[Special Lecture]

The Cultural Meanings of the Republican Debate in Australia

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Debate over Australia becoming a republic has been a recurrent feature in the nation's history even before it formally became a nation in 1901. At least as early as 1850, more than a century ago, significant republican arguments were heard (McKenna 1996). Despite this history however, the present republican debate is substantially different from any previous expression of support for Australia becoming a republic. It is different in kind not merely in degree. There are a number of reasons for this:

1. Previous republican movements were mostly confined to minority and elite opinion, to intellectuals with little direct popular support or to radical political minorities. In the 1990s this is no longer the case. The republic has become an issue discussed at the breakfast table in ordinary households and in the mainstream media as well as in the cafes or committees where intellectuals might be found.

2. For the first time one of the two major political parties, the Labor Party when under the leadership of Paul Keating, came out unambiguously in favour of the change to a republic. Keating's leadership meant that for the first time the republic was a prominent issue on the mainstream political agenda, part of the debate between the main political parties, and therefore front-page news. This had never happened before.

3. From early in the process, support for the republic crossed party lines; members of the conservative parties as well as the Labor Party have publicly expressed their support for the change.

4. Perhaps most important of all, the debate in the 1990s has not centred around the question of loyalty to Britain or to Australia's British heritage. I will explain this point in more detail later.

5. Underlying these changes, there have been profound shifts in the last two decades in every aspect of Australian social and cultural life, including its ethnic composition, its attitude towards Asia and the Asia-Pacific region, and what we might call its own 'cultural confidence'—that is, Australians' sense of having a distinctive and original culture of their own making, a culture no longer in a dependent or colonial relationship to Britain or the United States. Once again I will discuss this point in more detail later.

For these reasons I would argue that the republican debate in the 1990s in fact has very little connection with earlier forms of republicanism in Australia. It is something new that could not

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have existed in earlier decades. The forms that this debate has taken in the 1990s, what I have called its ‘cultural meanings’, reveal a good deal about contemporary Australian society and culture as we approach the twenty-first century.

II

The recent debate about an Australian republic began in the early 1990s. The years 1991 and 1992 saw the formation of the Australian Republican Movement (ARM) which featured many prominent public figures including politicians and ex-politicians from both sides of politics; the formation of the opposing group, the Australians for Constitutional Monarchy (ACM); and the election of Paul Keating as Prime Minister and his public intervention in the debate. Mr Keating took a clear republican position which he linked to a number of other important aspects of Australia’s modernisation: its increasingly close relationship with Asia and the Asia-Pacific region; economic and financial de-regulation; multiculturalism within Australia; and reconciliation with Australia’s Aboriginal population. With Mr Keating’s intervention in the debate, the question of the republic became a central issue on the mainstream political agenda and an issue that received maximum coverage in all forms of the media. It became a widespread issue for the general public for the first time in Australia’s history.

In 1993, Mr Keating appointed a committee, the Republican Advisory Committee (RAC), to prepare a report on the options for Australia to become a federal republic with an elected Australian Head of State to replace the present monarchical constitutional arrangements. The Committee was asked to report on ‘the minimum constitutional changes necessary to achieve a viable federal republic of Australia while maintaining the effect of our current conventions and principles of government’ (RAC, 1993). Note carefully these terms of reference: the minimum changes; maintaining our current principles of government. The change to a republic was clearly going to be presented to the Australian people as involving only minor changes to our constitution and system of government; the absolute minimum that would be necessary to allow for an elected Australian Head of State. This was a very conservative proposal, designed to reassure the population that there would be no fundamental change to the system. Its focus was on the symbolism of the Head of State and the democratic principle that the Head of State should be an elected Australian citizen. As the Committee reported, ‘The hereditary office of the monarchy is the only element of the Australian system of government which is not consistent with a republican form of government’ (RAC, 1993: 1). In other words, Australia is already a republic in all aspects except its remaining ties to the monarchy. The Committee held public meetings across Australia to present the issues and to hear public discussion.

