

Women for an Australian Republic

**Submission to Senate Finance and Public
Administration Committee**

**Inquiry into a Bill for an Act to require a Plebiscite
on whether Australia should become a Republic**

Women for an Australian Republic

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Introduction

1. Women for an Australian Republic (WfaAR) supports the intention of Senator Bob Brown's Bill for a plebiscite and acknowledges his persistence in keeping the Republic before the Australian people, in this instance, through the federal Parliament. We agree with the Senate's reference to the Finance and Public Administration Committee that this issue is extremely important for *the public and the Australian Parliament* and that the process by which it is progressed has appropriate public input, is properly scrutinised and debated in the Parliament - and elsewhere.¹

Proposed Single Question

2. While Senator Brown proposes a single threshold question in his Bill, WfaAR considers that the process for this plebiscite needs to be put in context: does Senator Brown propose one, two or multiple plebiscites before a referendum on the Republic? That is not clear from the Bill or Explanatory Memorandum but, in our opinion, does have a bearing on how, and how many, questions should be framed for the non-binding vote/s. We have assumed in this submission that Senator Brown proposes a single plebiscite before referendum.

3. WfaAR's view is that at least two plebiscites are required before the final referendum on the Republic. The first plebiscite would preferably have multiple questions while the second plebiscite would deal with the method for selecting the head of state for a second time and any other issues requiring clarification arising from the responses to questions in the first plebiscite. The purpose of having at least two plebiscites before referendum is to allow maximum public involvement in all the choices to be made about the Republic – not only for the one to be made about the method for selecting the head of state.

4. The first plebiscite should have multiple questions covering a range of issues about the Republic on which the people can express an opinion:

- (a) Should Australia become a Republic replacing the Queen with an Australian head of state?
- (b) Should the head of state be called i) President or ii) Governor-General?
- (c) Should the powers of the head of state be defined?
- (d) The head of state should be selected by:
 - (i) the Prime Minister?
 - (ii) a two-thirds majority of the federal Parliament?
 - (iii) an electoral college?
 - (iv) direct election involving all voters?

5. The questions in para 4 are based on the Royal Hotel Resolution - with our additions - developed at the People's Convention held at Corowa in December 2001. This event remains the most recent and large-scale vote on the plebiscite questions

¹ Paraphrased from the Senate's reference to the Committee.

with self-nominating attendees from all parts of the country, representing all walks of life and with a significant number of women participating.

6. The questions could be worded in many different ways. The formulation above is not intended to be definitive as far as wording is concerned, but to indicate the topics that the questions at the first plebiscite should at least cover, there may be others.² Question 1 could be worded similarly to Senator Brown's Bill: Should Australia become a Republic? with no reference to the Queen or an Australian head of state or, using his exact words: Do you support Australia becoming a republic? Question 3 could be more formally expressed as: Should the powers of the head of state be codified?

7. We think the wording of the questions should be simple and clear and that the words "Australia" and "Australian" should appear as often as possible to promote support for the proposition.

Gaining Support for a YES Vote at a Single Plebiscite

8. WfaAR believes that a single threshold question will be voted down. This is because it does not define, or even suggest, what sort of a republic we would have and which head of state voting process will be eventually used. Alternatively, a threshold question is necessarily limited in content and could be interpreted to imply that the people will not be much involved in the other debates and decisions about the Republic, if at all.

9. A single threshold question is highly likely to be dogged by the same controversy that swirled around the 1999 referendum about what sort of republic was on offer and why only one model – "the politicians' republic" – was presented, with direct election being the (rather large) unmentioned elephant in the room. The anti-republic campaign was easily run, quickly understood and its catchphrases readily taken up. It is precisely because the contra case was run with such ease in 1999 - and its success - that we believe that the first plebiscite should be open and honest, encompassing the main decisions to be made about the form of the Republic, including names for features of the Republic and key persons and canvassing the selection methods for the head of state, *in addition to the threshold question*.

10. Even if there is no clear preference expressed at that time on some or all of the questions, the responses from the people will guide further work to be done by the experts and educators before the second plebiscite (presumably using a Constitutional Convention-type process and expert committees advising the Government) before the questions are put again and voted on at least oncemore before the final referendum.

11. Perhaps Senator Brown considers that a single question would be easier to deal with at the same time as a general election because it can be simply defined and argued? However, WfaAR thinks that an issue as important as the Republic does not deserve to be short-changed by *apparent* simplicity especially given the risks outlined the previous paragraphs. Much more emphasis should be put on the likelihood of

² If there was a serious proposal on the table to change the name of our country from the Commonwealth of Australia to the Republic of Australia, for instance, we would expect that to be put to the people at the first plebiscite.

success before any options are voted on, even if non-binding. If the single threshold question failed to gain more than 50 percent in favour at the first plebiscite because it was not indicative enough, it would be a severe setback for obtaining the Australian Republic.

Proposed Timing to Coincide with the next House of Representatives Election

12. We do not agree with this proposal. A plebiscite on the Republic timed to coincide with the next federal election is desirable in a perfect world and to minimise costs but WfaAR believes that the Republic needs its own air to be properly and fully debated throughout the community. This is not likely to happen in the environment of a general election, that may be conducted in a short timeframe or in circumstances out of the Government's control. As the House of Representatives does not have fixed terms, it is difficult to predict when the next election might take place. This makes public education and campaigning problematic. The Republic risks not only being side-lined or subjugated if voted on at the same time as a general election but, potentially, also voted down for that very reason.

Impact on Women

13. Women are unlikely to vote in favour of a single question that leaves matters of detail unexplained or suggests complexity or concealment. Women prefer more information and context so that they can understand what is being proposed and clearly see its implications. If a single question results in uncertainty or, in particular, creates controversy, women will be more likely to vote NO.

Technical Issues with the Bill

14. We have no issues to raise.

Other Comments

15. Naming of "Non-binding Votes"

WfaAR prefers that "plebiscites" are referred to as "non-binding votes" or "advisory referendums". Use of the word "plebiscite" implies that there is something secret or special - and having legal force - about the process which *the people* cannot, or should not, understand. Hence, it is alienating. We note that our preferred term "advisory referendum" is used in the Explanatory Memorandum.

16. Costs of a Plebiscite

The Explanatory Memorandum also contains a Financial Impact Statement as required. It says the cost of holding a plebiscite at the next election would be around \$10.5m based on the cost of a referendum held in 1984 of \$4.0m, along with \$31.7m³ for the simultaneous election. We are unable to source these dissected figures noting that the cost of the standalone 1999 republic referendum is estimated as \$66.2m in

³ www.aec.gov.au: Costs of Elections and Referendums 1901 to present, accessed 31 January 2009. The cost of the combined 1984 election and referendum is listed as \$38.4m on the website.

1999-2000 on the Australian Electoral Commission's website (compared with the cost of the 1998 election of \$96.7m⁴.)

The point that WfaAR would like to make is that the funding required to hold plebiscites, referendums and the like as a single electoral event, or in conjunction with federal elections, is a proper cost of active democracy to the Government. The amounts involved are relatively small in the overall federal Budget - no referendums have been held for nearly ten years so they have commanded nothing in outlays in recent memory. Costs should not be a factor in determining the timing of the next vote/s on the Republic.

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⁴ www.aec.gov.au: as above; there is no basis provided for the costings of the simultaneous 1984 referendum and election on the AEC website that could be located.