

CAPEs – Agrégation

Champagne Republicanism

Australia's Challenge to the Imperial Connection

An Interview with John Keane

by Norma Denny

John Keane is professor of Politics at the University of Westminster, London, and Director of the Centre for the Study of Democracy. Born in Australia and educated at the Universities of Adelaide, Toronto and Cambridge, he has been awarded many scholarships and prizes. In 1992 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts. A frequent contributor to radio, television, newspapers, and magazines, he has written many books, including the prize-winning Tom Paine. A Political Life (1995), Reflections on Violence (1996), and The Media and Democracy, which has been translated into seventeen languages. The Times of London recently ranked him as one of Britain's leading political thinkers and writers whose work has "world-wide importance." He is currently writing a biography of Václav Havel.



As an Australian and a specialist in political philosophy how do you react to the present debate concerning constitutional reform versus radical reform in favour of a republican system?

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For my generation of Australians, the current vigorous debate about Republicanism is a welcome surprise. It is undoubtedly a serious challenge

to an imperial connection which has lasted more than two centuries, in which the Australians acted, as the author Thomas Keneally has said, as “cargo-cultists.” Once they waited for and received their rations in a penal colony by ship, over huge distances from Britain. In the 20th century the cargo cultism continued, as many contemporary republicans would have it, in that Australians waited upon the imperial connection, the ships of the imperial connection, for confirmation of their own identity, and confirmation of their national sovereignty. So the current controversy about a republic and the future of the Australian Constitution represents something of a rupture of this cargo-cultism.

You are also, I believe, on record as saying that you are struck by the contrasts between the republicanism of the past and that of the present?

I should say at the outset that Australian republicanism is hardly comparable to the actions of the musket-wielding colonists doing battle against the Redcoats, and it's not to be compared to the 18th century French response to monarchy; a trial, a ritual enactment of the fall of the Ancien Régime, a public assertion of the legitimacy of the Revolution. And there are certainly no resemblances in contemporary Australian republicanism to the charge of high treason against Charles Stuart, King of England, during the failed “English Revolution” of the 1640s. Currently there is no talk of the kind Cromwell engaged in, for example to Algernon Sidney, when he said that the opponents of monarchy would cut off the monarch's head with the crown upon it. Australian republicanism is unlike these 17th and 18th century precedents. But it is nevertheless a period of liberation, not only a psychic liberation from the kow-towing of the past. There is also a sense that history is at stake, a growing sense of the worth of Australia as an independent country, and consequently a challenge to the imperial connection. Many see that Australia is ahead of the United Kingdom, in the sense that monarchy will be abolished in Australia before the same thing, as unthinkable as it might seem, will surely take place in the UK.

Will republicanism succeed in your opinion, and what effect will this have on Australia's world role?

Within the next ten years Australian champagne will be drunk to the abolition of the monarchy—most probably at or around the time of the Sydney Olympic Games in the year 2000. The only uncertain matters are questions like: Who will open the Olympic Games? What kind of head of State will there be? Who will replace the Governor-General and the Queen? Will it be a directly elected President, as some of the left-wing republicans would prefer, or will it be a compromise in which the new Head of State is

appointed by Parliament? How will the constitutional changes be affected? These are important questions for all Australians. As a lad who grew up in Adelaide with mixed monarchist and republican sentiments—my non-conformist mother loved Queen Elisabeth II, my lapsed Catholic father refused to fight for the Empire during World War II—, I relish the public surfacing of these questions.

French students usually study British History before studying any Commonwealth History and tend to associate Australian republicanism with fairly recent developments concerning the British royal family, notably all the various House of Windsor scandals. Yet to what period should we really date Australian republicanism?

The roots of Australian republicanism run deep. Every political crisis of the kind that exists in Australia today produces a crisis of memory, struggles to define the meaning of the past. The living try in new ways to own the dead. It's therefore not surprising that Australian historiography has been touched by the republican upsurge. The greatest achievement is Manning Clark's 6-volume *History of Australia*, which was published between 1962-1987. It is a ferociously partisan book, epigrammatic and deliberately contentious, a new republican history of the clash of people and ideals in Australia, of which republicanism, he argues, has been a key.

