WHY I AM NOT A REPUBLICAN

WILLIAM MERRYLEES LECTURE 1997
Charles Sturt University
Wagga Wagga

presented by
Beatrice Faust

I refuse to support a republic for two reasons: one is "if it ain't broke, don't fix it"; the other is "never remodel the house when it's burning at both ends." Notice that I do not actively oppose the republican movement. That would take energy that I think should be better used to save the house.

Let us ask what the problem is that a republic is meant to solve. I put this question to a dear friend who said it would enable us to walk tall in Asia. Now, ever since the age of eighteen, I've known that I'll never walk tall anywhere and I don't think it is a goal greatly to be desired.
The Asian communities have had a bellyful of Europeans walking tall - that's why they sought independence from the colonial powers as soon as they could after World War 2. I am quite sure that our Asian trading partners are more interested in practical success than in symbols like walking tall under a republic.

The drive for a republic began when Sir John Kerr dismissed the Whitlam government, revealing an undreamed of treasure chest of reserve powers of the Crown. These powers were so vague and tenuous that they looked to some observers like the contents of Pandora's box - limitless and menacing. I'm not at all convinced that republicanism did not come about as a way of punishing Her Majesty and the Governor General for sacking Whitlam, rather than as a genuine concern about reserve powers. Now Sir John is dead and the Queen is otherwise occupied, we are left with this silly agitation. Reserve powers are almost impossible to codify and, whatever they are, the Monarch has hardly exercised them for two hundred years. The constitutional monarchy that came into being between 1689 and 1701 has all the good points of a republic except a replaceable head of state.
And why make a fuss about the head of state when the United States example demonstrates that electing a president does not stop friction with government but aggravates it?

The Whitlam dismissal seems to have made the office of Governor General look more powerful than it really is. Ian Holloway, lecturer in Public Law at the Australian National University, points out that under the Australian system of government, the Governor General takes his powers from the constitution - not from the Queen.¹ This was recognised as early as 1901 but today’s republicans seem to have forgotten it. The excitement surrounding the events of 11th November, 1975 obscures the fact that it was such an extraordinary occurrence that it is unlikely to happen again.

Those peculiar circumstances are not likely ever to occur together at the same time: Malcolm Fraser's o'er vaulting ambition, Sir John Kerr's self-importance, Sir Garfield Barwick's malice, the extreme adversarialism of Australian party politics and the bad sportsmanship of the Liberals who, seeming to believe that they had a hereditary right to rule, refused to accept the voters' decision and found hysterical reasons to block supply.

However, lightning does occasionally strike twice so it would not be unreasonable to secure stable government through a couple of simple changes to the constitution by referendum. We could make it impossible for the Senate to block supply and impossible for the Governor General to dismiss a lawfully elected government with a majority in the lower house. I shall discuss the mechanics of this later.

On the matter of symbolism: people make their own symbols as and when they need them. Since the French Revolution, the English royal family fought to provide a symbol of ideal family life and to avoid any hint that they had lost their moral authority to rule.
When Prince Albert – later King Edward VII – actually gave evidence in a divorce case, denying that he had committed adultery with Lady Mordaunt, the Argus said "A revelation more damaging to high society was never made, and I have heard sober, constitutional people remark that this has hastened the republic by fifty years." That was in 1870.

If I had time to be frivolous, I could put a strong argument that the monarchy has lost popularity precisely because it no longer functions as a symbol of virtuous family life. In that case, the prediction of the Argus is being fulfilled more than a century too late. We need a republic because of Camilla Parker Bowles. But what would a republic symbolise? a return to family life? if so, it must be on the their hidden agenda for no one in the republican camp discusses it.

