

# Voting for a Republic

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On November 6<sup>th</sup> 1999, Australians will vote on whether to change the Constitution to become a republic.

For this purpose, a republic means a system of government, which does not have a King or a Queen at its head. The effect of the change in Australia would be that Queen Elizabeth II would no longer be Queen of Australia and would no longer play a direct role in Australian affairs.

In fact, the Queen plays a limited role even now. She appoints the Governor-General and the State Governors. In doing this, she always appoints whomever the Prime Minister or State Premier asks her to appoint. She would remove a Governor-General or a Governor too, if the Prime Minister or a Premier asked her to do this.

Otherwise, the Governor-General and the Governors carry out all the functions of a Head of State for Australia. Most of these functions are ceremonial - making speeches, meeting people, and attending community events. Some are more directly connected with government. For example, the Governor-General calls Parliament together and dissolves it before an election. In all but a very small number of cases, the Governor-General acts on the Prime Minister's advice in performing these functions too.

If Australia became a republic, a new way of appointing (and removing) a Head of State would need to be found. The Constitution may also need to say more about what the Head of State should do and how much independence the Head of State should have, in making decisions. The present Constitution does not say much about this, because all practices or "conventions" which developed over the centuries in connection with the monarchy were assumed to apply in Australia as well.

The main purpose of the Constitutional Convention, which met in February 1998, was to draw up a model for a republic on which Australians could vote. Australian voters elected half of the Constitutional Convention with the other half, including Members from all Australian Parliaments, were appointed to the Convention by the Parliament.

The main features of the model, which came from the Convention, were:

- The Head of State would be called President and would be appointed for five years.
- The President would have the same powers as the Governor-General has now.
- Most of the powers of the President would still be exercised on the advice of the Government, and

- The Constitution would spell this out as far as possible.
- To appoint the President:
  - All Parliaments, local governments, community organisations and members of the public would be invited to make nominations.
  - A committee consisting of Members of the Commonwealth Parliament and of the community would draw up a short list of candidates.
  - The Prime Minister would propose the appointment of one candidate to the
    - Parliament.
    - The Leader of the Opposition would second the motion.
    - The appointment would be approved by a two-thirds majority of a joint sitting of both Houses of Parliament.
- The President would be able to be removed at any time by a notice in writing signed by the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister's action would have to be approved within 30 days by a majority of the House of Representatives.

Australia is a federation and each State has links with the Queen as well. The Convention decided that it would be desirable for all parts of Australia to become a republic at the same time but that it was up to each State to make the final decision and to work out its own republican model.

The Convention also said that there should be a new introduction or "preamble" to the Constitution which refers to Australia's history to some of the main features of its system of government and to other things which make Australia what it is today, including its cultural diversity and the respect which Australians have for their unique land and environment. The opening words of the preamble (and of the Constitution) would be "We the people of Australia..."

Before the proposal is put to referendum, it must be passed by the Commonwealth Parliament. The Convention left a lot of details for the Parliament to fill in, including the way in which the public can really be involved in nominating people for President. It is likely that this will be considered by Parliament early in 1999. In order to be adopted, the proposal must be accepted by a majority of all voters and by a majority of voters in at least four States.

If the proposal is passed, Australia will become a republic by 1 January 2001, exactly 100 years after the present Constitution came into effect. And, if that happens, the Convention has one final recommendation: another elected Convention should be held within three to five years to consider how the republic is working and other aspects of the Australian system of government.