Manning Clark is right. It was during the last quarter of the 19th century that the first systematic republican critique of class-dominated Australia emerged. Late-nineteenth-century republicans were offended by the fact that Australia was governed by an English-accented ruling class, jealous of its blood and sperm, a class which had plenty of money to spend freely at garden parties and lavish dinners, balls, and Government House functions, and which prided itself above all on loyalty to the throned Empire. This line of attack was prominent at the celebration, in June of 1887, in various Australian cities—with speeches, pyrotechnics, and royal jubilation—of the Silver Jubilee of Queen Victoria. The biggest spectacle was in Sydney, where the celebrations turned into something of a political fight about the future of the monarchy.

On June 10th that year, the leading citizens of the city, including members of Houses of Parliament, plus barristers and merchants, gathered at the Sydney Town Hall to celebrate the Silver Jubilee, only to witness a rowdy and large demonstration forcibly enter the Town Hall and ransack the meeting. The demonstrators were men who represented the Trades and Labour councils. They had their roots in the emerging labour movement, and were leaders of the Secular Association, as it was called. These were men who rejected the bourgeois and royalist sentiments of the country's political ruling group. Despite calls for "Three cheers for the Queen!," the

republican, gatecrashers responded effectively with “Three cheers for Liberty!” The fracas had something of the feel of the French and American revolutionary events. The republicans were thrown out of the meeting, and those who had organised the Silver Jubilee expressed their sense of being appalled by the events, they reiterated their loyal attachment to the laws, institutions and throne of the British Empire. They accused the republicans of fomenting anarchy and, as Manning Clark tells us, some Loyalists at that meeting were said to have shouted, “Thank God there is an English fleet in the harbour!” The Sydney Town Hall event was a watershed. Several weeks later, on July the 4th 1887, the Australian Republican Union was founded, and a monthly newspaper called *The Republican* was launched. With banner headlines of “Liberty, Fraternity and Equality,” it declared its commitment to national independence. It called for an end to grovelling, tried to fashion a new language of popular sovereignty, predicted the end of the throne and aristocracy of England, and swore that it would not give up until Australia was ruled by Australians.

This late-nineteenth-century political republicanism had its cultural wing. It spawned, and was supported by, groups of poets, songwriters, and painters, amongst whom were people like Henry Lawson, one of whose famous songs I remember from my childhood—“We’ll make the tyrants feel the sting of those that they would throttle. They needn’t say the fault is ours—if blood should stain the wattle.” You can hear in these words all the ingredients of republicanism at the end of the 19th century. Such republicanism was also powerfully given expression by painters like Frederick McCubbin. One of his famous paintings—which is now displayed in the Western Australian Art Gallery in Perth—is called “Down on His Luck.” The central image is of a swagman in the bush, poking a fire with a stick, looking forlorn. It is full of rusticism, which is paradoxical considering that Australia during this period was already the most urbanised country in the world. The same rusticism is evident in the most famous Australian song, *Waltzing Matilda*. A product of fin de siècle republicanism, *Waltzing Matilda* is a bush song, written by A.B. (“Banjo”) Paterson. It tells the story of a “swagman,” i.e. a rural labourer searching for work, who camps beside a water-hole in an otherwise dried-up river bed. As he waits for water for tea to boil in a pot, or “billy,” he sings and dances with his sleeping roll, “matilda” being the slang for the latter. Suddenly, a “jumbuck” (a sheep) comes down to the water-hole, or “billabong,” for a drink, and he pounces on it, and puts it into his “tucker bag” for food. He is unlucky. The feared “squatter,” the property owner, backed by the constabulary, “the troopers,” come and question him. On the spot, he is judged guilty of theft under the property law of the constabulary and “squattocracy.” He refuses to accept their law by committing the ultimate act of republican defiance: suicide, drowning himself in the water-hole.

Would it be correct to say that this tradition was not necessarily one that Australians can be uniformly proud of, and that it failed to achieve its own objectives?

