

This time, the republic movement must be community driven

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Greg Barns

The Australian people, not politicians, should decide how we become a republic, and what it looks like, if the 1999 failure is not to be repeated.

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ARM leader Malcolm Turnbull in 1999.

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On this Australia Day, those of us who support replacing a British monarch with an Australian head of state have some good news: all state and territory premiers and chief ministers, with the exception of the republican Western Australian Premier Colin Barnett, have signed an unprecedented joint letter calling for an Australian republic. Barnett presumably didn't sign the letter because his state has a large number of English migrants and it's an election year in the West.

But having political consensus on the need for Australia to finally untie the knot to Buckingham Palace is one thing. Translating that into a reality of a successful constitutional referendum outcome, which requires four of the six states and the national vote to be in favour of a change, is another thing altogether. There needs to be a mechanism for a genuine, transparent community-driven consensus on how we become a republic, and what it looks like, if the failure of the 1999 Republic Referendum is not to be repeated.

The 1999 referendum, which saw a nationwide 45 per cent support for an Australian head of state (with Victoria closest to gaining 50 per cent plus 1 of voter support), and the lead-up to it, had some valuable lessons and we need to take careful note of them in planning for a successful push this time around.

In 1999 Malcolm Turnbull's Australian Republican Movement (ARM) campaign was derailed by sharp politics on the part of then prime minister, and arch monarchist, John Howard. The cynical, albeit clever, manipulation by Howard, of the way in which the pathway to a republic was set out, doomed the push for an Australian head of state by 2000.

Howard held a two-week constitutional convention in 1998 and insisted that it come up with one model of how an Australian head of state would be elected. The ARM model of a parliamentary election process was successful at the convention but it allowed the sizeable group of republicans such as former independent federal MP Phil Cleary, who support the people directly electing their



We did not see them passing by..... Peter Greig

head of state, a chance to join the monarchists in arguing that what was being proposed was a "politicians' republic" and therefore undemocratic.

Illustration: Robin Cowcher

The campaign was effective in scaring off many republican-leaning voters and in tapping into the strong current of anti-politician sentiment in the electorate.

Since 1999 the debate about how a head of state would be chosen has been low-key but no one should kid themselves that it remains the one stumbling block to achieving an Australian republic. So how do we ensure that this obstacle is cleared, if not removed?

In our book *An Australian Republic*, published in 2006, Anna Krawec and I flagged the idea of a deliberative democracy process as a useful mechanism to enhance the chances of a republic becoming a reality.

Deliberative democracy is a process devised in modern times in the early 1980s in the United States, which brings together samples of voters to learn about and discuss a particular issue. Participants hear advocates from each side of an issue, independent experts and other citizens.

Most famously it was used in the 1999 Republic Referendum over a weekend in Canberra when a group of randomly chosen citizens heard each side of the republic debate and voted at the end of the weekend. In the US it is a commonly used tool for decision making on contentious issues. The Canadian province of British Columbia held a yearlong deliberative assembly process a decade ago to help design a new electoral system. Another province, Ontario, undertook a similar process on the same issue in 2007.

A deliberative democracy process dealing with the republic could be sponsored by a forum of COAG – the Prime Minister, premiers and chief ministers. A random selection process of, say, 300 Australians, a man and a woman from each electorate, and, critically, Aboriginal representatives, with co-chairs appointed by COAG, would provide for a truly representative democratic exercise.

In that group of 300 or more would be monarchists, direct electionists, minimalists and those who were undecided on the question of a republic.

The role of a republic deliberative assembly would be to deal with fundamental questions such as whether there ought to be a plebiscite and then a referendum, or simply a referendum. It would determine what would be put to voters and how. The assembly could determine the head-of-state models should be put to a plebiscite or whether a single model would be put directly to a referendum.

This deliberative assembly would hold hearings, listen to individuals, constitutional experts, lobby groups and political parties. The decisions that emerged would need to be binding on the Commonwealth, state and territory governments.

In short, the Australian people would be deciding what, when and how, in relation to constitutional reform, not politicians. Their role would be to pass any necessary mechanical legislation to enable a plebiscite and referendum to take place.

Finally, and this is critical in 21st century Australia, where so much political debate is couched in terms of self-interest (i.e. the republic won't create jobs, therefore it's irrelevant), deliberative democracy could encourage better citizenship.

US deliberative democracy pioneer [James Fishkin and his colleague Robert Luskin](#) argue deliberative democracy "may make citizens more public spirited. They may come, in the process of discussing the issues with others and, partly as a result, learning and thinking more about others and their interests, to take account of the interests of others – of either the population as a whole or at least wider sections of it."

One of the essential conditions to achieving an Australian republic is to generate widespread enthusiasm and support for the idea. A deliberative democracy approach to an Australian republic would enable Australians who are agnostic about the concept, or perhaps even hostile to it on the grounds that it will do nothing for their own interests, to experience the broader public spirit and rationale for the notion that Australians should have their own head of state.

It is time to make the republic a reality, as the premiers and chief ministers have shown, but we need ensure the road to the republic is driven by our community.

Greg Barns was campaign director for the 1999 Republic Referendum Yes case. He was national chairman of the Australian Republican Movement and, with Anna Krawec, author of the book *An Australian Republic*.



In October 1994, the chairman of the Australian Republican Movement, Malcolm Turnbull, prepared for a presentation under the republican logo in Canberra.

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