---

Having a constitutional monarchy is something of an anachronism but being traditional or old-fashioned is not a handicap in Asia. Look at the Japanese Emperor, who must change sex, marry himself and spend the first year of his reign growing rice in order to guarantee the harvest for the rest of his lifetime. And all this even though Japan now imports rice! Or the Thai royal family, who are descended from Gods and greet their subjects from a balcony designed in the form of a half-human bird, who traditionally carried the Emperor down from Heaven on his or her back. Asians have anachronisms in their cupboards too. The Daijo-sai or Great Harvest Festival is somewhat controversial in Japan but it has not caused the country to lose face internationally. Similarly, Thailand’s current economic crisis has little to do with the fact that its royal family flies about on the back of a genetic anomaly.
Robert Manne, editor of Quadrant and Associate Professor of Politics at La Trobe University, explains that he became converted to republicanism because the monarchy no longer matters and because some presidents such as Vaclav Havel, in the Czech Republic, and Mary Robinson, in Ireland, have won the respect of their people by nobility of character. Certainly - but neither can be symbols in the same way that monarchs can because monarchs replace themselves through their children. When presidents die or retire, their successors have to establish themselves as symbols from scratch. Some never do.

Manne goes on to say that Sir William Dean and even Bill Hayden exercised a countervailing moral force that benefits government. Well, yes, and they did it as Governors General. They did not need to be presidents to make public statements on controversial issues. The constitution is about government, not symbols, and a Governor General can be a moral force as effectively as can a president.
So the system ain't really broke: the Governor General is subordinate to the constitution, the monarch is house-trained, and symbols are a plaything of people with more leisure than commonsense. Attempting to convert Australia to a republic might well create troubles that do not now exist. Even supposing that everyone exhausted themselves to work out the blue-print for an ideal system, it would have to go to the voters in a referendum. To pass, it would have to win a majority of votes in a majority of states. Australians historically vote "no" so that only about one referendum in four gets through.³ Thus, we would have to spend much time and energy and millions of dollars with very poor odds of success.

Academics have not succeeded in explaining our conservatism but some factors seem important. The chances of passing a referendum are better if the proposal has the support of both major parties and if the government is popular with the voters. Success also requires a congenial Senate. The proposal gets more support if it is straightforward and easy to understand. None of these

factors is likely in a referendum on far-reaching changes to the constitution.

In particular, we have entered a period that is sometimes called "government by lobby group." We no longer have to consider only party goals. Women, Aborigines, ethnic groups, environmentalists, family lobbyists, the young and the unemployed have joined the traditional lobbies of farmers, doctors and clergymen. The newcomers are looking for more than limits on the monarch's reserve powers or new symbols to impress Asia. They want a bill of rights that will guarantee their particular interests. This is bound to cause irreconcilable conflict. You will understand why if you simply think of a bill of rights embodying that frightening three-letter word "Wik". Land rights may be achieved without a republic but a republic will never be achieved if it is tied to land rights. Far from being an inevitability, the republic is a fantasy.
The republic seems to have overtones of liberty and independence. We would be freeing ourselves from the crown - which is, as I have said, usually too housebroken to exploit its reserve powers. But liberty and independence are themselves illusory if more than half Australia's assets are foreign-owned and one adult in three is on welfare. If we don't own something, we can't control it. People with little money have limited choices. Despite the short-lived attempt by the Whitlam government to buy back the farm, it seems that foreigners control more than two-thirds of Australia's strategic businesses and resources.  

I say "seems" because it is difficult to be precise about foreign investment over the last decade. Government agencies have not published detailed analyses and Queensland is the only State to record foreign land holdings. Its database records that investors from 107 countries have paid $8.1 billion to buy 4 million hectares of land representing less than 3% of the State's total area.  

---

5 ibid.
That isn't much if you say it quickly, but remember that these investors would be buying prime real estate or agricultural land: 20% of Cairns is foreign-owned.

Before asking whether this is really a bad thing or a concealed blessing, let us agree that it is at least different. The buyers from 107 countries do not particularly care whether they are getting into a constitutional monarchy or a republic. This suggests that national borders are fast breaking down and theories of national government are out of alignment with economic realities.