This early republicanism certainly had its limitations. It was crudely nationalistic. Although it talked about waving high and proudly “the bonnie bright flag” of the Southern Cross, there were certain groups excluded from its vision of a republican Australia: liars, fornicators, drunkards. Its radical nonconformism was tinged with a Nonconformist moral reform crusade mentality. It also had no sympathy for the aboriginal peoples, who were regarded as mere marsupials to be wiped out by modern “progress.” Finally it both despised the Chinese hordes to the north and the small Chinese population then resident in Australia. And despite its commitment to constitutional reform and independence for Australia, it enjoyed not major political victories. Yet there is one sense in which nineteenth-century republicanism was a success. It gained ground in the cultural sentiments of the emerging civil society of that period by helping to forge the shared feeling among the Anglo-Celtic Australian stock that they were different from the mother country, that they had their own historical trajectory, their own literature, songs and paintings, in short, their own national identity.

In recent years there has been considerable interest from film-makers and historians in Australian participation in the First World War as a turning point in Australian attitudes. Do you subscribe to this view?

Yes. The tragedy and triumph of the Anzac episode is a good example of the cultural advances of the first phase of Australian republicanism. The facts are well known. The Anzac episode began just before dawn on Sunday, April the 25th, 1915 (still commemorated as Anzac Day). Australian and New Zealand troops, called ANZACS by the British, mainly working class lads, were landed on the beach near the promontory of Gaba Tepe in the Dardanelles (Turkey). It was a treacherous zone. The aim was to divest the Turkish of control of the Straits, which British and French naval power had so far failed to do. This was the same area in which 5,000 years earlier the Turks had massed for the fall of Constantinople. According to all the contemporary evidence, often in the form of letters sent home from the front, these Anzacs considered themselves to be loyal sons of the Empire—true Australian Britons. Their officers, under the command of Colonel John Marsh, considered them fairly docile, certainly patient and manageable troops. According to contemporary evidence these troops whistled their way to shore. They sang and cracked jokes as they reached the beaches, where they were gunned down. They hardly stood a chance as they were using bayonet charges against machine-gun emplacements.

The Dardanelles was Australians' first taste of total war in concentrated twentieth-century style. The consequences were disastrous—acres of dead men rotted on beaches and cliffs or floated face down in the sea. Australia lost nearly 8,000 men—a fact emphasised in Australian school history textbooks—while more than 19,000 were wounded and 700 went missing. The Turks' casualties were even higher. The campaign was finally called off in late December after many somersaults of judgement by the British High command, and the remaining troops were eventually evacuated.

As a consequence of this delay and poor judgement, the officers became the object of contempt. Contemporary source evidence makes it clear that Australians at Gallipoli came to loathe English officers who wore red, the military emblem of the upper class officer. There was a young journalist, Keith Murdoch, the father of the press magnate Sir Rupert Murdoch, who reported from Gallipoli in September 1915 that these were young soldiers who were deeply "Australian." They despised their English officers and were unafraid of death. As brave fighters, they had a special capacity to endure hardship. Some of this "Anzac spirit," as it later came to be called, is encoded in the Anzac Memorial, in Hyde Park in Sydney. I revisited it during the past year. It is a building sacred to the memory of all Australians who served in this and subsequent wars. A brass relief at the entrance reads, "Let silent contemplation be your offering." I think that these words convey only half the meaning of the Anzac debacle. For after Gallipoli many Australians made a fist out of their hearts, and shook them in the direction of London. Australian units had been slaughtered because of British calculations and stupidity, British pomp and imperial designs. Gallipoli, the Anzac Beach and the Heights above it, became the first great sacred spot in the history of Australia. The Anzacs, despite their crushing defeat, were heroes. Defeated, they had triumphed—Australia had now come of age, despite the British Crown.

So it would seem that even in the years when Australia was merely part of a vast British Empire—with an Australian people who were markedly Anglophone and Eurocentric—it was possible for an "Australian identity" to develop. How has the situation subsequently been affected by changing patterns of immigration?

Looking back on the 20th century, it is obvious just how dramatically immigration has transformed the social composition of the population of Australia. It has become the most multi-national state in the world. At the time of the Federation of Australia in 1901, the population was just under 3 million people, of whom a tiny minority, 67,000, were aboriginals, and some 3/4 of a million were overseas-born. Of the latter, 8 out of 10 were born in Britain and Ireland. At the time of Federation, in other words,

Australia was perceived by its population and governors as a white, Anglo-Celtic nation, based very strongly on British traditions and the imperial connection. During the next four decades, between 1901 and 1940, there was some gain through migration of just under 3/4 of a million people, but it is extraordinary that even at the end of the Second World War it was a country with a population of only just over 7 million people, sharing some 7 million square kilometres of territory.

