

Our Republic Policy

Moving towards an Australian Head of State

Photo courtesy of Daniel Noone



"The reconciliation referendum represents a unique opportunity for Australians to define their national identity and the republic question once and for all."

Natasha Stott Despoja
Democrats' Senator
for South Australia

An opportunity arises

On 11 October 2007, John Howard committed a new Coalition Government to a referendum by 2009 to incorporate a statement of reconciliation into the preamble of the constitution. The plan received bipartisan support.

While the PM's plan falls well short of the national apology that is necessary, the reconciliation referendum is a positive move towards recognising and respecting the unique role that the First Australians play in our nation's past, present and future. It is also a chance for Australians to reflect upon our history, and re-define the direction of our young nation.

Whoever forms government, in Rudd or Costello/Turnbull *et al*, a declared republican will inevitably be Prime Minister when the reconciliation referendum occurs in 2009.

So when the question of Constitutional reform is put to the people at the reconciliation referendum, why not clear up another issue of historical regret for many Australians and ask them if an Australian should be our Head of State?

A plebiscite for the people

November 2009 is 10 years since the 1999 republic referendum, and the Democrats want a simple question put to the Australian people in a plebiscite:

Do you want Australia to become a republic?

YES

or

NO

The vote will be non-binding, and conditional upon the public being consulted about different forms of republic models before a referendum occurs. The Democrats are not wedded to any model – the public should decide this too.

The reconciliation referendum represents a unique opportunity for Australians to contemplate their history and define our national identity. By re-electing Democrats in the Senate, you can ensure that it is not an opportunity lost.

The 1999 republic referendum:

Monarchists have argued that the failure of the 1999 referendum represented a definitive rejection of republicanism.

The truth is the referendum rejected a model. It was not a rejection of republicanism itself. The referendum put only one model for a republic to the people: a model that allowed an Australian Head of State to be hand picked by the Prime Minister and approved by a 2/3 majority of Parliament.

The 'no' campaign in 1999 was in fact led by a split republican lobby who urged Australians to say no to a President elected by politicians. It worked, and the monarchists led by the PM couldn't believe their luck.

The Road to a Republic

In 2004, the Democrats initiated a Senate Committee inquiry co-sponsored by the ALP, the *Road to a Republic*, which investigated the steps and processes towards Australia becoming a republic.

The Committee recommended a four step process to move towards an Australian as our Head of State:

1. An initial plebiscite to enable Australians to vote "yes" for a republic on the condition that a future plebiscite would be held, where the type of republic would be decided by a majority of Australians;
2. A second plebiscite where up to five republic models are put to a preferential vote, including models for direct election and Prime Ministerial appointment;
3. A 'drafting convention' where constitutional experts are brought together by Parliament to draft the legislative form of the republic model based on the people's choice; and
4. Finally, a binding referendum to put the constitutional model to the public.

The Democrats have had legislation on the Senate notice paper since 2001 to achieve the first step, and we are committed to pursuing the Committee's recommendations after the election.

What do the polls say?

Polling conducted in 2007 suggests that 45% of people are totally in favour of a republic compared to just 36% who are opposed, with some 19% undecided. Those in favour climb to 62% if Prince Charles takes the throne (Newspoll, 21 January 2007).



A public awareness campaign

The *Road to a Republic* inquiry also found that public awareness was a crucial first step in engaging the public before any future plebiscite occurs.

The public needs to be fully informed before it makes a decision. An education and public awareness campaign would require commitment and resources from Government, but it's small fry compared to what the Government has spent flogging WorkChoices.

An adequate campaign would require the Government to commit around \$15 million over 18 months in the lead up to a plebiscite, less than or equivalent to what has been spent on campaigns like *Strengthening National Security*, or *Simpler Superannuation*.

The 2009 plebiscite

The plebiscite itself will be virtually cost neutral, piggybacking the infrastructure in place for the reconciliation referendum by simply adding a separate ballot paper.

It will also appease those poll weary voters who are tired of Saturday morning trips to the local primary school by allowing votes on reconciliation and a republic to be cast at the same time.

As the major parties prevaricate on the republic question, the Democrats' Republic Policy represents a clear choice for the majority of Australians who want a local Head of State.

It is clear that Australia wants to move forward, given the right opportunity. This policy presents that opportunity to the public. Australia, it's up to you to take it.