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REPUBLICANISM CULTURE VISUAL ARTS

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This book is dedicated to the memory of
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A Socialist's Republic

HUMPHREY McQUEEN

By challenging the monarchical doctrine that some people are born to rule over others, the case for republics everywhere is tied to social equality. Because of Australia's experience of colonisation, a republic is also part of our struggle for national independence, which aims at equality in relations between peoples. Australia's becoming a republic will clear a path in that direction. A republic, by jettisoning the hereditary principle behind the throne, will take a step towards social equality inside Australia. These aspects of the republic as expressions of social equality will be considered in turn.

A. The equality of nations

Federation in 1901 renovated the channels by which Australia served in the British Empire. Hence, the A.I.F. stood for Australian Imperial Force. Economic and military ties continued to bind, despite some victories over London; Canberra did not ratify even the formal independence of Dominion Status until 1942, just in time for the US imperialism to more than fill the spaces left

by the collapse in British power. Useful though a republic's completion of our constitutional independence will be, the inequalities between Australia and the various imperial centres will remain rooted in economic and security questions.

One advantage of breaking the formal ties with the British Crown will be to clarify these lines of power between Australia and the rest of the world. John Kerr's position as the Queen's man confused analysis of his 1975 sacking of the Whitlam Government. The significance of Kerr's life-long involvement with the US-dominated intelligence community was thus harder to specify. Some Laborites even supposed that he had acted to protect the Queen's investments. Severing the open links between the Australian state and its British counterpart will help us resist the covert flows of influence around the Australian Security Intelligence Service, Britain's MI-6 and the US' CIA-National Security Agency.

The change to a republic will also allow more attention to the economic levers, whether from Frankfurt, Osaka or Los Angeles. In short, a republic will be worthwhile if it does no more than get rid of a source of confusion about the power of non-British imperialisms in Australia. Keating's anti-British republicanism was a fig leaf for his surrender to speculators from around the planet. Compelled to pick between a republic and re-regulation of our finance sector, I would plump for the latter. My point is that the controls are not divisible. The mentality that wants a British monarch at the top of Australia's constitutional system is the mindset that nourishes Howard's playing sheriff's deputy to those whom his idol, R.G. Menzies, called his 'Great and Powerful Friends'. Severing the link with the British monarchy will fray the belief that we must subordinate our security to the needs of the Pentagon, or accept the trading regimes that advantage corporations.

The achievement of an Australian republic will thereby contribute to the welfare of working people. Constitutional monarchists allege that a republic will not create one more job or knock a dollar off the trade deficit. That view ignores the contribution that confidence makes to achievement. Australia's constitution saps that enrichment in two ways. First, the fact that our head of state is also the head of state of the power that colonised

Australia insinuates that no Australian is capable of filling the post. Until 1963, the cringers demanded that even the monarch's representative as governor-general be a British aristocrat. Secondly, this presumption of inadequacy recurs when the Constitutional Monarchists allege that Australians cannot devise a system of government for ourselves, but must stick with the one approved by the Colonial Office in the 1890s.

The Australian Republican Movement's (ARM's) 'Yes' case did not offer any kind of republic but rather called for a nativist version of the existing structure. As a nationalist in the sense of being an anti-imperialist, I back Australia's having one of our citizens as Head of State. That preference, however, has next-to-nothing to do with Australia's becoming a republic. If all we want is a resident for president, we could install a home-grown royal family, whether the Packers or the Joneses, and end up with no more than a koala for king. The UK has a resident for its Head of State and it ain't no republic.

Moreover, the assumption that being born here (or even choosing to become naturalised), makes one a loyal Australian is untenable. Rupert Murdoch traded his citizenship for television licences in the US. The agents of the UK and US empires in Australia have often been drawn from our oldest families. As the Duke of Wellington remarked whenever his Irish birthplace was mentioned: being born in a stable did not make you a horse. Nativism and nationalism are far from the same. In an act of solidarity with the oppressed, a real republican would rather vote for an imprisoned foreign freedom fighter, such as Nelson Mandela or Xanana Gusmao, as Australia's president rather than some native-born lick-spittle.

In practice, we need a long-term resident as our Head of State in order to have someone familiar with our unwritten codes, as can be deduced from the appointment of the Irishman Brian Kennedy to the National Gallery of Australia. His selection struck me as inoffensive to our sense of ourselves. Australians occupy leadership positions in art overseas, so why should we not admit another skilled immigrant? I doubted that we were ready for a Brit or a Yank, but someone from Ireland seemed sufficiently off-centre not to revive the colonised mentality. Aside

from all the other faults that Kennedy has revealed, he needed a couple of years to comprehend that he was operating in a Federation, not a unitary state, such as the Republic of Eire. This example has wider application. Hence, the appeal to republican virtue in choosing an overseas rebel as our Head of State must be subordinated to the everyday requirements of the office. Preference for the local, however, is not essential to being a republic.

