peter Fitzsimons - who despite his formidable campaigning skills, is not full bottle on constitutional change technicalities - are across the ARM's latest policy on a plebiscite announced in mid September. ARM now officially supports two questions at this vote: one about whether the voter favours the country becoming a republic, the second about the voter's preferred method for selecting the head of state, most likely a choice between four or five options including direct election.

Our group favours even more questions such as how our country should be referred to (Republic of Australia?) and whether our head of state should be called President or Governor-General, the latter appearing to be a major sticking point for female voters.

This approach avoids the intense polarisation around Yes/No questions or a choice only between two possibilities as we have seen in the last couple of years, for example in the Scottish independence vote in 2014 and the New Zealand flag change final vote earlier this year.

Voters are going to have to take a republic plebiscite framed like this seriously, be informed and think, the best form of democratic participation. The only way that we are ever going to become a republic, bearing the post 1999 history in mind, is to let the people decide how it is to be done not just whether it should happen or not.

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