The Committee’s Report was presented to the Prime Minister in late 1993. It addressed the advantages and disadvantages of various models for the election of a President: appointment by the Prime Minister (as happens now for the office of Governor-General); election by Parliament; popular election (ie, election by the whole nation). It also pointed out that becoming a republic did not involve leaving the Commonwealth; indeed 28 of the 50 Commonwealth countries were already republics.

In mid-1995 Mr Keating addressed Parliament and the nation, presenting his response to the Committee’s Report and his proposals for taking the next steps towards a republic (Australian,
1995). Keating favoured the model which was also preferred by the ARM: this was that the President would be elected by the members of the two federal Houses of Parliament, the House of Representatives and the Senate; the Prime Minister would give one nomination to the Parliament and a two-thirds majority of Parliament would be required for the person to be elected President. This was seen to be a model which required the least amount of change to Australia’s constitution and system of government, and a system which would guarantee a President who had the support of all sides of politics and who could therefore be impartial. This option would be put to the people at a referendum, with the aim of achieving a republic by 2001.

In Australia this view came to be called the ‘minimalist’ position. It is strongly identified with Paul Keating and with the Australian Republican Movement. The minimalist position is that:

1. we should focus on the one issue of changing the status of the Head of State to an elected Australian President (‘A resident for President’);
2. that we should make only the minimal constitutional changes necessary to enable this change to occur;
3. that we should at this stage make no radical changes to the system or principles of government.

This position is almost always linked to the method of election which I have just described: election by a two-thirds majority of both Houses of Parliament.

However, the minimalist position has been criticised by both monarchists and republicans. Monarchists argue that no change is necessary as Australia’s political system is already functioning well and it is already republican in all but name. Monarchists also argue that there could be no such thing as a minimal change. To alter the Head of State would mean major changes to all the institutions of government; we would be risking instability. On the other side, the republicans who criticise the minimalist position do so because: 1. they are in favour of the more radical proposal for direct, popular election of the President, where all the nation’s voters would vote directly for the candidate of their choice; and/or 2. because they argue that just to make the Head of State an Australian citizen does not go far enough towards making Australia truly a democratic republic. The change to a republic should involve a much wider range of social and political changes, not just having an Australian Head of State. As one critic said, just changing the Head of State’s postal code won’t make Australia a republic. Those advocating this position came up with their own slogan: ‘a just republic, not just a republic’ (McKenna, 1997). The arguments between different republican positions have had a very important influence on the way the debate has gone in Australia, and it might even determine the success or failure of the whole question when it is put to the people next year, in 1999.

In response to Mr Keating’s proposals, John Howard, then leader of the Opposition, announced his plan, if elected to government, to hold a People’s Constitutional Convention to discuss the issue of the republic before any referendum was put. A referendum would only be put if a clear consensus emerged in favour of a republic and in favour of one particular model for a republic. Many commentators felt that Mr Howard’s proposal was designed to delay the process rather than to achieve a result. If this was Mr Howard’s intention, history was to provide a rather different outcome. His party was elected to power in 1996 and Mr Howard became Prime Minister. He was
thus obliged to hold the Constitutional Convention which took place in February of this year, in the old Parliament House in Canberra.

There were 152 delegates to the Convention, half appointed by the Prime Minister and half elected in a nation-wide election. The election produced a significant majority for republican candidates: 46 republicans, against 27 monarchists, with 3 undeclared. The biggest single group was the ARM, but there were also many other republican groups and individuals elected to the Convention. This diversity among republicans would produce the most important debates and divisions at the Convention.

The Convention had no power to change the Constitution but it was to discuss and vote on the key questions: whether Australia should become a republic, and which republican model should be put to the Australian people at a referendum. There were a number of other issues related to these, but they were the two central matters. The Convention was an exciting—even an inspiring and moving—event, widely acclaimed as the most successful exercise in open democracy that the country had seen. It was covered live on television and radio and it could be quite gripping following the debates and the changing balance of power from day to day as republicans formed alliances, argued among themselves, and then reached a compromise.