Republican opponents of the ARM model risk losing track of the decisive question by focusing on the direct election of a president. That procedure is desirable because it is the manifestation of a republican vision based on a democratic polity and a socially egalitarian economy. Real republicans will continue to vote 'No' if the directly elected president retains the existing reserve (monarchical) powers of the governor-general.

The business executives and consultants who formed Conservatives for an Australian Head of State favoured the minimalist position on the grounds that it was unwise to go too far too quickly. They claimed to represent 'a lot of cautious conventionally minded people — millions of them'. Yet these same managers are not in the least conservative about their other policies. Caution plays no part in their attitude towards the economy where deregulation, privatisation, downsizing and restructuring can never go fast or far enough. They blame market failure on the remnants of schemes designed to protect us from the outrages inflicted by a self-regulated market. At their day jobs, the Conservatives for an Australian Head of State argue that if only all award wages and conditions were abolished, unemployment would disappear. These political conservatives are maximalists in their economic correctness.

The expression 'minimalist' gained currency from attempts by ARM to win support by making the smallest number of changes possible to the existing constitution. The ARM's 'minimalist' model would have left Australians with a political system inherited from late Nineteenth Century. Hence, 'minimalist' is deceptive. ARM adopted a maximalist position in terms of retaining the anti-democratic structure hammered out in the 1890s.

After the 1975 dismissal, republicans campaigned for a constitution which would give supremacy to the people's house and protect a majority there from gubernatorial ambush. In short, Australia would have caught up with the United Kingdom, where the House of Lords had been stripped of those powers by the 1950s, and where the Queen would not be game to sack a prime minister who retained the confidence of the House of Commons. In the 1999 referendum, ARM abandoned that post-Kerr agenda of reforms to champion a resident for president. By that criterion, Kerr's deviousness would have been acceptable.

The 'No' majority in the October 1999 referendum was necessary for Australians to establish a republic. Rejection of the ARM's monarchist model gives us the chance to move forward. Because the ALP, the Democrats, Greens and both contenders for the Liberal leadership all want to write themselves into the history books as the achievers of a republic, another referendum will be held in the near future.

Leadership of the ARM responded to the 'No' vote in the manner that Bertolt Brecht attributed to the Communist Party bosses in East Germany after the workers' rebellion of 1953:

... would it
Not be simpler if the government dissolved the people
And elected another?

Typical of this arrogance, Phillip Adams on *Late Night Live* referred to Direct-Election Republican Phil Cleary as 'Fool' Cleary. The ARM case lost because its mouthpieces declared that they did not trust Australians to select our own president. Half the pro-republic supporters responded with a 'No' vote, which was our way of saying 'Thanks for letting us know how much you fear and despise us. We now know better than to trust you.' That resentment was also widespread among many who nonetheless voted 'Yes'.

A pro-republican critic of ARM's model, Richard McGarvie (an ALP-appointed erstwhile Governor of Victoria) voiced the social prejudices behind ARM's minimalism, which he thought too extreme. The distinguished and the genteel, McGarvie lamented, would not even submit themselves to election by a

joint parliamentary sitting, since rejection would be an affront to the nobility of their motives for public service.

New South Wales ALP Premier, Bob Carr, threatened that if ARM's minimalist model were defeated he would campaign against a direct-election version. Republicans should be grateful for Carr's lesson in executive dominance. Throughout the last 100 years constitutional arrangements at both state and federal levels have slid towards increasing the power of the executive (the prime minister, the cabinet, the bureaucracy) and away from the legislative branch. This slippage was blatant when the Hawke-Keating administrations overturned policies on which they were elected — whether privatisation of the Commonwealth Bank or land rights against states' rights. The alarm among the executive branch that a directly elected president will upset that imbalance of powers is justified. Indeed, that disturbance is one reason why such a change should be made. A popularly chosen president will tilt the system away from executive domination. Stripped of the reserve powers, a president will rely on the authority of the republican virtues that secured her election.

Although democratising the top end of government is worth doing for its symbolism alone, the aim should be to spread those principles of social equality through every aspect of public policy.

B. Social equality

Through generations of struggle, Australia's working people have marginalised the feudal trappings of Britain. That achievement has not vanquished the capitalist division between those who control productive property and those who have nothing to sell but their labour power. So settler Australia has always been a class society. The absence of the accoutrements of Europe's aristocracy accounts for the popularity of the claim that we are a classless society.

The latest Royal sojourn revived the claim that the Queen is above politics. That comment is true in only the most restricted sense of her not being openly pro- or anti- either of the major party machines. Her minders are smart enough to know that the

difference between them, both here and in the United Kingdom, is so infinitesimal as not to affect her interests. The game of parliamentary ins and outs is the least important element in the distribution of power. In vital areas, the monarchical principle is ideologically pro-capitalist. This bias has nothing to do with the Queen's rating as one of the richest people in the world. The royal fortune epitomises the unearned income of the capitalist as *rentier*, living off the labour of others. As a symbol of how a minority flourishes without working, hereditary rule validates that class system. Academic apologists for capitalism have never been able to explain why the children of capitalists should inherit wealth that they have done nothing to earn.

