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Tony Abbott's claims on republic plan stretch credibility

Tony Abbott's comments criticising the federal Opposition Leader's two-stage plan for addressing the republic issue are more likely motivated by a desire to stymie any vote rather than protect our Constitution.

"Tony Abbott clearly hasn't changed his monarchist tune, but now fears the success of the only plan on the table for moving towards a republic," said David Muir, chair of the Real Republic Australia.

"Mr Abbott's long-standing opposition to an Australian republic is well known so whatever contribution he makes to any republic debate needs to be viewed against that background," Mr Muir said.

"Mr Abbott was part of the leadership of the anti-republic forces 20 years ago when the wrong model was put before voters who would otherwise have supported a republic.

"It stretches credibility to believe Mr Abbott is now concerned about getting it right. Perhaps he is simply fearful that once voters settle on a preferred model, a 'yes' vote for a republic could be assured.

"Mr Abbott reveals his real and unchanged position — firmly against a republic — by yet again peddling the monarchist myth that the Governor-General is our head of state.

"His staunch opposition to any change is also revealed by his highly emotive and misleading claims about a plebiscite that would 'delegitimise the Constitution' or a process that would inflict 'Constitutional vandalism'.

"His claims that a national 'yes' or 'no' plebiscite on a republic would be 'toxic' for our Constitution are hard to accept. After all, various governments since federation have proposed Constitutional changes that have been put before voters at a referendum.

"The mere existence of any of those proposals to change the Constitution has not proved to be 'toxic' as Mr Abbott claims would be the case once the outcome of the initial question was known.

"Apparently Mr Abbott thinks that consulting Australians on their own future will bring about the end of the world as we know it. The fact is that achieving change that people want actually affirms and legitimises our Constitution."

Mr Muir said while Mr Shorten had proposed a two-stage process, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull had not presented any plan to move Australia towards a republic.

"It can be argued that Mr Shorten's two-stage plan should be collapsed into a single step, with voters asked at the same time the threshold question about becoming a republic and their choice of the model for our head of state," he said.

"But Mr Shorten's two-stage plan is still the only one put on the table by the Prime Minister or alternative PM. Malcolm Turnbull has not outlined any alternative except to wait until the end of Queen Elizabeth's reign before even starting to discuss a republic.

"That's the worst possible approach because there is a real risk it then becomes a 'get Charles' debate.

"There's no need to disrespect the British Royal Family during a republic debate. Most Australians acknowledge the service of the Royal Family and respect them for it, and in return the Royal Family will no doubt respect the decision Australians will make in favour of a republic."

Mr Muir said while the Real Republic Australia supported the direct election of Australia's head of state it also wanted any referendum on a republic to include questions for other Constitutional changes delivering real reforms including:

- recognition of Indigenous Australians,
- fewer Senators for each state and breaking the nexus between the size of the upper and lower houses,
- synchronised elections for the lower and upper houses of Federal Parliament and four-year terms,
- applying to the House of Representatives the casual vacancy system now used by the Senate to cut costs by avoiding by-elections, and
- local government recognition to remove any doubt about the validity of direct federal funding.

The Real Republic was founded by delegates to the 1998 Constitutional Convention including:

- the late Dr Clem Jones AO former Lord Mayor of Brisbane,
- Ann Bunnell former Deputy Mayor of Townsville in Queensland,
- Brisbane lawyer David Muir, also chair of the Clem Jones Trust
- Ted Mack former mayor of North Sydney and independent MP in both the NSW and Federal parliaments, and
- Phil Cleary former independent federal MP for the Victorian seat of Wills.

Mr Muir said the Real Republic organisation continued to be supported by the Clem Jones Group.

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