

Why the new push for an Australian republic is doomed to fail

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What passes for a new debate about a republic is a shallow fraud built on zero substance.

Australian leaders renew push for republic

State and territory leaders except WA's Colin Barnett have signed a declaration calling to replace the monarchy with an Australian head of state. Courtesy ABC News 24.

I have no problems with Australia becoming a republic. I also think this is the majority view. I do have problems with middlebrow megaphones.

The current debate, if you could call it that, about a republic is a fraud. Australia is not going to become a republic while self-appointed Dumb and Dumber are trying to dominate the process.

Let's look at the first attempt: Dumb. The agitation for a referendum began a quarter of a century ago in 1991, after it became Labor policy. Within months the Australian Republican Movement was set up. It made its first mistake by appointing the novelist Tom Keneally as its first head. Keneally is a delightful man but his appointment introduced a subtext of Irish versus English into the argument, which would be exacerbated later by the inevitable acidity of Paul Keating.

Malcolm Turnbull after the 1999 republic referendum was lost. Photo: Dallas Kilponen

What followed was a cascade of errors for the republic case. There was much misguided contempt for existing constitutional arrangements. There was gratuitous contempt for the British royal family. After Prime Minister John Howard established a Constitutional Convention, held in 1998, the republican model that emerged was a doomed pastiche.

The referendum was an abject defeat, despite the support of former prime ministers Keating, Gough Whitlam and Malcolm Fraser and unceasing cheerleading by the media.

When the people voted, the republic case was smashed. It lost in every state. It lost the national vote by a landslide, 55 per cent to 45 per cent.

Now comes a sequel, which brings us to Dumber.

The logic, as far as I can tell, is that Australia now has a Prime Minister who championed the republic cause during the 1999 referendum as head of the Australian Republican Movement. Therefore, one plus one equals two.

Malcolm Turnbull, however, has never been accused of being dumb, let alone dumber.

He has become much more politically adroit than he was 18 years ago. As such, he is keeping at arms' length from the Dumber sequel. As he said on Australia Day: "Frankly, there was more [republican] momentum in the late '90s than there is now."

The Prime Minister also pointed out that there is already a pre-existing log of national matters in the pipeline. First is a plebiscite on same-sex marriage. Then there is constitutional recognition of the Indigenous people.

The recognition process has become so mired that it has gone through four prime ministers and shows no prospect of even getting to the starting gate, let alone passing at a referendum.

The detail is difficult. It is make-or-break.

This time around, the Labor national leader lending his name to the republic push is Bill Shorten. He wants to appear more decisive and progressive than Turnbull on the issue. But Shorten is, politically, a dead man walking. His opportunism here is also naked. Turnbull, not Shorten, has done the heavy lifting for a republic.

The Dumber version, learning nothing, is again indulging in celebrity and mockery. Queen Elizabeth II is irrelevant to the process. She should be left out of it. So, too, is Prince Charles.

At the centre of the Dumber sequel is the insulting recycled claim that Australia is an insecure nation for having a foreigner as head of state and will not be a whole democracy until the British monarch is removed from the constitution. I wish people would stop projecting their own insecurities onto the nation.

It has long been an iron convention of Australian politics that the head of state, in practice, is the Governor-General. For more than 50 years, only Australians have served as Governor-General, and that, too, has become an iron convention.

Conventions are not expendable. They are core to the operation of the Constitution. The central role of political parties, for example, is based on conventions, not the Constitution.

Far from suffering from democratic cringe, Australia is one of the world's oldest, most stable and adaptable democracies. That democratic evolution is now almost 200 years old. The first Parliament in Australia, the NSW Legislative Assembly, can trace its roots back to 1823. Few nations have democratic continuity longer than this.

Crucially, the Dumber republic push does not even have a model for constitutional change, or a process for creating a model. Without a model, there is nothing.

Instead, an asinine idea is being floated that there should be some vote on a republic without doing any of the hard stuff. Do the soft stuff first and leave the hard stuff for later. This idea would consign Australia to a constitutional limbo, with no certainty that a model acceptable to the people would be formulated and pass at a referendum.

The hard stuff, the model, is everything. The talk is cheap.