After World War II, fundamental changes began. In 1945 the Federal Department of Immigration was established. Its first Minister, Arthur Calwell, championed the “populate or perish” policy. Later famous for his policy regrets and xenophobic remarks, Calwell tried rapidly to increase the population of Australia, mainly by encouraging emigration from the United Kingdom and Ireland. It’s also significant that during this period the Australian Nationality and Citizenship Act was passed. It came into force on the first of January, 1949, shortly before my birth. It introduced for the first time the new concept of Australian citizenship. Up till then, Australians had been subjects of the Crown. This legislation introducing the notion of “Australian citizenship,” combined with a growing political and economic pressure for immigrants, began dramatically to change the social identity of the population. The emphasis up until the 1970s was, wherever possible, to find British emigrants, failing that, Continental Europeans, and only later—reluctantly—Asians. Until relatively late in this period, there were strict regulations on Asian immigration. For example, until the mid-1950s Asians required permits to remain in the country. Until 1956 they had to be resident in Australia for 15 years before becoming eligible for citizenship. This was not the case for people of Anglo-Celtic stock. The policy throughout the 1950s and 1960s was one of racist assimilation—keeping Australia white—rather than pluralist integration.

Would it be true to say therefore that the 1970s could be considered as a watershed for Australia’s republican identity, and that the Australian Labour Party was instrumental in this?

It was no doubt significant that a reformist Labour Government was elected to power in 1972 under the leadership of Gough Whitlam (of whom more later). One of the new government’s first moves was to remove the last vestiges of the “white Australia” policy described here by announcing a policy shift from cultural assimilation to multiculturalism. In 1982-1983, for the first time in a century, Asia became the largest source of immigration. Especially under the government of Paul Keating, this re-orientation of Australian immigration policy towards Asia became irreversible. Keating saw correctly that the world of old Australia, favoured by the British and linked to the outside world by DC3s, Telex and liners

carrying letters and parcels, was gone for good. He understood that Australia now stood in a world of multi-national corporations, satellite communications, the Internet, Boeing 747s, European integration, and the rise of the Pacific Rim. More than any previous Prime Minister, Keating tried to break Australia's imperial connection and to switch, or try to reposition the entire political economy in the Asian region. Symbolic of this attempt was his controversial speech about Singapore, in which, on the basis of recently released government documents, he described to a stunned electorate how the British had decided during World War II to abandon Australia to Japanese imperialism. Needless to say, the speech quickly caused something of a panicked uproar amongst monarchists. Keating was also a champion of "Asian-Pacific economic co-operation." His whole idea was that immigration policy should be linked to the new economic and political position of Australia in Asia. So, for example, not only did a clear majority of people come to Australia from Asia as permanent residents, but there was also a sharper focus on the economic criteria for residence. What was most important was not skin colour or ethnic origin, but the educational qualifications and capital that potential immigrants could bring. The consequences of this dramatic reversal and transformation of immigration policy in the 20th century are now beginning to be felt.

Do Australians now accept that "Australian-ness" cannot be tied to any one identity, and is instead composed of various identities?

There has been a nasty backlash. Arthur Calwell, mentioned earlier, became infamous in my youth for speeches attacking the population of Australia by "foreigners." I remember my grandparents expressing shock at the crudeness of his favourite xenophobic accusation that 'new' Australians "breed like flies and live off the smell of an oily rag." In 1969 the Minister for Immigration, Billy Sneddon, voiced similar sentiments: "We must have a single culture, and I am quite determined it should be a mono-culture, with everyone living in the same way, understanding each other and sharing the same aspirations. We don't want pluralism," he said. The most extreme version of the backlash against a multicultural Australia occurred just prior to, during, and since the 1996 Elections, when for the first time candidates with overtly anti-migrant and anti-aboriginal sentiments were elected. The most famous of these candidates is Miss Pauline Hanson, a former fish and chip shop owner, who was able to steal a normally safe Labour seat with a 25% swing. She has subsequently created her own political party, "One Nation," and maintained a consistent focus on the immigration debate, especially concentrating on Asian migration and Aborigines. She has done more than attack immigration levels. She has also called on the new Liberal government to abolish all

immigration, to repudiate United Nations' treaties and review Australian membership of the U.N., to abolish foreign aid, to ban foreigners from owning land and to abolish multiculturalism. She intends to make it clear that Asians are not welcome in Australia, and would like to abolish the Aboriginal Commission, along with ending specific state assistance payments for Aboriginals. It is clearly an "Ein Volk, ein Partei" phenomenon, and obviously dangerous. I detest its stupidity and bigotry.

