



# PRIME MINISTER

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**SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P.J. KEATING MP  
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It is a pleasure to be here, even if it is something of a daunting task to follow Robert Hughes, and I thank Malcolm Turnbull and the Australian Republican Movement for inviting me along.

Robert Hughes is an expatriate Australian but a genuine patriot. He maintains a keen, intelligent and very sympathetic interest in his homeland; he has written a couple of the great books about Australian art and Australian history; and by his work and his character - a sort of pragmatic Australian humanist - he is a great ambassador for this country.

He is to Australian arts and letters what Lew Hoad was to tennis.

An unselfconscious ambassador for Australia to the world.

And of course he is a republican.

There used to be another kind of Australian expatriate of course - the one who left and from a great distance heaped scorn upon the place. But these are much less common than they used to be and we are all grateful for that.

We are not alarmed if Peter Carey decides to write his novels in New York instead of Sydney or Bacchus Marsh. We do not get a fit of the cringes if our film directors and actors base themselves in Hollywood, or our painters get themselves a villa in Tuscany, or our musicians set up camp with the Berlin Philharmonic or sing with the Scottish National Opera.

For those of us whose memories extend to the fifties and sixties, this represents a considerable change of heart. We are much more relaxed about it.

And rightly. No one really leaves anywhere for good these days. Not in the way people used to.

In part the change stems from the revolution in global economics and telecommunications. It is going to be increasingly difficult to be xenophobic and prosper in the modern world. If you are not open and interacting with the globe you will not be in the game.

This demands a large measure of tolerance, openness and adaptability; and, remarkably for those of us who remember the days of insularity and the mighty cringe, suddenly these things can be said about Australia.

This is a tolerant, open and adaptable society. It is hybrid, eclectic and infinitely diverse. I hesitate to use such terms in the presence of Robert Hughes, but Australia does seem to me to have a touch of the post moderns about it.

That is not to say that it has happened overnight, only that it feels like it. Nor is it to say that this generation is singularly responsible for the change, in fact the foundations were laid a long while ago. The roots go down to the colonial democracies, to the democratic institutions we inherited from Britain, to the experience of war, to post-war immigration.

It is impossible to overstate the significance of post-war immigration or the power of good it has done us. Nothing has wrought such a change on the national consciousness and the national fabric.

And nothing was better calculated to drive away the fear and the prejudice.

It is one of our great national successes, this transformation of Australia into a tolerant and diverse and outward looking modern society.

Every day a thousand cliches are uttered about it - but we really should take great pride in the achievement, because it proves something about both the old values of Australia and the new.

And we should passionately defend the principles of tolerance and democracy on which it is built.

That is not to say that what has come to be called multiculturalism is beyond either criticism or the need for reform and adjustment.

And in the past couple of years I have been making this point: what we have come to call multiculturalism must never become an ideology, or a bureaucratic citadel of political correctness.

It must never become exclusive or exclusionist. It will self-destruct if it begins to mistake diversity for the mainstream. Nothing in the agenda of multiculturalism has ever said, and nor must it ever say, that the culture of pre-multicultural Australians is to be washed away.

That includes those great institutions and traditions we inherited from Britain, and those Australians of earlier times adapted and invented.

We are not discarding the old tiles in the social and cultural mosaic, we are adding to them.

I suspect that the mark of a truly successful multicultural society is less the degree of diversity than the sense of unity, the sense of oneness.

Diversity is easy to achieve, and we have proved that it can be managed in ways which are equitable and fair and which preserve social harmony.

The real trick is creating the glue that holds it together. That is probably the hardest part. It is certainly the crucial part and the part we must be forever vigilant about.

And it is the part where the republic comes in - not as a sufficient condition for national cohesion and purpose, but a necessary one.

And these are things we need.

We have a huge continent and a small population. There is a great deal of cultural diversity within the geographical and occupational spread before you even get to the ethnic differences. The federation is a loose one.

I don't see these facts of Australian life as a threat to the nation - though it is always worth bearing in mind that we cannot take our nationhood for granted.

Rather I think that in them lies the clue to the sort of country, the sort of republic, we ought to and can become.

One that values the diversity of the place and the population; one that is deeply democratic, egalitarian and tolerant; one that expresses a love for the land and the best traditions of the people and yet can accommodate the new.

In a sense, this is the other meaning of minimalist. As much as a republic will set a new direction for Australia and express our hopes for a new sense of common purpose, it will confirm what is already there.

It will confirm our independence. It will confirm that tolerance and diversity and our democratic institutions and traditions. It will confirm our belief in Australia and our love of the land and the environment.

