

From the Editor

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THE popular rejection of the republic proposal will probably confirm many members of Australian elites in their horror of citizen-initiated referendums (CIR). They will take it as further proof that you can't trust the people.

In fact, the experience shows why CIR is very much a good idea. How else can the people stop united elites forcing things on them they do not want? If the republican campaign showed anything, it showed how out of touch with popular sentiment so much of what passes for 'public' debate in the media really is: does anyone even begin to think that even 25 per cent—let alone 55 per cent—of commentary by members of the media supported a 'No' vote? Having media which too often fail miserably at reflecting the nation back to itself increases popular alienation and resentment. As the One Nation phenomenon showed, this creates rancorous feelings ripe for exploitation. If more issues were forced to the direct popular vote, we would have political outcomes much more in contact with popular feeling, with a consequent improvement in social harmony.

Many people take it as a knockdown argument against a directly-elected President that it would change the way we are governed. On the evidence of the referendum, much of the general public would regard that as a good thing: the creation of competing power centres would make government more tractable to popular will. Jeff Kennett's downfall was surely deeply connected to a feeling that Premier Jeff was no longer being held accountable. Parliament wasn't enough—particularly after Kennett gagged all his own candidates.

Some economic reformers are dubious about CIR because they think people will vote against reform. The proper response to that is that it will

simply force reformers to be persuasive. It was very conspicuous that Jeff Kennett had stopped trying to persuade, having developed a take-it-or-leave-it attitude to his government's performance. In the end, the voters left it (without embracing the alternative with any great enthusiasm). Kennett himself described politics as the longest job interview—yet he stopped doing the interview. The effort of persuasion is the effort of paying attention. A courtesy that the voters are most emphatically entitled to, and will punish if it is lacking.

There is a difference between preaching—what the pro-republican media did, what Paul Keating PM did—and persuading, particularly in politics. Preaching is about telling the people The Truth, on a take-it-or-leave-it basis, with the clear understanding that you are a horrible sinner and/or complete boofhead if you don't take it. Persuading is about connecting people's enduring values and sentiments to the issues of the day: successful persuasion is rooted in the concerns of those to be persuaded.

Which is why we should be so worried about our media culture and what was revealed in the republic campaign. An important role of the media is to bring people's concerns into the public arena. Yet, on a range of issues—environment, indigenous affairs, immigration, industrial relations to name a few—there is great conformity in media opinion, conformity often quite divergent from popular opinion. The republic is not an isolated example, merely a particularly flagrant one because genuinely consulting the people could not be avoided.

Journalists have always had some tendency to be captured by whoever is their most important source of stories: thus crime reporters generally report the police perspective; industrial relations reporters the union perspective; education



reporters the teacher union/bureaucrat perspective; environment reporters the green perspective, etc., etc. Modern journalism has discovered an even lower form of professional prostitution: reporting on the basis of what makes them appear 'kosher' in their attitudes to their fellow journalists—often in terms which implicitly or explicitly denigrate the values and aspirations of most of their fellow Australians.

If opinions become status markers, they become assets to be defended. This encourages conformity and intellectual sterility (since genuine debate makes the opinions contestable and thus not status markers); and dishonesty (since contrary evidence also undermines the opinions' role as status markers). A media culture pervaded by opinions-as-status-markers is a morally and intellectually corrupt media culture: one alienated from popular feeling and which will encourage popular alienation. Preaching and moral grandstanding will pervade it.

The republic campaign revealed these problems for all to see. If it is treated as just a one-off aberration, rather than evidence of much deeper underlying problems, Australian democracy and public life will be the poorer for it.

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