The most significant divisions during the Convention were those between republicans themselves—between those who supported the minimalist position and election of the President by Parliament, and those who supported direct, popular election of the President. This was always going to be a difficult problem for republicans; and it is also the question that will decide the future success or failure of the republic. Should republicans support any model for a new republic as preferable to the present system, even if they thought it seriously wrong? Or should they maintain a hardline position on principle and only vote in favour of their preferred position, even at the risk of seeing the republican movement lose out in the final vote? Opinion polls have consistently shown that the majority of Australian want direct election of their President, but the majority of political, intellectual and constitutional opinion is in favour of the minimalist, 'two-thirds majority of Parliament' position. Republicans at the Convention were divided.

The most important votes were kept until the final day. On the general question of whether Australia should become a republic there was a clear majority: 89 for, 52 against, 11 abstentions. But the vote in favour of the preferred model—the 'two-thirds' model with a slight variation that allowed for community involvement in the nomination of candidates—was much closer. This was because many who supported the direct, popular election of the President either abstained or voted against the model. The result was 73 for, 57 against, 22 abstentions. Mr Howard nevertheless took this as a clear indication of a preference for this particular model and he has promised that a referendum on the issue will be put to the Australian people next year, 1999, with a view to Australia becoming a republic on the First of January 2001, exactly 100 years since Australia became a nation.

The Convention represented a significant victory for republicans, but the next step will be even more difficult. For Australia to have a new form of Head of State in a republic requires a change to the Australian Constitution. The only way the Constitution can be changed is by a referendum, when the proposal for change is put to all the nation’s voters in the form of a Yes or No question: do you approve of the change or not. It quite possible that a Yes vote for the change to an Australian Republic will not be produced despite the fact that opinion polls consistently show that
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a majority of Australians are in favour of the change. How can this be so?

There are two main reasons:

1. Because of the disagreement between republicans, and in the population more broadly, over the means of electing the President; that is, whether by Parliament or by the people.

2. Because of the mechanics of constitutional referendums in Australia. A referendum must be passed not only by an absolute majority of voters but also by the majority of states, that is, by a majority in at least four of Australia’s seven states.

Although it seems clear that a strong majority of Australians support the change to a republic, an even stronger majority support direct or popular election of the President. But this is not a choice they will be offered at the referendum. The referendum will only be a choice of saying yes or no to the ‘two-thirds’ model. This model has some support in the population but much less than the option of direct, popular election. The big question, then, is whether the popular sentiment for a republic and an Australian as Head of State will overcome the public’s lack of enthusiasm for the ‘two-thirds’ model which is being offered.

Why is it that so many political leaders and intellectuals are against the direct or popular election of the President? After all, the majority of the people are in favour of it and it does appear to be the most democratic way of electing a Head of State because it involves all the people.

In the view of those who oppose the direct election model, such a method of election would mean that inevitably the position would become a political position rather than a merely symbolic or ceremonial position. Why? Because only the established, organised political parties would be able to mount the kind of national campaign that would arise; also because a President elected with the mandate of a nation-wide popular vote would become an alternative power base to the Prime Minister, Cabinet and Parliament. Members of Parliament are elected only by the voters in theirelectorates or districts, whereas the President would be elected by a majority of the whole nation. Thus the President would have a wider mandate, a wider basis of support, than the Prime Minister. Also the President would be directly elected while the Prime Minister is only elected by his own Party. Thus, it is argued, the authority of the Prime Minister and Parliament could be challenged by the President leading to political instability and confusion. It would change the fundamental nature of the Australian political system.

Although the direct election model appears to have wide public support it is not supported by any of the major political parties. Without the support of one of the major parties, the experts argue that the direct election model would not get a majority at a referendum were it to be the option offered at the vote despite the opinion poll results showing the public’s support for this model. Perhaps even some republicans would vote against it. For this reason it is in fact very difficult to know whether the direct election model or the preferred compromise ‘two-thirds’ model would have the best chance of being passed at a referendum. There are many conflicting opinions, and the strategies of many of the key players—the government, different republican groups etc—are still unknown.