I think that this is the essential beauty of it, the huge opportunity it presents to us. In a single essentially symbolic act we can confirm both the history and the contemporary reality of Australia, including our contemporary ambitions.

I include among these our ambition to make women truly equal partners at every level of our national life; our ambition to give Aboriginal Australians both justice and opportunity and to make our Aboriginal cultural heritage secure.

And I also include our ambitions in the region and the world. Our ambition to succeed in becoming a partner and player in the region. Our ambition to make this a clever and creative country.

And we can do it at a hugely symbolic time - at the close of our first century of nationhood, at the dawn of a new century.

Few other countries have such a chance.

I don't think I need to tell you that I believe it is altogether too good an opportunity for Australia to let pass.

Now, this seems to me to have certain inescapable consequences for the Australian Republican Movement and for all those Australians who believe that our head of state should be an Australian.

It means, perhaps above all, that we talk a good deal less to each other - and a good deal less to Lloyd Waddy and his little band of soldiers - and a good deal more to Australians who remain sceptical, uninterested or, for whatever reason, vaguely hostile.

It means that the great debate - the really great debate - should now begin.

The republic is no longer an abstract idea, it is not something out there in the never never.

I think Australians should now assume that there will be a referendum on this question before the year 2000. And I think the debate should be conducted with this in mind. Australians will soon be asked to decide whether they want as their head of state the monarch of Great Britain or an Australian.

Now for most of us here - all of us is a reasonable guess - the issue is beyond doubt.

I confess - I sometimes cannot understand how anyone could fail to see why Australia should have an Australian head of state.

And I also confess that sometimes, even though I know there are complexities to resolve and obstacles to overcome, I cannot understand why anyone should not have faith enough to think that we can overcome them.

Nevertheless, I know and I'm sure all of you know, that there are good reasons why Australians are cautious and sceptical about this change.

"If it ain't broke, don't fix it" sums it up pretty well. Of course, it's less a question of being broke than one of obsolescence. If being broke was the criterion for discarding something most of us would still be getting around by horse and cart.

What we're talking about here is a trade-in. A trade-up. A new model - called the Republic.

Now, it is possible that events since France began exploding bombs in the Pacific again have possibly persuaded a lot more Australians that indeed it is broke.

Many Australians, I know, fear the change to a republic. I think their greater fear should be that we will be left to share a head of state with a country which may very often in future feel itself obliged to oppose our interests in this region and the world.

The British Government has made very clear what has been obvious for a long while - that Australia's interests and Britain's interests are often very different and even fundamentally opposed.

This was made plain even before John Major declared his outright support for President Chirac's actions, when Britain stood alone among European nations in refusing to condemn the French nuclear testing program. Now it is plainer still.

It should come as no surprise to anyone, of course.

I seem to remember making a speech in the presence of Her Majesty The Queen shortly after I became Prime Minister; and in it saying that just as Britain had for many years been pursuing her interests in Europe, Australia was now pursuing Australia's interests in Asia and the Pacific. And drawing the conclusion that while we saw our heritage as shared, and there was much else to share in the future, we saw our destiny as distinctly different.

It was entirely unexceptional. I was a little worried I might be accused of being platitudinous.

But then that closet republican, John Hewson, rushed outside Parliament House and condemned me for showing too little respect.

We can't be sure at all that Australians everywhere will see in the British Government's support for the French Government more evidence that it is silly for us to share a head of state with another country - and I stress this, **any other country.**

As confirmation that Britain would pursue its best interests regardless of ours, John Major's action this week approached the brutal. However, the lesson to be learned from it is not an anti-British one but one about the inappropriateness of Australia having a head of state who is not one of us.

So how do we proceed?

I think the answer is - by persuading our countrymen and women that we can make the change to an Australian head of state without danger to our democracy and our federation and without offence to a Queen we hold in very high regard.

And by resisting the course on which the conservative parties have embarked, which is to stall the debate and progress towards a republic by means of a charade called a peoples' convention.

The peoples' convention they talk of has very little to do with genuine debate and democratic participation, and a great deal to do with political diversions and procrastination.

It is about - to use an expression attributed to Mr Howard - kicking the republican ball into touch. Mr Howard cannot be relied upon to change his views on the monarchy: I doubt if there is a more ardent monarchist in the country.

Let me quote to you from an article Alex Mitchell wrote in the Sun Herald on 25 June this year in which he referred to a discussion he'd had with a person he described as "a very senior Liberal". He meant John Howard. How would the Liberal Party respond to the republic he asked him

No worries he replied. We can kick the whole thing into touch by calling for a peoples' convention. the peoples' convention is a perfect talking shop. It will keep the issue off the party political agenda and the election agenda. With the people's convention up and running, the Liberal Party wouldn't have to say or do anything about the republic. It would effectively bury the issue for as long as we want it.

