



PRIME MINISTER

STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP

MR HOWARD BENDS TO ANY BREEZE

Mr Howard's response to the Government's proposal for an Australian republic is a very sad commentary on the state of his thinking about Australia.

He has had more than two years to think about it, but his contortions of the past few days make it plain that it was too hard for him. Since last Wednesday night, he and the rest of the Opposition have been making it up as they have come under pressure for a considered response.

What we have seen in the past week, with the headland speech and Mr Howard's republic response, is a leader not only unable to lead, but one who lacks policy substance on any front.

On the republic, Mr Howard's position now seems to be this: he would hold a "people's convention" (to which his Government would appoint half the delegates); and if the convention arrived at a "consensus", his Government would put that consensus to a referendum. If no consensus was reached at his convention, he would put a series of "options" to a plebiscite, with one of the options being the retention of the Monarchy. If the preferred option arising from the plebiscite was a republic, he would put that proposal to a referendum – though he and any Government he led could not in conscience support it because he thinks the Constitutional Monarchy is best.

Until yesterday, Mr Howard would not answer the question which counts above all others in this debate – does he want an Australian to be Australia's head of state?

In this morning's press he did provide the answer. He said he didn't want an Australian as our head of state – he wants the Monarchy.

Mr Howard now says: "If the Australian people want a republic, the fact that I support the present system need not be seen to be in the way."

All those Australians who believe an Australian should be our head of state should take note: Mr Howard says you can only have a vote on that when you have been through a convoluted process designed and steered by him, a monarchist.

What chance would those Australians who want a republic have if a Howard Government only deigned to put a republic referendum under a sense of obligation? No such referendum would have a snowball's chance in hell without the full commitment and enthusiasm of the Government of the day. Mr Howard's option therefore effectively means no republic.

Mr Howard's attempt to justify his convolutions over the last few days on the grounds that they are more "consultative" and "pro-choice" is a manifest fraud. The Government has put a considered proposal which will be put to a referendum – the most democratic of all acts of consultation. The referendum we propose will not take place for at least two and a half years, in which time there will be extensive consultation and debate throughout the community.

If the referendum is defeated, the Monarchy remains, as it is now. That is the real democratic choice, provided for in the Constitution.

Now, in his desperation, Mr Howard apparently has seized on the erroneous idea that the Government would put its referendum proposal to the people repeatedly, until it was passed. This, of course, is a complete furphy.

The Opposition's response on this issue has been an exercise in high farce. It has left Mr Howard looking pathetic. We have not seen its like since The Things that Matter. But this is worse. The Things that Matter really didn't matter at all – the republic does.

So does much else matter in the lives of Australians – but of course Mr Howard has given his word that he will not have anything coherent to say on these things either.

CANBERRA
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