Paul Kelly of the Australian has pointed out the problems and contradictions in the direct election model:
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"The public's support for popular election is heavy with contradictions. The public resents politicians, yet popular election will ensure that a professional politician becomes president; the public is suspicious of radical constitutional change, yet popular election of the president means a radical change; the public is fearful of power concentrated in Canberra, yet popular election will further concentrate power within a president adjacent to a prime minister." (Kelly, 1998)

Because it involves major change it would also be easy to mount a scare campaign against the direct election proposal by exaggerating the dangers or unknown elements of such a change especially when the present system works well anyway. The compromise model, by contrast, offers the reassurance to voters that the system of government will not be fundamentally altered. On the other hand, there is a danger that because the change is only minimal, voters will not be persuaded that it is worth making a change for this option. Australians might decide that it is just a change for the benefit of the politicians and the lawyers with no real benefits for the people themselves. Some republicans who favour the direct election model might vote against the 'two-thirds' model because they see it as undemocratic or as a 'sell out', not really a genuine republican option at all.

To be passed, a constitutional referendum in Australia must not only gain an overall majority of votes—voting is compulsory—but also a majority of votes in the majority of states. This makes it very difficult for changes to be passed. It is also always easier to mount a 'no' case, a case for the status quo, than it is to argue for a change. Only 8 out of 42 referendums put to the Australian people have passed since 1901. In short, it seems that history is against the success of a republican referendum despite popular support.

It is also conventional wisdom that a referendum will not pass unless it has the bipartisan support of both sides of politics, both major parties. However, in many ways, in approaching the republican referendum, we are entering unfamiliar territory where perhaps the lessons of the past might not be a very accurate guide. For a start, as I have said, support for a republic now crosses party lines. A number of members of Mr Howard's cabinet have declared themselves in favour of a republic. Most conservative leaders at state and federal level have declared themselves republicans. Even though Mr Howard himself is a monarchist neither he nor his party are likely to run a strong campaign against the change to a republic.

And perhaps as the referendum approaches the direct election option will disappear from view as voters focus on the central issue—change to a republic and an Australian Head of State or stay with the present system. If this question rather than the detail of the new arrangements becomes the central issue then I am confident that the referendum will be passed. It is unlikely, I believe, that those republicans who in principle favour the direct election of the president will vote against the 'compromise' model and therefore vote to maintain the present system. Nevertheless many commentators, and it has been reported the Prime Minister himself, firmly believe that the referendum will be lost, that the vote will not be sufficient for the change to be passed. There is still a lot of work to be done on the republican side.

III

Having brought the recent history of the republican debate up to the present day, I want to turn now to my main argument concerning the cultural meanings of the specific forms which the
debate has taken since 1991. What does this tell us about Australians’ attitudes to their nation and their state?

There are two arguments about the republican debate which I want to put forward, two arguments which might seem unusual or contrary to common sense at first glance but which I hope to explain. My first argument (and this is the most significant point) is that the republican debate has not been a debate between ‘pro-British’ and ‘pro-nationalist’ groups in Australia. Britain has not been an issue. My second argument is that the debate has not been a debate between ‘monarchism’ and ‘republicanism’ as principles or systems of government. It is strange, perhaps, but also quite significant, that the monarchy as an institution has not really been the issue either. As I explain what I mean by these two points I will also be drawing attention to the fact that despite the public debate, it seems to me that the two sides have shown that they share many of their political and cultural attitudes. We should certainly continue to refer to the republican debate in Australia, but I would also like to raise the idea of a republican consensus (Carter & Hudson, 1997).

These arguments would not be accepted by everyone within Australia and I suspect they are probably even more difficult to see from outside Australia. But that is exactly why they need to be emphasised. I do think that people who interpret the republican debate as being primarily a debate about Australia’s relationship with Britain, or about Australia struggling to come to terms with its identity, are largely wrong—not entirely wrong, but still I think this interpretation is out of date in some very important aspects.

Let me take the second point first, the argument that the debate has not been primarily about the monarchy and even, on one level, that it has not been a debate about republicanism versus monarchy. Over the course of the republican debate since the early 1990s, there has been very little discussion for or against the Crown or the institution of the monarchy as such. There has been much discussion about the relevance of the British Crown to contemporary Australia, but very little republican criticism of the Crown itself. There have been few republican voices attacking the institution of monarchy. Even on the monarchist side, most of the argument has been that the present constitutional arrangements are good for Australia rather than a philosophical defence of monarchy or an attack on republican principles. I cannot remember hearing a passionate speech either defending or attacking the notion of hereditary monarchical rule. Such an issue was simply not on the table.