You have suggested that this transformation of immigration policy brings new opportunities for contemporary republicanism, I think?

One positive consequence of the backlash against a multicultural Australia and the rise of the extreme right is that republicanism is being forced to hand in its nationalist weapons. It is now potentially a force for a more cosmopolitan Australia, and in that respect one of the ironies of contemporary Australian republicanism is that it is in the throes of rejecting the very nationalist sentiments that originally fuelled its growth in the late 19th century.

What importance do you place on the Whitlam Affair (1975)?

Today's Australian republicanism has a lot to do with the Whitlam Affair. Under the 1901 Australian Constitution the monarch, and the Governor as her representative, have extraordinary reserve powers. For example, Section 58 of the Constitution permits the Governor-General to "reserve" any bill passed by the Federal Parliament "for the Queen's pleasure." Section 59 allows the monarch retrospectively to disallow any legislation within one year of its enactment. Under the 1901 Constitution the reserve powers for any Governor-General are very considerable. These powers were used in 1975 by Governor-General Sir John Kerr to dismiss the Prime Minister Gough Whitlam. In the events of 1975, Her Majesty was not even informed beforehand of the sacking of Prime Minister Whitlam. Almost certainly she would not have approved of the plan had she known, if only because she would have perceived correctly the inevitable damage that would be done to the reputation of the monarchy. The events were these: in October 1975 the Whitlam Government introduced its Budget for the coming year. Malcolm Fraser, the Leader of the Opposition, blocked it in the Upper House, the Senate, where it had a majority. The Government ran out of money and could not pay its public servants. Whitlam responded by calling for an election for half the Senate, which he was entitled to do under the Constitution. He expected the Governor-General to do his constitutional duty of adhering to the advice of the Prime Minister. Kerr consulted the ultra-monarchist, claret-swilling Chief Justice Sir Garfield

Barwick (1903-1997), who advised the Governor-General—extraordinarily I think—to stand firm, to dissolve Parliament and call a General Election, which he was entitled to do under one interpretation of the Constitution. The Armed Forces were placed on standby. On the morning of 11th November 1977, I remember well that Kerr, acting the part of despotic colonial governor, handed Whitlam his redundancy notice. The Stock Exchange prices soared. Glasses clinked and champagne and cabernet flowed in the Sydney and Adelaide gentlemen’s clubs. There were large demonstrations that evening in every Australian state capital, but Whitlam took the long view and called for calm. A foul election campaign followed, and, amidst general nervousness about the state of the economy and the Constitution, plus a concerted media attack on the Labour Party, the Liberals won one of the greatest landslide victories in Australian history. So, “the constitutional coup,” as it came to be known, had succeeded in the short-term. But the long-term price was to be the victory of constitutional republicanism. One of the nice ironies of recent Australian history is that two and a half decades after the Whitlam Affair the constitutional arrangements which enabled his sacking are now very much at the heart of the political debate, and look as if they will be transformed.

What essential differences have you noted between anti-monarchistic tendencies in contemporary Britain and Australia?

During the 1970s I recall that the Australian commentator A.J. Marshall remarked that in Britain many people depended on the monarchy, and found it as necessary as aspirin! It functioned as something of a pain-killer for a country suffering from imperial decline, and unwilling to come to terms with the dramatic long-term consequences. In Britain the pain-killing qualities of the monarchy—as the scandals surrounding the House of Windsor reveal—are wearing off. But in Australia there is a different dynamic. For many Australians the monarchy has functioned not as a pain-killer, but rather as a guarantor of a tacit contract, which goes something like this: we the Australian people respect and obey the monarchy as a central symbol of Britishness, in return for which you, Queen Elizabeth II, will do all that you can to respect and protect our way of life, our dignity, our sense of place in the world, as loyal half-citizens, half-subjects of the Crown. This security contract is today in deep trouble.

