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Never say never to beneficial reforms

Diehard monarchist Professor David Flint is right when he says the current troubles swirling around the House of Windsor courtesy of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex are not the “silver bullet” to deliver an Australian republic. (*Royal rift no reason to revive tired republic debate 13/1*)

Prince Harry is sixth in line to the throne, and therefore sixth in line to be Australia’s head of state. But to borrow a line from Professor Flint, for republicans “the monarchy is not the problem”.

The problem is the lack of will shown by the succession of recent prime ministers who failed to follow Paul Keating’s lead in putting the republic issue firmly on the national agenda as part of a process for meaningful Constitutional reform.

Even Malcolm Turnbull, supposed strong republican and head of the Australian Republic Movement at the time of the 1998 Constitutional Convention and the failed 1999 referendum, did nothing to advance the issue while holding the nation’s top political office.

In recent years the fall-back has been that we must wait until the current Monarch’s reign is over.

This death-watch approach is a morbid cop-out and a recipe for a very negative and personal campaign against Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II’s son and heir, the Prince of Wales, when he inherits the throne.

The republic debate should never be about the Royal Family or any individual within it, no matter how far back in the line of succession they stand.

Professor Flint throws in a very left-field suggestion that we are already a republic, but one that just happens to have a monarch as its head of state.

He correctly recounts the figures showing the failure of the 1999 referendum, but incorrectly claims that because we had a vote on a republic in 1999 we should never ever have another.

Professor Flint appears to agree with the need to undertake Constitutional refurbishment, even if he wants to leave a republic off the to-do list.

The Real Republic Australia sees the republic issue as part of a wider effort to modernise our Constitution to deliver real reforms and benefits to Australians.

We need a long-term work plan to identify reforms, seek public input, and then ask Australians to modernise our Constitution through a number of referendums over several terms of parliament.

We should consider becoming a republic through this process after seeking the views of Australians on which models should be put to a referendum, with our preference being an elected head of state.

The process could also extend to seeking views on fixed four-year terms for both the House of Representatives and the full Senate with elections held on the same day for both houses.

This would mean reducing the terms of senators to four years instead of six and having no more half-Senate elections.

This change would lead to greater stability and cost savings by holding fewer elections. It would also mean any government formed from the verdict of voters on election day would no longer face the risk of being held hostage to senators elected several years earlier.

Further savings could be made by asking voters at a future referendum to break the Constitutional nexus governing the relative sizes of both of our houses of parliament as well as to reduce the number of senators from the current 12 per state to the original six while keeping two for each territory.

Another Constitutional reform might be to apply the casual vacancy system of the Senate to the House of Representatives to avoid the cost of by-elections between general elections. This would deliver up even more cost savings.

Indigenous recognition in our Constitution ought to be considered as well as recognition of local government.

It is these types of initiatives, not just a republic, that could form a long-term plan for Constitutional reforms based on consultations with Australians leading eventually to referendums where needed.

It is this type of process that will deliver the restoration of the “good governance” Professor Flint seeks.

David Muir is chair of the Real Republic Australia and was a delegate to the 1998 Constitutional Convention in Canberra after being elected on the team of former Brisbane Lord Mayor Clem Jones favouring a republic with a directly elected head of state.