We can also add that the republicans, on their side, do not seem to have a problem with, say, the idea of a monarchy in other countries, in Thailand, Japan, Belgium or Spain, for example, or even in Britain. The more immediate issue for them has been the fact that the monarch in her office as Australian Head of State is not an Australian citizen. By contrast, many Australian republicans do have serious problems with the republican presidential systems in many other countries such as the USA or France. Republicans have frequently been heard reassuring the population that they are not proposing a shift to the American system. Again this might seem strange, but it tells us a lot about Australian attitudes to their own political system.

Among the constitutional monarchists, the celebration or defence of the monarchy has been very much down-played, very low-key and muted, so much so that it scarcely figures. Rather than passionate claims about England and the Queen what we have had are passionate claims about the Australian constitution as an honourable document which has given Australia its prosperous,
democratic society and its peaceful, stable development. In other words, the monarchists feel much more comfortable putting their arguments in terms of defending Australian institutions rather than in terms of defending the monarchy. The Australians for a Constitutional Monarchy, in the campaign for the Constitutional Convention, adopted the Australian flag, not the Crown or the Queen's head, as their symbol (ACM, 1997). It has been very rare to hear anti-republicans arguing a positive case for the institution of the monarchy. Instead you will find them arguing that Australia already has an Australian Head of State in the Governor-General, the Queen's representative—so why do we need to change?

As I said, this is a strange, but very revealing and interesting situation—we have republicans who seem reluctant to proclaim republican principles and monarchists who seem reluctant to proclaim their allegiance to monarchism. I will return a little later to an attempt to explain and interpret these facts. Let me turn first, though, to my other controversial argument: that the debate which has taken place in Australia over the last decade has not been a debate between pro-British and anti-British (or pro-nationalist) positions. From the outside I know that many people observing the debate have understood it to be a debate between those who want to maintain close ties with Britain and those on the other side who oppose the British connection and say that Australia needs to assert its independence. Again I think this involves something of a misreading of the situation. It is a decade or so out of date.

Some people have also argued that the apparent difficulty Australia is having making the change, its apparent reluctance to change, is because Australians are reluctant to finally cut the ties to Britain. Again I think this is incorrect. If there is any reluctance to change, it has more to do with the debate about different models for the new republic; the failure of the debate, at least until the Convention, to arouse strong passions in the population; and also a fear that republicanism might mean Australia adopting a US-style Presidential system. This is one thing nearly all Australians agree upon: we don't want the American system.

It is true that there are minority groups on both sides of the debate who from time to time have voiced the views I have just outlined—strongly pro-British or strongly anti-British positions. There are some whose resistance to change is still based on a sentimental or ideological faith in 'British traditions'; there are some whose republicanism is still based on the notion of England as the colonial power whose role is inhibiting Australia from achieving full independence or full nationhood. But these are now certainly minority positions, even on their own side of the debate let alone in the broader society. Such minority positions have become increasingly irrelevant to the main issues and have dwindled almost to complete silence. Even Prime Minister Howard has admitted that his own attachment to the monarchy is a minority position.

Then Prime Minister Paul Keating, when he initiated the whole debate in 1991-92, was careful to establish it on a new level, different from earlier forms of republican politics in Australia many of which had indeed been tied to an anti-British, anti-colonial nationalism. Keating insisted that the move to a republic implied criticism neither of Britain nor of the monarchy (Keating, 1993). The point was rather that the existing constitutional arrangements were anachronistic. They no longer reflected the relationship between the two nations, nor were they adequate or beneficial to Australia's modern national image, for its own citizens and internationally. Although nationalist arguments were still certainly present, this was a new way of posing the question.

