



Speech by
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AUSTRALIA ACTS (REQUEST) BILL

Mr BEANLAND (Indooroopilly—LP) (5 p.m.): The Bill before the Parliament is really about the republican referendum and what sort of republic we want to have. Having listened to some of the comments that have been made over recent weeks and months, I have concluded that the issue is really about ego, power and who is or is not going to be the father of the republic. It is interesting to note that it is about giving the Prime Minister more power to sack the president than he has to sack his own driver. That is the bottom line. That is a fact of life.

We are rushing into a decision on this proposal without having the sort of mature debate that this country is capable of undertaking. In fact, the proposal is a squib. What is suggested is not a real republic. Even Malcolm Turnbull of the Australian Republican Movement says that it is all about taking a minimalist approach; it is all about changing the name of the head of state. That is his line. He just wants to change the name of the head of state. What about the rest of the Australian Constitution that I hear members in this Chamber and people elsewhere in the country regularly complaining about? What about all the other matters that we ought to apply our minds to at the same time?

If people are genuinely serious about this country becoming a republic, let us become a real republic and not simply undertake change for change's sake. However, before this nation becomes a republic we must have the sort of real debate that a mature country is able to undertake. Various people have put forward a range of matters that need to be covered in such a debate. For example, what form of government do we want? Do we want to stay with the Westminster or London system, or do we want to analyse and look at the Washington system of Government? What type of Legislatures do we want in the Federal and State arenas? Do we need to have a Prime Minister or do we want to rearrange the system so that the president has all the power, as in the United States? In other words, should we move to a Washington system? Do we want to have a Prime Minister as we currently have and a president elected by the people, as I believe it is fair to say the vast majority of people want should Australia become a republic?

I believe that, firstly, Australians are looking for a mature and real debate on the type of republic they want and the other changes that they would like to make to the Australian Constitution and the compact between the States and the national Government. People keep asking, "What sort of federation do we want?" It is worth while noting that it was not so long ago that when he was in Opposition, Premier Beattie—and I well remember him saying this over and over again—said that he stood for a popularly elected president. He openly espoused that view around the State and elsewhere in the nation. I notice that his principles soon went to water. He wants a squib approach to it. He wants a minimalist approach where a name is changed and that will do. Of course, some people say, "Once we change the name, if there are any problems we will fix them up down the track and worry about them then." That should be fun, particularly when we have a constitutional crisis. It will not be a prime ministerial crisis such as in 1975. This will be a real constitutional crisis, as the Constitution of this nation will have let the country down because we failed to go about the process in a proper manner.

Those of us who were at the Constitutional Convention in Canberra will well remember the debates that occurred and how this current inadequate model was arrived at. This is the model that gives the Prime Minister more power to sack the president than he has to sack his own car driver. That

model was arrived at as a compromise because various people could not agree. There were fights within the ARM, fights within the group for a popularly elected president, and fights between people who wanted a republic but with some changes and who were very unhappy about the way that the Prime Minister was going to have power viz-a-viz the president and so forth. Those issues were debated and we ended up with the half-baked proposal that we now have. It is a recipe for a constitutional crisis, and a full-blooded one at that. In the hothouse of political argument and pressure, one can just see what would happen if the situation that we had in 1975 occurred under this so-called republic. We would end up with a major disaster for everybody, particularly the ordinary citizens of this country.

The Australian Republican Movement itself does its cause no good. I noticed recently that its president wants to change some of the words in the proposal that will go before the people. No longer is it good enough to have the word "republic" on the question. Goodness gracious me! If we are not going to have the word "republic" on the question, what is the point of the whole exercise? What a con it all is. One has to ask: who is getting what sort of ego trip out of the whole exercise? If we are genuinely serious about it, at some stage this country may become a republic for reasons that I might get time to go into later. However, that will not happen overnight, particularly without a mature and sensible debate of all of the proposals and propositions. That could be a long time down the track if half-baked proposals like this are put forward from time to time.

It is fair to say that the Australian Republican Movement has failed with its minimalist approach. I believe that it will fail in the forthcoming referendum because it has taken the people of Australia for fools. The people of this country are not fools. They know that very serious changes are being proposed and that those changes have not been appropriately debated. This is a mature country with one of the longest continuing democracies in the world—I think we come in at number five or six. We have the ability to undertake a proper debate.

There are firm monarchists and others who believe that we might become a republic one day but that we should do so properly. They look about them and see that this country has a wonderful standard of living and lifestyle. It has arguably the strongest economy in the world, with very low rates of interest and other wonderful economic measurements. We are situated at the bottom end of Asia, which has had all sorts of economic problems in recent times, but we have remained internationally competitive. Those people are saying, "Why the rush? How will that improve our lifestyle or our standard of living?" It might start to destroy them, and it could very well do so if we end up in a huge constitutional crisis. We should not forget that a republic in itself will be no panacea. There might be some benefits that many of us could talk about at length. However, a republic itself will not be a panacea, particularly the half-baked, squib proposal that is currently being put before the Australian public. If we are to go down this track, we need to do it properly, adequately, and thoroughly.