The Windsors have learnt not to flaunt their wealth. Throughout the 1950s, the Queen appeared on our postage stamps dripping with diamonds. Since the 1970s, she has turned up in coloured street frocks, indistinguishable from any well-heeled matron. Glamour is the most that the royals now dare parade. That discretion reduces any purchase that they have on majesty. Majesty was never a personal attribute but always the product of pomp and circumstance, a masquerade now reduced to the pomposities of Australians for Constitutional Monarchy.

Snobbery remains a potent weapon in the monarchists' armory. Curtsying bestows on the servile a sense of superiority over those of us who, as Henry Lawson said, 'call no biped lord or "sir", And touch their hats to no man!' Although talk of blue blood has disappeared, the myth that the royals are innately superior lingers and lends support to the notion that some people are born to rule over the rest of us. Elizabeth Windsor is the Queen of Australia because of her birth, not because of any achievement. Thus we have a model of public life which proclaims inheritance to be more meritorious than effort. The prime argument for dumping the current constitutional arrangement is to be rid of such anti-democratic assumptions. A monarchical system requires a subordinate people as much as it elevates the privileged few. Because Australians have created ways of life remote from the excesses of a pre-capitalist social order, we can lose sight of the inequalitarian structures on which every monarchy rests, whether the modest Scandinavian versions or the Tongan autocracy.

The point at issue is highlighted by the Japanese imperial household, even after its surrender of pretensions to the divine and General MacArthur's relegation of the emperor to being the symbol of the state, not even its nominal head. The Japanese people refer to their current emperor as a salary-man, that is, as a totally undistinguished character. Yet his office remains the pinnacle of the Shinto cult of cleanliness. This absolute purity requires the positing of its opposite in total filth, a burden allotted to the two or three million untouchables (*Burakuin*), descendants of those who did the dirty work of tanning and handling the dead. Corporations maintain registers of *Burakuin* names to block their employment. The liberation of those at the bottom of the social heap can never be complete as long as Japan's public culture retains their antithesis as its symbolic head. Australia has never had a social order as discriminatory as the Japanese. Nonetheless, that presumption about superiors-inferiors infects every hereditary arrangement.

Only five per cent of Australians believe that a monarchical system is good in itself. Supporters of the divine right of kings are even fewer than the number of royals sponging on the public purse. The Constitutional Monarchists abandoned all pretence that monarchy is preferable on principle. Instead, they aimed their attack on the republican model on offer, an easy target because it was so remote from republican values.

The Constitutional Monarchists were also too canny to argue that heredity bestowed any grace on individual royals; this would have been difficult to maintain in light of their behaviour towards each other. What the House of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha (also known as Windsor) has inherited are dysfunctional children from a succession of thuggish fathers across 200 years. The Constitutional Monarchists reply that their system is not responsible for individual indiscretions, or even for collective misdemeanours and cruelties. Yet if the Windsors do not possess the qualities to make even themselves happy and glorious, by what right do they reign over the rest of us? The case for any monarchy must be the inheritance of intrinsic worth, or it is a nothing.

In the middle of the referendum campaign in October 1999, the chair of Australians for Constitutional Monarchy, Professor

Flint, so forgot the proprieties of his public office as head of the Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA) that he allowed himself to be interviewed about the republic by John Laws, then subject to an ABA investigation. This instance exposed how monarchists conceive themselves to be superior to the rules that apply to the mob. Flint's breach of decorum was nothing compared with the affront delivered to republican virtue by the stream of minimalists who accepted the largesse of Rupert Murdoch to relaunch John Laws' reputation for Foxtel in March 2000. The Whitlams, Bob Carr, and Democrat Senator Scott Despoja attended, while the Victorian and Queensland ALP premiers sent video testimonials. Guest of honour Germaine Greer's excuse — that she had blown in only for the money — highlights that the battle in front of republicans and socialists alike is against plutocracy.

Community: Thinking Through Cultural Politics

JACQUELINE MILLNER

In the depression that results from... insufficient exchanges... I nonetheless hold on to this certainty: humanity is not constituted of isolated beings, but made up of communications among them; we are never given, even to ourselves, except in a network of communications with others: we bathe in communication, we can be reduced to this incessant communication, whose absence we feel in the very depths of our solitude.

Georges Bataille¹

Make the spectators the spectacle, give the actors, themselves! Make everyone see and love himself in the other, so that they will be more united.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau²

[N]o radical who takes a cool look at the tenacity and pervasiveness of dominant ideologies could possibly feel sanguine about what would be necessary to loosen their lethal grip. But there is one place above all where such