To sum up these points: the central debate that has emerged in Australia is not whether
Australia is to remain a British nation or become a sovereign, independent nation. This is because both sides agree that the latter is already the case—Australia is already an independent, sovereign nation. Nor has the debate really involved the opposed political philosophies of republicanism and monarchoism. Instead, for both sides, the argument has come down to the question of the constitutional arrangements best suited to ensuring that Australia has an impartial, non-political, nominal or symbolic Head of State with strictly limited powers. Both sides agree that this is the kind of Head of State we, as Australians, want in the present day. The monarchists support the present system not so much because it is a monarchy but rather because, in their view, the constitutional arrangements we have provide the best system for guaranteeing an independent, non-political Head of State. In an odd way, for the monarchists, it is precisely the Queen’s absence from the Australian governmental and political system that is the great virtue of the present arrangements. It guarantees an impartial, symbolic figurehead, above politics. For the republicans, of course, the Queen’s distance from Australian institutions is a powerful argument in favour of change. The crown is now irrelevant to Australia. But in general they support the same kind of Head of State as the monarchists. The only difference is they want that person to be an Australian citizen and resident. Mainstream republican arguments have always come with the reassurance that no fundamental change to the present system: the minimalist model.

With some exaggeration, we could even say that both sides agree that the British Crown as such is irrelevant to contemporary Australian political life and nationhood. Of course the constitutional monarchists would not like to hear their position expressed in these terms. Nevertheless I find it difficult to imagine even the most fervent monarchist arguing that were Australia today choosing its system of government from nothing, that we should choose to have an hereditary monarchy with a British monarch as our Head of State. Their argument is rather that the present situation is a kind of historical accident that has served us well by protecting Australian institutions.

No one on the monarchist side argued explicitly against the idea of there being an Australian as Head of State. How could they? Both sides, as we have seen, argue for a Head of State above politics (in this sense republicans share the constitutional principles of constitutional monarchism). Both sides also agree that Australia is already operating much like an independent, sovereign republic (in this sense the monarchists share the democratic principles of republicanism). Despite some minority voices, the central arguments on both sides are being proposed in civic or constitutional terms not in terms of ethnicity (‘British’ or ‘Australian’). Both sides begin from the fact that Australia is already a fully mature, modern nation with its own distinctive identity, institutions, culture and so on. They disagree on how this has been achieved and how it might best be secured in the future.

Monarchists argue that this has been achieved not just under present constitutional arrangements but because of them, for they have guaranteed stability, democracy, and the necessary checks and balances on the power of executive government. Many monarchists go even further and argue that we already have an Australian Head of State, the Governor-General, and that Australia is already in all but name a republic. In Justice Sir Michael Kirby’s words, Australia is a ‘crowned republic’ (Kirby; 1993). So why risk change? Republicans, on the other hand, will argue that our constitution, especially the situation regarding our relationship to Britain and the Head of State, have not kept pace with Australia’s developing independence and changing identity.

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Therefore change is necessary. Some have argued that the change is necessary to complete Australia’s development towards independence, others see it more as a simple recognition after the fact.

Despite this level of disagreement, what my analysis suggests is that in many ways there is a surprising amount of agreement between monarchists and republicans about the nature of Australia, its relationship to Britain, and even about the form of government and constitution best suited to it. This is what I am referring to by my title: the cultural meanings of the republican debate. What is revealed, I think, is just how far Australia has moved beyond the British, or English, orbit in the last two decades. This is so in every sphere of political, economic and cultural life.

Perhaps the most significant thing to me about the Constitutional Convention was that Britain or England was scarcely mentioned, not by either side. The debate at the Convention had virtually nothing to do with Australia’s relationship to Britain except in the most formal legal or constitutional sense. Britain or the British connection really was mentioned only once or twice. It was largely irrelevant to the issues. The debate was, instead, all about the system of government most appropriate to contemporary Australia. And this was exactly as it should have been. We might also note that in the media, in political debate and in popular circulation, we have unthinkingly adopted the term ‘the republican debate’. I have never heard reference to the ‘monarchy debate’. It is as if the inevitability of Australia becoming a republic is a widely shared belief. I think this too is an indication of how far the ground has moved, how much Australia has changed.

