



EMBARGOED UNTIL: Friday 25 January 2019

Commitment to Constitutional change needed on Australia Day

The Real Republic Australia says the nation's political leaders should stop their fragmented approach to Constitutional changes such as an Australian republic and recognition of indigenous Australians.

"We need a coordinated program for tapping views on a package of Constitutional reforms, not a piecemeal, issue-by-issue approach," said Chair of the Real Republic Australia, David Muir.

"Australia Day is an opportune occasion for Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Opposition Leader Bill Shorten to commit to a process for testing the views of Australians on a package of Constitutional changes.

"In recent weeks we have seen public discussion on whether Bill Shorten's plan for a yes/no plebiscite on a republic should or shouldn't come before or after testing public sentiment on an indigenous 'voice'.

"It should not be a matter of picking and choosing which issue takes precedence. The form of indigenous recognition including the idea of an indigenous 'voice' could be discussed and decided through a process for considering a package of Constitutional reforms, instead of having issues dealt with in a haphazard manner.

"It may be that some people may wish to add to the proposed package of reforms the idea of a new national day to replace the current Australia Day.

"By having a clear process and timetable, all such issues could be subject to public debate, some form of Constitutional working party to thrash out details, and then a plebiscite if necessary before heading to a referendum to enshrine reforms in our nation's Constitution.

"Taxpayers will foot the bill for any plebiscites and any referendum on these issues so we need to get value for money. We don't need the expense of holding a public debate and possibly a plebiscite on one issue and then another one later on, and then others after that.

"Those seeking to lead our country as Prime Minister of Australia need to set out their plan to allow public scrutiny of a package of proposed Constitutional reforms plus a timetable leading to a referendum where questions can be put to voters."

Mr Muir said the Real Republic Australia wanted voters to consider the republic question as part of a wider package of Constitutional reforms that would deliver cost savings and more stable government:

- a republic with a head of state elected directly by voters
- investing in our elected head of state the role of appointing and overseeing those responsible for integrity and anti-corruption agencies at the federal level;
- recognition of indigenous Australians,
- parliamentary reforms to deliver greater stability through cutting Senate numbers for each state from 12 to the original six while maintaining two for each Territory;
- implementing synchronised, fixed, four-year terms for both Houses of Parliament to ensure voter mandates are reflected in both Houses; and
- adopting a casual vacancy system for the House of Representatives to deliver greater stability and cut costs to taxpayers; and
- recognition of local government.

Mr Muir said Opposition Leader Bill Shorten's current plan for handling the republic issue was an example of how a worthwhile reform could be derailed by not coordinating it with other issues.

“Mr Shorten wants to stage an initial yes/no plebiscite on the republic but not to ask at the same time about what model voters want for choosing their head of state,” he said.

“Offering no choice of model at the time of asking the threshold yes/no question is a waste of taxpayers’ funds and could lead to voters deciding against approving what opponents of a republic will portray as ‘a blank cheque’.

“This could spell disaster and end the republic debate even before a second plebiscite on a model is held.

“A plebiscite is a cost to taxpayers so it needs to get more bang for buck by also asking voters to choose between at least two potential models — parliamentary selection of a head of state or direct election by voters.

“The Real Republic Australia advocates for a directly elected head of state which we believe is the model Australians will support if given the opportunity.

“Asking about the model at the same time as the threshold question on a republic will unify pro-republic groups behind the people’s choice and prevent a repeat of the split seen at the 1999 referendum.”

Mr Muir said despite the Real Republic’s reservations about Mr Shorten’s plan, it was the only one on the table by the prime minister or alternative prime minister.

“So far Scott Morrison hasn’t explained how he would give Australians their say on a republic or indigenous recognition if re-elected,” he said.

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The Real Republic Australia is supported by the Clem Jones Group which carries on the work of Brisbane’s longest-serving Lord Mayor, businessman, community worker, and philanthropist, Dr Clem Jones, who was a delegate to both the 1975 and 1998 Constitutional Conventions. Dr Jones died in December 2007 and in his will he expressed his wish for a national campaign for a republic based on his preferred model of a directly elected head of state. The Real Republic Australia continues his campaign.