Later in the conversation he announced: I am a monarchist. I was born a monarchist and I will die a monarchist.

Dare I say the rest of Australia need not die with him.

Mr Howard can be relied upon to create smokescreens and confusion. He has lagged behind the progress of this nation throughout his political career, and that is what has made him a difficult opponent. The experience of being forever at odds with the direction of the country, forever trying to catch up, has made him Australia's foremost spoiler.

We can be sure he will want to slow progress and he will do that by trying to create as much uncertainty in the public mind as he can. He will try to make the resolution of this issue appear more difficult than it really is.

But we have got over him before and we can get over him again.

If you ask Mr Howard what his policy is on the republic, what policy he will give you he will say: "you can be for it and against it". That is, he'd give you the direction either way.

But what he is really saying is that he himself is against the republic and effectively, he would make certain there is no chance of a republic.

John Howard says that if there was a referendum for a republic put by a Government led by him, he personally would be for the monarchy.

Does anybody in this country seriously believe that where such a referendum proposal must secure a majority of electors in a majority of States that such a proposition would have a snowball's chance in hell if the Government of the day wasn't going flat out for it.

Particularly if the Prime Minister was running on the "no case".

Any Government putting a referendum proposal for a republic would need an all out national effort - an all out political effort.

But to go into such a campaign with the Prime Minister saying that he is actually against the proposal would be to make a sham of the whole process.

John Howard's shonky republic proposals mean one thing and one thing only - no republic!

A Coalition Government would mean no republic.

There's only one way to an Australian republic and that's with the only Party which gives real meaning and expression to the great breadth of national sentiment and identity that is, of course, the Australian Labor Party.

Like all great reforms, the Labor Party will have to carry the weight of this one too. But to carry it with an Opposition saying that they could be with you on the same proposal when their purpose is to destroy it is taking political chicanery too far.

And we will do it by the same means. We will be appealing to the Australian people who are sceptical and pragmatic but not bad judges and who are not averse to necessary change.

Mr Howard said the other day that the republic was now "election neutral".

Let me tell you and him it is not. It is alive and well and all his efforts to neutralise and destroy it, will almost certainly fail.

If we take our argument to the people of Australia and put our case well - and the media of this country allow us to put it well (and at least on their editorial pages they do support the republican cause) - I am sure the people will vote for an Australian republic.

We will have to take it well beyond the perception that the republic is for the well-heeled of Sydney and Melbourne. We will have to dispel any perception that it is a male and middle class movement without much consequence for the great majority of Australians.



And we will have to dispel some of the myths about the Government's proposals. For instance, it has been alleged that an Australian president elected by a two-thirds majority of parliament and only removable by the same means would be able to abuse the powers he or she would possess.

In fact this method of election is much less likely to give us wilful or whimsical Presidents than a popular election, and Presidents much less likely to claim a popular mandate for their political or other beliefs.

No President could be elected without bi-partisan support and no President could be removed without it. As we have said many times, popular election would mean that a Ninian Stephen or a Zelman Cowen would never become President of the Republic of Australia.

And as we have also said, the requirement of bi-partisan support would insure against arbitrary or politically motivated removal of a President.

The Government's proposals have been carefully constructed to avoid the appointment of Presidents who bring their own political agendas to the office of the head of state. Serving politicians would be disqualified for appointment for five years after leaving parliament - and for those who remain in any doubt, I can ensure you that would disqualify me for life.

An Australian head of state would be expressly required to exercise his or her powers, other than the reserve powers, in accordance with ministerial advice.

And the reserve powers would have to be exercised in accordance with the Constitutional Conventions.

The Government's proposal provides for a President who performs essentially the same functions as the Governor-General does now.

Because we will have to answer these and many other questions about the implications of the move to an Australian head of state, the Government today released an information kit for distribution throughout the Australian community.

Of course I will leave a few of the kits with you tonight and I hope that they will be of use in the great campaign that lies ahead of us.

We will need all the resources of reason and faith that we can muster. Even with the tide of history and logic running for us we can't expect to be easily carried ashore. We are going to have to swim. And we are going to have to expect the occasional attack from jellyfish and stingrays and the odd hold-up in the seaweed - otherwise known as proposals for a peoples' convention.

But the tide is with us and the incentive is certainly there. Drifting is no longer an option and drowning is simply not on.

It really can and must be done and I urge you all to make the mighty effort it requires.