To put the case in very clear, black and white terms, I would argue that by the 1980s, if not a decade earlier, Britain had stopped being a place that mattered very much at all in Australia in cultural as well as economic, defence and political terms. Such a change can be traced back to the 1960s at least, but of course fundamental changes of this nature take some time to become widespread or to sink deeply into people’s minds. But certainly now, with the second generation of post-war children starting to have children of their own, it is difficult to think back to a time when Britain was of central importance to Australian society, culture or politics. I am sure my twenty-year old students in Australia find it strange; something that seems to belong to the nineteenth century rather than thirty years ago.

Many historians have remarked on Australia’s historical move away from Britain but I don’t think it has often been registered just how complete and dramatic and relatively sudden this shift has been. We have gone from an orientation that was almost one hundred percent British to one in which Britain plays no significant part in the space of two or three decades, a remarkably short span of history.

This is really another topic so I won’t go into further historical argument here. For the present argument, the issue of the republic, the important point is that by the mid-1980s the idea of a republic no longer made much sense as any anti-British position—not because Australia was still very close to Britain but because the idea of Britain was largely irrelevant to Australians, to their sense of identity to their daily lives, their cultural and political perceptions. By the 1990s, the idea of an independent Australian nationality did not have to be argued for or defended against a pro-British establishment; it was something the majority of Australians just took for granted. I suspect that some Australians even rather resented republicans telling them that their national identity was somehow incomplete or imperfect when they already felt thoroughly and
distinctively Australian, and nothing else.

The difficulty for the republican side was that for the majority of Australians the Queen was so unrelated to their sense of who they were as Australians and as citizens that the republic just wasn't an issue that excited their interest. The monarchy is so irrelevant to their everyday lives, and to their political interests, that many probably had to be reminded that Australia did not in fact have an Australian Head of State. What happened during the Constitutional Convention was that many Australians did become involved in the issue of what kind of Head of State they wanted and what were the constitutional arrangements best suited to achieve this. But the issue was not Britain or the Queen.

There are other signs of Australia's shift away from a British orientation. I think it is quite revealing that Australians like myself, of English origin (in my case English and Scottish) but five or six generations in Australia, will clearly distinguish themselves from those we call 'British (or English) migrants', that is people who have arrived in the last decade or so. We no longer feel that recent British migrants are somehow closer to us, or closer to being real Australians, than say Italian Australians or Lebanese Australians or Chinese Australians. Multiculturalism has changed not only how we think of ethnic groups within Australia but also our relationship to Britain.

More importantly, I think we can note a very significant shift in the way in which Australians are now beginning to understand their own history. It is not just Britain's role in the present, but also the meaning of Britain's role in Australia's past which has changed dramatically. The central question of Australian history until the last ten or twenty years was the relationship between Australia and Britain. Histories traced the evolution of the Australian colonies into an Australian nation, sometimes in terms of struggle and opposition, sometimes in terms of evolution and adaptation. There were different approaches depending on method and ideology but the key question was the Australia-British relationship. Today, by contrast, the history that matters most in Australia is the relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, the relationship between the settlers and immigrants and Australia's Aboriginal people. Both in the academic world and the popular media, and indeed in politics as well, this is now the deepest issue for the question of national identity and national community.

Interestingly, the Britain that now matters in Australia is the Britain that is part of Europe. This Britain, modern, European and multicultural, has almost nothing to do with more traditional notions of the 'home' country, the mother country, the source of tradition and culture.

We can interpret this shift as a change from a period when Australia defined itself as a nation primarily in terms of its relationship to an outside power (a colonial relationship, a relation to a past elsewhere) to a situation where this definition of the nation occurs as it were internally, with reference to an Australian past. We might call this a truly post-colonial situation in which, now, at the end of the twentieth century, Australia is re-defining itself without reference to the original mother country. This situation also allows Australia's openness to its place in the Asia-Pacific region. Despite some of the more colourful political debates about this issue in recent times, the shift of focus to Asia is one that the many Australians now take for granted on the cultural level even though there remains a lack of detailed knowledge of the differences between 'Asian' cultures.
IV

To conclude, let me put forward my own argument as to why Australia should become a republic with an Australian as Head of State. As I have argued, the debate has focused on the question: what sort of Head of State do we want? To answer ‘an Australian citizen’ is a start, but does not get us very far. To add ‘someone who can represent Australia and no other nation’ takes us further, but perhaps we need to look more closely at what the Head of State would represent.