Indeed, Kenichi Ohmae, in his book The End of the Nation State, argues that the distinction between foreign and local is obsolete. This is partly because money that can be moved around electronically is out of sight of government and out of reach of traditional methods of collecting taxes and excise. Or, as Mel Gibson so pithily says, "Why go in and take a country with a bayonet when you can use the banking system?"

Moreover, the movement of manufacturing jobs offshore creates interlinked economies that may produce goods from components made all over the world—say, a computer containing a hard-disc made in Texas and a case made in Korea to be finished with components made in Japan.

Dr Ohmae does not get the press he deserves in Australia. He began his career at the Tokyo Institute of Technology, took a PhD in nuclear engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and worked on nuclear reactors for Hitachi. He then spent twenty-three years as a director of McKinsey and Company, an international management consulting firm. After a stint as professor in the Harvard School of Economics, he became chairman of a reform movement to get rid of feather-bedding in the Japanese economy.

Ohmae's work makes sense to me—partly because his credentials are so remarkable and he is so widely published but also for a personal reason.
I must confess that I spent fifteen years of my life as a company wife. My recently-ex husband was a hot-shot lawyer in one of the multinational petroleum companies known as the Seven Sisters. The economy seems different when you are inside the tent looking out than when you are outside the tent looking in. Chmae is definitely an insider.

He argues that interlinked economies - also called "regional" or "globalised" economies - enable people to buy the newest and the best at the cheapest prices. The product could be computers, rice-steamers or Tomaguchis. They also create phenomenal growth in the interlinked areas. A Honda plant in Ohio, an IBM plant in Japan, or a Motorola plant in Malaysia may be foreign-owned but they are contributing to the wealth of the host countries in a way that makes national boundaries look artificial. There is some evidence that foreign ownership in Australia is in services, not manufacturing so we may not expect the same benefits.
Globalisation has a beggar-my-neighbour aspect because it inevitably leads to growth for those areas inside the interlinked economy but unemployment or lower wages outside. Australia has two problems: we have missed opportunities to join interlinked economies - for example, in the region including Singapore, Johor and Batan - but if we do globalise, sections of the country will be left out. In China, the annual income of people living outside a regional economy is less than one tenth of the income inside it. Growth does not benefit the country as a whole. In Australia, the unskilled and people living outside the major cities can expect to be left behind.

Let's get this straight. "Asianisation" does not mean bringing Asians to Australia to take people's jobs. It means exporting jobs to Asia or wherever. If the jobs are in low-skill manufacturing, the sacked workers will not get comparable work. Sally Weller, of Melbourne University, studied the fate of 600 Textile, Clothing and Footwear workers retrenched from 1991 to 1993. By 1995, only 47% had found work and their new work was often low-paid, part-time jobs such as cleaning.\(^7\)

Thus some Asians are better off and some Australians are worse off. Pauline Hanson and the supporters of One Nation are responding to genuine changes that they simply do not understand. By hogging the media, they confuse people about the real issues. This is happening in Europe too: France has Jean-Marie Le Pen and Austria has Jörg Haider. They pander to the prejudices of an anxious community but they have no solutions.

Australia has, for most of its existence, succumbed to what Ohmae calls the "Resource Illusion".
"In today's knowledge-driven economy, the nations that still define their interests primarily in [national] terms - such as Brazil, Indonesia, or Australia, and the oil-producing countries of the Middle East - suffer from what I call the 'resource illusion.' In the name of protecting their national interest, they wall themselves off from the most powerful engines of growth."  

\[1\]

OHMAE, K. op cit p50 - 62.
Ohmae goes on to discuss opportunities that Australian industry has missed in Japan, substantially through wilful ignorance. I recall the period 1980 - 1985, when my husband was working on what was then Australia's largest-ever export contract (selling North-West Shelf gas to Japan). The seller's consortium had one-and-a-half Japanese speakers in Tokyo while the Japanese buyers had 80 English-speakers in Melbourne alone. Ohmae concludes with this observation, "If a country like Australia keeps the global economy at arm's length, its resources will, over time, become commodities and commodity prices inevitably fall. Growth depends on inviting the global economy in, not keeping it out."