What do you see as the most potentially productive outcomes of this crisis?

The crisis promises a more realistic geopolitics, a realistic estimation of where Australia as a small, but rich, country is “located” in the international division of labour—i.e. in Asia. The crisis of the imperial,

monarchic contract also promises—notwithstanding Hanson et al—a more tolerant, post-nationalist civil society. Sydney is a prototype of this new and different Australia which republicanism can feed, an Australia in which multicultural differences are not only accepted but encouraged. Needless to say, many of the new immigrants in Australia have no automatic love of the monarchy, which means that multiculturalism fuels the resurgence of republican spirit. Least obviously, the crisis of the monarchy foreshadows in the Australian context a symbolic regicide, to be carried out in public, but without masked executioners, as in the French and the English cases. Republicanism promises a transformation of the population from half-citizens/half-subjects of the Crown into citizens with straightened spines, who live in a country, as Camus put it in *The Rebel*, in which the throne of sovereign power forever remains empty. Australians are in the process of putting to death a terminally ill, long-ago defeated institution, in which the monarch ruled alone, like God, over a visible and actual body politic, itself understood as an extension of the earthly sovereign's body. Monarchy was more than one individual's claim to rule, for example by Divine Right. It was also a justification of a certain kind of political order, that could only be ruled by one sovereign individual. The famous phrase of Bossuet that "the State is in the person of the prince" highlights this point. The body politic required a particular kind of leadership, a leader who was God's deputy, a peace maker, a lord of everything, sole knower of the mysteries of the State, a father who protects and lovingly disciplines his child-like subjects. We know that the public trial and execution of monarchs proved fatal to this mode of power or regime type. Assassins and court murderers could strike down monarchs in private, but putting kings on trial and executing them before an open-mouthed public killed forever two bodies, that of the king and that of the body politic. Power relations were consequently seen from hereon not as divine, or as symbolically linked to an individual of royal birth, but as contingent, that is, dependent on human actions and judgements made in public. Australian republicanism is helping to consolidate this change of perception of power.

Would I be correct in saying that you are struck by the paradoxes, ironies and novelties of modern Australian republicanism?

Such themes are prominent elsewhere in my political writing—I'm not one who favours apologetics—so, naturally they condition my own republican sympathies. I said at the outset that today's Australian republicanism is not simply a re-run of the 17th century English, and 18th century American and French republican experiences. The contexts are obviously different. The latterday challenges facing Australian republicans are obviously different too. It is also important to recognise a bitter fact:

Australian republicans' struggle for a written Constitution which is based on the sovereign people, which frees Australia in the international division of labour, and which confirms that the population enjoys citizens' rights and are not simply subjects of the Crown, will also surely force Australians to confront the conceptual and practical limitations of early modern republicanism.

To make this important distinction between these earlier models of European republicanism and the current Australian situation, ought we then to talk of the "post-republican" quality of today's Australian republicanism?

Yes. Early modern republicanism, of the kind that developed in England, France and the United States, and then in Australia, was deeply masculinist. "Mateship" and bronzed male bodies symbolised republican courage and resistance to the effeminate stupidities of the Crown. Certainly, classic republicanism as an ideal and political project criticised old-fashioned patriarchy and championed the resistance of adult men to what Thomas Jefferson and others called "the fatherly government of monarchy." But republicanism typically—Australia was no exception—stopped short of questioning the power of fathers per se, by preserving the conventional imagery of women as potentially seductive—as fickle prostitutes. Women were seen as creatures marred by their lack of virtue, their disregard for reason, and hence they were judged as fit only for the private realms of life.

And yet foreigners think of today's "Sheilas" in terms of the famous Australian feminist Dr Germaine Greer, and a relative independence and ability to express views in forthright fashion, encouraged by pioneer traditions on the Australian frontier!

Greer's refreshing iconoclasm confronts this masculinism head-on. Traditional male presumptions are still alive and well in Australia, despite the women's movement. They serve to constrain, frustrate, and physically exhaust Australian women. Their complicated modern daily lives of juggling partners, children, relatives, friends, employment, entertainment, and civic involvements are hopelessly at odds with the symbolic association of women with "home," which was a key ingredient of the old republicanism. This is one sense in which the modern movement is not a re-run of early modern republicanism.