The office of the Australian President should represent an ethical or civic role. Thus I agree that he or she should not be a party political figure but someone who can represent the values of our civil society and our civic institutions—democracy, justice, diversity, the rule of law. Note that my emphasis is not on the idea of someone who embodies the national identity. As I have been suggesting, I believe the debate has grown beyond the nationalist phase.

In Donald Horne’s terms, we want a civic rather than ethnic definition of citizenship and nationality, and this should be reflected in the office of President (Horne, 1993). A good example of this might be the recent Governor of Queensland, Mrs Leenee Ford, a woman born in Canada, a migrant to Australia, still with a strong Canadian accent, but highly respected and successful as Governor of the State. If we define the President in this way, as a figure of ‘civic virtue’ representing a democratic, inclusive Australian community, then it is clear that the monarchy cannot play this role. Nor can the office of Governor-General while it derives its meaning and authority from the Crown. This is why we need an Australian Head of State, not for simple nationalist reasons but to symbolise a unique, democratic set of civic principles by which we define the nation.

One of the traditional defences of monarchy was precisely its symbolic dimension, ‘the magic of its dignified institutions’. Some conservative republicans have based their republicanism on the fact that in contemporary Australia, the Crown simply no longer has this dimension: ‘the Crown has lost its civic virtue; ‘the symbolism of the Crown has been emptied of resonance’. For Robert Manne, ‘from the utilitarian point of view our constitution works well. But with regard to the layers of symbolic meaning it has already all but broken down’ (Manne, 1995; Hirst, 1991). The case for republicans to argue is based precisely on the need for the symbolism attached to the Constitution and the Head of State to once again ‘take hold of the public imagination’—a symbolism which is largely absent from Australia’s civic culture at present.

I am also a supporter of the ‘minimalist position’, although I am not overly concerned by the supposed dangers of direct election of the President. I believe the existing conventions governing Australia’s political system would continue to operate throughout the period of adjustment. What I would argue is that a change which merely changes the symbolism attached to the Head of State and the constitution without changing much else is already a major change, and a major improvement on the present system, even if there are no other democratic reforms. We should not underestimate the significance of the initial step, the minimal step, of just changing the Head of State. Even the most minimal change to an Australian as Head of State is, I think, a momentous change—a change to an Australian Head of State not deriving his or her authority in any way from the Crown, from somewhere else, but from the Australian people and from Australian institutions. In other words, I think that the minimalist option is really not minimal at all, but a

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major and very significant change, especially if it can be connected to the symbolism of 1 January 2001 (the centenary of Australian federation).

Over the last decade we have seen a shift from a ‘closed’ or ‘negative’ idea of Australian nationalism to a positive, open nationalism. The former was defined almost wholly in relation to Britain and was based on an ethnic, British or Anglo-Celtic notion of identity and community. The new form defines itself in terms of internal and regional relationships—Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, multicultural, Asian-Pacific. These newer ideas are still debated in Australia; they are not accepted by everyone. But I think they are the emerging ideas, the way of the future, and their momentum cannot be turned back. The republic would be a symbolic recognition of such a new self-definition.

The need for a republic is not based on the idea that somehow Britain, the monarchy or our present constitution is holding us back from full national identity. Rather it is based on the fact that Australia is already a unique, mature, original, independent society—and so capable of owning and inventing our own institutions of government. I like to think that the change to an Australian Head of State and a republic is not a single, one-off change but part of an ongoing process which has both a past and a future. A history of constitutional evolution and increasing Australian autonomy can be traced back through the century. And the change to a republic might be seen as initiating rather than completing a process of reform and renewal. My hope is that the continuing republican debate can turn the historical accident of our present situation into an historical occasion for such reform and renewal.

References
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*本稿は第9回オーストラリア学会大会における特別講演に基づくものです。