Naturally, he advocates removing tariffs and nobbling the Foreign Investment Review Board.

Before we can even begin to debate the implications of globalisation, we need to stop the wasteful diversion of republican talkfests and horrendously expensive referenda. We must examine our own economy and look closely at overseas experience.
One major question that is being obscured by both the republicans and Pauline Hanson, is whether Australia can enjoy the benefits of globalisation without creating a permanent underclass and an impoverished rural hinterland.

Without tariff protection, Australia’s largest clothing manufacturer, Pacific Brands, may go off-shore at the cost of 8,000 Australian jobs. If the whole textile, clothing and footwear industry goes, it could cost 100,000 jobs. I’d be sorry to think of Chesty Bond being exiled to Taiwan or Brazil but the loss would not be so costly if the workers could be redeployed. As Sally Weller has shown, this is unlikely. Many CTF workers are migrants who speak little or no English and are not able to take advantage of growth industries: high technology, education and tourism. Several surveys have shown that the community would rather pay slightly more for some goods in order to retain tariffs and protect jobs. That could be a prudent choice.
I am absolutely certain that hysteria about Mrs Hanson is selling Australia short. We have been told that she has given us a reputation for racism that has flattened both student visa applications and tourism. This is untrue. While Australia-wide figures show that Malaysia, China and India are sending fewer students, Vietnam and Indonesia are sending more. Monash's international student enrolment is up 25%. We can't explain this by saying that the Indonesians and Vietnamese have not heard of Pauline Hanson and I know that Monash is not sending out brochures dissociating the University from One Nation.

Possibly some students have been deterred by fee increases. Many Australian Universities are also selling courses off-shore - either through distance education or by sending teachers into Asia. We need to remember that Third World countries have been developing their own educational systems. India and Thailand, for example, have well-developed off-campus systems as well as other institutions. The world may be reaching a point where the developing countries are becoming more self-sufficient in education. Meantime, Australia can profit by servicing their need.
We can see a similar pattern in tourism. There has also been a panic about Mrs Hanson's effect. Different figures have been used to show that tourists are put off by the fear of racism. Yet falls in visits by one nationality have been offset by rises elsewhere. Some falls are clearly related to badly targeted advertising that fail to identify which overseas groups have disposable income. Debating the effects of Pauline Hanson distracts attention away from more basic issues. Should we be careful before accepting education and tourism as staple industries? In the long-term, they may be as unreliable as resources - although for different reasons.

The immediate future is in information technology - which is one argument for retaining ownership in Telstra. IT is already 7.5% of the economy and set to double by 2005. However, if we could expand sufficiently to get into the IT corridor around Kuala Lumpur, the industry would more than double and we would have established ourselves regionally with Malaysia. This would take immense effort but it is conceivable - if we have not already missed the boat.
Ohmae is obviously right about the benefits of regional economies but he is brutally indifferent to the costs - perhaps because the extremely generous and counter-productive treatment of farmers in Japan has made him cynical. Australian farmers are hardly feather-bedded.

Australia is not an Asian nation. We have had almost one hundred years of high living standards - although they are slipping now. I do not believe that our fair-go tradition will tolerate high unemployment for much longer. The community is rightly suspicious of moves to cut tariffs and export jobs. Australians do not easily riot but we are beginning to get stroppy at the lack of improvement in unemployment figures. According to Professor Helen Hughes and Graeme Dorrance, real unemployment in Australia - officially unemployed, under-employed and discouraged job-seekers - was 12.6% in 1995. We desperately need to consider our options.