If we look at the power relationship between the Prime Minister and the president, people can argue, "Of course, if the Prime Minister intends to sack the president, he has to get the support of his own party in the House of Representatives", and so on. We know how the party structure in this country works. For example, I will take the Australian Labor Party structure. Obviously, if the Prime Minister was going to do that, he would first get caucus approval and then he would have a majority in the House to carry the matter through. We need to be sensible about this. People say, "The Prime Minister may have the power and not do it properly." That does not mean to say that the Prime Minister will not be able to quickly call a caucus meeting, in the case of the Labor Party, to get the approval and then quickly go about the task. He can do that very expeditiously indeed. He might call a party meeting for some other reason and tack it on to the end of the business being dealt with. We all know how the political system works. I am sure that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, are well aware of that matter and how very quickly this could be undertaken.

That would lead to our being the only republic in the world in which the Prime Minister had the power to sack the president on the spot. That would be a disaster. As I recollect it, under the current arrangements there are no rules in relation to impeachment of the president. I do not think that matter is included in the proposal. There are provisions for impeachment of the president. At the end of the day, it will be left up to the Prime Minister to handle the issue. All sorts of issues arise in relation to the person occupying the highest office in the land.

Miss Simpson: I wonder if Boris Yeltsin could give us some advice.

Mr BEANLAND: If Boris Yeltsin, the President of Russia, could give us some advice, I am sure he would. President Yeltsin is always the subject of threats, innuendos and motions in the Russian parliament.

What we have is a Clayton's version, not a real proposal for a republic. As I said, I believe that all Australians feel that they want to be part of this republic. If we go down this track, they should be educated properly about the benefits. To date no education has been forthcoming about this proposal. This is why people do not feel part of it and do not feel that it would take us forward. It is fair to say that the republican movement has not paid proper care and attention to this issue. It believes that, at the end of the day, the people of this country will simply vote for this change to the Constitution. We all

know how hesitant people are to make any changes to the Constitution. Consequently, it will not go ahead. Come November, it will be defeated, because the whole process has been rushed.

As I touched on before, other improvements need to be made to the Constitution. For example, the power of the Senate, which has been raised with me many times, needs to be examined, in particular in respect of the issue of Supply and whether the whole of the Senate goes to the people, as would the House of Representatives, if the Senate were to block Supply. A whole range of issues flowing from the events of 1975 need to be looked at. Those issues should be examined at the same time that we look at going down the road to a republic.

A host of other aspects needs to be examined. One issue in particular that irritates me is the fact that the Federal Government can enter into treaties without those arrangements being put to both Houses of Parliament. In a number of other countries, the United States in particular, there has to be a two-thirds majority approval from the Senate.

Mr Nuttall: You just want to be President of the Upper House.

Mr BEANLAND: Am I going to be President of the Upper House? That sounds pretty good.

We need also to look at other types of improvements, and this is the appropriate time to do so. Although all of these matters are significant, they will not sink the republican debate—far from it. We can resolve these matters at the same time as we educate people about the republican movement. In that way, the people of this nation can be made to feel as though they are part of the process.

As I touched on before, the central issue is that the people of this country see that economically and socially we are very strong and they question what benefits this proposal might produce. We do not see anyone promoting any of the benefits. That is because the benefits are not there. Certainly, it might encourage the spirit of the nation. I could spend some time speaking about how it might bring together the nation as one and how we might be able to gain some benefits. However, it is very doubtful that there will be any social or economic benefits. If we travel down this track, other aspects arise, such as a Bill of Rights. Under a monarchical system, we do not need to look at those issues. Perhaps we need to take that into account.

Recently we heard people saying that the proposal from the ARM was treason and a sell-out of the republic. I think this matter was raised in this debate. I agree with those sentiments. If we are to have a proper republic, the nation will be permitted to elect its president. We should not be subjected to some half-baked proposal that has come in via the back door. I note that 6 November is the date of the big vote. It will not be such a big vote, because at the end of the day the public will say no to this proposal; they find it wanting in many respects. A lot of monarchists and other people who are not wedded to one system or the other but who are concerned about the lifestyle of this nation—obviously, many members opposite are not concerned, otherwise they would not be going down this track—would fight to have a real republic in this country and not some half-baked squib of a republic put up by Malcolm Turnbull in order to try to rush this through so that the ARM can gain some benefit out of it. The model for the republic should be put forward by the Australian nation, not one section of the community.

Those are the main points that I wished to make in relation to this matter. In conclusion, this Bill is being put forward so that the States, and not the Federal Government, make these changes. Were the Federal Government to make the changes, it would establish a precedent which no doubt would be used in the future against the States. It is very important for the States to have a say in these changes. After all, the Australia Acts are part of Federation and were brought into existence by the States and the Commonwealth to ensure that the States had a say in respect of any changes that might be proposed. This is an example of those changes. Therefore, it is important that the State has a say and that that change is not made by some other method.