A second example of how Australian republicanism is today having to confront the weaknesses or blindspots of the old republican tradition concerns the classical republican commitment to "the common good." Old

republicans, in Australia and elsewhere, typically supposed that there was a common good, and that it was associated with the nation and the entitlements of the nation against the Crown. Today this talk of “the common good” seems to be mere moralising, and, at worst, potentially authoritarian, simply because the connotations of the words “Australian” and “common good” have become controversial, and irreversibly so. Australia now contains conflicting definitions of what it is to be an “Australian” and what is best for Australia. At the end of the 20th century, the country is in this sense having to confront the breakdown of the fictional ideal of the public or common good.

Thirdly, Australian republicanism is having to confront the question of violence. There was a certain romanticisation of violence in early republicanism. The old republican defence of the right of all men to bear arms is a case in point. The Second Amendment to the American Constitution was its first great triumph in modern constitutional law. It states that a well-regulated militia is necessary to the security of a free state and therefore the right of a people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed. In Australia there was no such constitutional provision for the right to bear arms, but republicanism was infected with the fantasy of necessary violence against the Crown. I’ve already mentioned Henry Lawson’s image of blood-stained wattle. The same sentiment lay at the heart of the Anzac myth. Of course civility today dictates that in Australian towns and cities there is arms control and a marked reduction of the unacceptable outbursts of dramatic violence of recent years. As I’ve argued in *Reflections on Violence*, one of the imperatives of democratic government is the control of guns and the reduction of violence within every day life. This requires a breach with the more violent fantasies of the earlier republicans. Australian republicanism must move beyond Australian republicanism.

Are there other respects in which the current republican phenomenon in Australia should be considered as something both unique and new?

One odd ‘new’ feature is the strong tendency of many modern republicans to retain “monarchic hearts.” In Britain, things seem different. The republicanism which has emerged in the body politic in recent years, beginning with the Sex Pistols and now including Charter 88, whose Manifesto I helped to draft, displays hatred of the monarchy. David Hare, one of the best modern British playwrights, has for example urged Britons to “tip nanny over the cliff!” British republicans insist that the monarchy is vile, corrupt, a straightjacket, a silly hangover from former times. This sentiment of bitterness against the monarchy can also be seen in the unusual oaths taken by some British MPs on being elected to Parliament.

They are expected to say, “I swear by Almighty God to be faithful and bear true allegiance to Queen Elizabeth, her heirs and successors, according to law, so help me God.” Yet one MP, Dennis Skinner, inserted the words, “...when the Queen pays her income tax.” The famous republican MP Tony Benn prefaced his oath with “... as a dedicated republican...”! In the British context, republicanism feels dangerous, even after the recent election of the Blair Government in a landslide victory. In Australia my impression is that republicanism has softer edges. Many still have room in their hearts for monarchy. Some, for example, continue to revere Queen Elizabeth II as a “good” queen. Just recently there was in the British press a large, full-page advertisement sponsored by Australians for Native Title and other organisations, timed to coincide with a meeting between the Australian Prime Minister and the Queen. The advertisement appealed on behalf of the aboriginal peoples for the return of their land, and the confirmation of their entitlement to that land, and called for a long-awaited Prime Ministerial apology for the historic genocide against the aboriginal peoples. Wrapped in republican sentiment, the ad took the form of an open letter to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, as if she were “the good queen” of Australia.

A regression to the old, medieval idea that the monarch remains the source of all justice, irrespective of the deficiencies of individuals or the system, almost?