---

I am suspicious of accepting globalisation uncritically - even if we could. A Chinese peasant whose income remains static because he is outside of the regional economy is little worse off than before. Australian country dwellers who are impoverished because the good things of life go to the cities because they can participate in new industries and regional links will not remain patient forever. There must be some way of benefitting from globalisation and still protecting country-dwellers.

We have horrendous ecological problems. The majority of river outfalls into the sea are contaminated by sewage. The Murray-Darling river system is contaminated by just about everything. No one can really devise an immigration policy because no one really knows what the optimum ecologically sustainable population is for this country. This is an ideal situation for using public works to create employment as Franklin D Roosevelt did during the Great Depression. This traditionally Keynesian model may work for Australia - if we are willing to find the money for it.
“Civil minimum” is a dirty expression for Kenichi Ohmae who sees it as a misuse of taxes. That is, he does not expect globalisation to provide a minimum standard of living for everyone. Surely that is anathema to this community? Rather, we should seek solutions that will yield a good minimum for all, rather than high profits for some. Civil minimum - the minimum standard of living available to everyone and below which no-one shall fall - should be the moral foundation of our economy.
Tuesday 12 August 1997

What’s news at CSU

- The benefits of a Republic can only be academic and ceremonial and its costs will be catastrophic, according to feminist academic, Beatrice Faust. She says a republic in Australia is unnecessary on the principle that, if something works, you should not fix it. She will expand on these views in the 1997 Merrylees Lecture at Charles Sturt University’s Wagga Wagga campus to commence at 8.00 pm on Wednesday 13 August. The public lecture, titled Down with the Republic, comes amidst ongoing discussion over the proposed Constitutional Convention. During her visit to Wagga Wagga, Ms Faust also will speak to CSU’s Women in Leadership Network at the CSU Staff Club between 8.30 and 9.30 am on Thursday 14 August, before meeting farmers at the Wagga Wagga City Saleyards to discuss their views on the High Court’s Wik decision.

- A conference aimed at making information on crime and justice issues more accessible to people in regional areas is being held at Charles Sturt University this week. Federal Member for Riverina, Noel Hicks MP, will open the Crime and Justice in Regional Australia conference, where participants will hear the latest on trends and directions in crime, juvenile justice, police corruption and approaches to the treatment of sex offenders. Organised by CSU, the Australian Institute of Criminology and the NSW Department of Juvenile Justice, the one-day conference is being held in the Convention Centre at University’s Wagga Wagga campus on Thursday 14 August from 9.00 am to 5.00 pm.

- Despite being located far from Australia’s sugar-growing regions, Charles Sturt University is to undertake major research for the Sugar Research and Development Corporation. Building on work already carried out for the national Sugar Research Institute, Information Technology lecturer, Dr Wayne Moore, has won a $100,000, two-year grant to create a system that will measure the foreign material attached to harvested sugar cane delivered to sugar mills. Monitoring the extra dirt, cane roots, leaves and additional burnt material on cane is important during crushing as these unwanted materials can wear out machinery and affect sugar quality. The study will develop an on-line monitoring process which will rapidly display the amount of unwanted material on cane delivered to mills.

- An exhibition of nearly two dozen works by well-known screen printing artists from France will be opened at Charles Sturt University this Friday evening. Impression Libres is a collection of engravings, lithographs and etchings being displayed around the world by French cultural organisation, Alliance Française. It will be officially opened by Wagga Wagga City Council Director of Recreational Services, Mr Kerry Geale, at 6.00 pm on Friday 15 August. The display will be open to the public between 9.00 am and 5.00 pm on Monday 18 and Tuesday 19 August, at the HR Gallop Gallery in the School of Visual and Performing Arts on the Wagga Wagga campus (Building 21).

Further information: Jim Booth, CSU Media Office, telephone (069) 33 2207, Email jbooth@csu.edu.au or mobile 0418 42 5757.