

# Australian Republic: so what?

On Saturday 6th November 1999 there was an Australian national referendum. The question: should the constitution be changed so that Australia becomes a republic? The people's decisive answer: no!

Australia is a constitutional monarchy. The head of state is the British Queen, whose agent in Australia is the governor-general, who is appointed by the (Australian) prime minister. The referendum question proposed getting rid of the monarchy and replacing the governor-general by a president, who would be selected by parliament.

There are very few monarchists left in Australia. Nearly everyone wants a republic. The referendum failed because the republican camp was seriously split. Many republicans wanted a president directly elected by the people rather than by the parliament, and rather than accept what they thought was a flawed republic, they voted no in the referendum.

Interestingly, analysis of the vote showed

support for the republic was highest in the most affluent suburbs and lowest in working class areas. Class divisions were stark. Many individuals with 'progressive' views are ardent republicans.

The most worrying aspect of this whole affair is how worked up people got over something that changes so little. The proposed president was to have the same powers as the governor-general: virtually none. In other words, changing to a republic means exchanging one figurehead for another.

At a referendum in Tasmania years ago voters were given a choice between two dams. The government did not include the important option of not building a dam. Environmental campaigners pushed for and achieved a large write-in vote of 'no dams'.

For the republic referendum, I wrote in 'no head of state' plus a few comments about direct democracy. My vote was 'informal', a term for an improperly completed ballot paper that doesn't count in the tally. However, my individual action had little impact since

the 'no head of state' option was not mentioned in the referendum campaign.

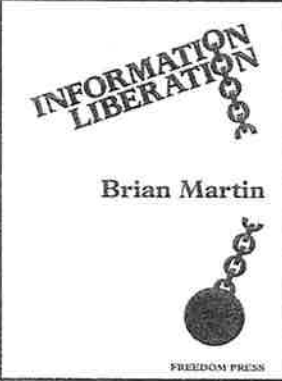
Incredible passions were raised in the campaign. The media covered the issue extensively for months and letters columns and radio shows were inundated with comment. It seems that Australians do want a head of state and that it matters to them how the head is chosen and what the head is called. There was little discussion of more substantial changes in how the country is run. Needless to say, self-management was off the agenda!

The illusion that the head of state is really important appears to be deep-seated. Suppose that BHP, Australia's largest company, proposed to change the name of the chair of the board to 'president' and ensure that the person was an Australian. Few people would get excited about this. After all, the structure of power within BHP would be unchanged. Yet the equivalent symbolic change in the political sphere was treated with great concern and seriousness.

Personally, I don't mind the Queen being Australia's head of state. It is so ludicrous that it promotes public disdain and inhibits patriotism. More dangerous would be an Australian republic in which 'nationalist' sentiments could be more readily mobilised against dissent, global solidarity and humanitarianism.

One consolation from the outcome is that many people voted no because they don't trust politicians, in this case to pick the president. The challenge is to convert this distrust of politicians to initiatives to do without them at all.

Brian Martin



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