Exactly! One could even say that there are many Australians who hope that the monarchy will remain alive and visible in Australia, even after the country goes republican. Some of my relatives, for example, are prepared to vote for a republic, but they hope that the monarch will not disappear. This phenomenon cannot be described or understood as classical republicanism—nor as monarchism—as was evident in a dramatic incident in Sydney in 1994. The visiting Prince Charles was threatened by a Kampuchean refugee, armed with a starter pistol. The incident not only revived embarrassed memories of the wounding at a Sydney picnic in 1868 of Queen Victoria’s son, Prince Albert, the first royal visitor to Australia—welcomed with an assassination attempt! What was especially interesting about the 1994 attempt was that Charles responded with a gallant speech in which he made it clear that, although he thought constitutional change was entirely the prerogative of the Australian people, he hoped that the “traditional affection” for the monarchy would not die. He won considerable respect for that speech. Although regarded as a future king with “a stick up his bottom,” he was also seen as a “good sport.” The Australian republican debate today is strongly marked by Tom Paine’s dream of what should have happened to the monarchy during the French Revolution. Paine

wanted the monarch, Louis Capet, to be judged guilty, but to be sent into American exile rather than to the execution platform.

I had presumed that a recent Times newspaper special issue of June 19th, 1997, on “the evolving relationship between Britain and Australia, and the business opportunities this presents,” reflected a purely British desire to hang on to old ties. Are you suggesting that even some Australian republicans share this unwillingness to make a clean break?

There are many republicans and republican sympathisers—clearly now a majority of the population—who secretly dream of the day when the British Royal Family will apply for Australian citizenship and settle in Australia! It is thought they’d enjoy themselves. The Queen could for example become a patron of Toorak Bowling Club in Melbourne. She could spend every Saturday “punting” (betting) a few dollars at Randwick or Oakbank, or at the Melbourne Cup horse race. Charles himself could become a ranger in the Flinders and his estranged wife, Princess Diana, could fly in from time to time to identify with the plight of aboriginal children and publicise their scandalous maltreatment!¹

Surely such ideas only feature in the Australian comedian Barry Humphries’ satirical sketches involving the rabidly Anglophile character, Dame Edna Everage, “Australian housewife and superstar”?

No. Unlike Humphries, I am not joking. Australian republicanism is militantly in favour of constitutional change, and it looks as if it will win. But the heart of this political tendency contains strong residues of monarchist sentiment. Indeed, I predict that when the Constitution is changed, and when there is a new Head of State, at or around the time of the Sydney Olympics in the year 2000, Australia will not be describable as a “republic” in the classic sense. It will instead turn out to be something like a “crowned republic.” Let me explain this oxymoron. The simple option posed in the English Civil War, and the American and French Revolutions—either monarchy or republicanism—seems to have been surpassed in all of the old democracies, including Australia, by a new hybrid form of government whose republican leadership wears a crown. There are no texts analysing this form of state, although during the 1790s the German poet who wrote under the pen name Novalis came closest to describing it. In several essays he expressed strong support for the French Revolution, which he rightly judged would have a basic irreversible impact on Europe and the rest of the world. Yet he also insisted that citizens would probably not obey and be

1. This was written before Princess Diana’s tragic accident in Paris (editor’s note).

motivated by a mere republic. Every republic required a virtual “monarch.” He was adamant that the virtual monarch could not legitimate its own power by reference to Divine Right, which was clearly a thing of the past. Nor did he think that personal, magical qualities could compensate for the absence of Divine Right. “Monarchs” in the new republics were mere mortals, and couldn’t be expected to be treated like gods. The only remaining option was for “the good king or queen” to legitimate themselves before the public by dressing themselves in the imagery produced by painters, artists, musicians. With all due respect for differences in circumstances and details, one can see that, in the age of media-driven politics, every old democracy contains a “monarchic tendency.” Both presidential and prime ministerial forms of government encourage the return of monarchy, or the “crowning” of their republics. I predict that in Australia the same outcome is likely: the new President will find that he or she will be engaged in a constant attempt to put on a public show of pomp and authority, to turn themselves into an ersatz monarch, to play the role of an elected Queen Elisabeth who embodies in virtual form the ‘spirit’ of the country. The new ‘royal’ figureheads of the future will sometimes be loved for their arrogance. There will be times when they will be objects of laughter or contempt. But unlike the monarchs of old, the new monarchs will fall foul of the conflicts and divisions, savage media treatment, and electoral contests within the republic. Like Nixon, Berlusconi, Thatcher, and others before them, they will be impeached, outmanoeuvred, sacked, or forced into early retirement. Despite its monarchist impulses, the crowned republic of Australia will ensure that nobody permanently owns sovereign power. That is a good reason for favouring republicanism.

