



Speech by

Mr J. HEGARTY

MEMBER FOR REDLANDS

Hansard 21 July 1999

AUSTRALIA ACTS (REQUEST) BILL

Mr HEGARTY (Redlands—NPA) (5.18 p.m.): This Bill is essentially about providing to the Commonwealth the power to make changes to the Australia Act. This is in preparation for the referendum to be held in November, at which all Australians will decide whether we should become a republic. This legislation, if passed by this House, will not have any effect should the referendum fail to receive the required support throughout Australia. Because of Queensland's connection to the Crown and the Governor, who represents the Queen in this State, there is also a requirement that we do not override the Australia Act should we wish to sever links with the Crown, as we are allowed to do under our own Constitution.

As one who supports the present system of government in Australia under a constitutional monarchy, I would not like to send a message to the public that this legislation is in any way endorsing the move to a republic—far from it. This Bill is merely to enable the Federal Government to meet all legal requirements in preparation for the passage of the Commonwealth Referendum Bill next month, which will enable the Australian people to have their democratic say on how they will be governed in the next millennium.

The system that we have in Australia, and have had for the past couple of hundred years, is well tried. It is one in which we have not had any oppression. We have not been in the situation of many European countries under a monarchy which could not wait for the opportunity to get rid of that system of government, which they found repugnant. We have had a system that has provided stability, and we are one of the very few countries that has had no conflict about the way in which it has been governed.

The situation in other countries is different. If we go back in history, we see that even the United States had a reason to change its system of government, although its people were not oppressed through violence or the way in which they conducted their lives. It was a matter of taxation that precipitated that country's move to a republic. Although even now we can all argue about our taxes, I do not think we can say that we were ever oppressed by the amount of taxes that went back to the Crown in the United Kingdom.

We have had a fair amount of postwar immigration from non-English speaking countries and in my experience not very many of those people feel that they have not had a fair go in this country under our present system of government. I have never felt any less of an Australian in the time that I have been on this earth under the present system of government, so I have to ask: how different would I feel should the referendum in November be successful? What changes will there be for me that will make me feel more of an Australian under a republic with a president replacing the Governor-General?

Some people from non-English speaking countries have said to me that they feel no allegiance to the Crown. I can understand that. But how would they feel about the system of government were they to immigrate to other countries, whether it be the United States or perhaps some South American country? Would they be able to voice concern about the system of government at the time they take up their residency and perhaps citizenship? I would suggest not. There has been a move by some people, to whom previous speakers have alluded—the "elite" in this country—who somehow feel that

they should take charge of the agenda and be the leaders in establishing a form of government different from what we have now.

I do not have any problem if it is the will of the people in November that there is an overwhelming need for change and they demonstrate that through their democratic vote. I will accept that, just as I accept various Governments that we have had in this State and in Australia throughout the years. I do not know whether that will be the result. The way I read the people is that they are reasonably happy with the form of government in Australia, although we all whinge from time to time - some more than others. Essentially, we in this country are blessed with freedom, stability of government and the peace that we have enjoyed ever since this country was founded.

I turn now to something which I do not know if all Australians have considered in great depth and that is the cost that this move to a republic—should it occur—would impose on the Australian people. The Federal Government is now moving to restructure the taxation system in Australia to give everyone a better go, to free up more money while hopefully imposing fewer taxes and to provide better services for all Australians as we move into the next millennium. Of course, the move to a republic system of government is not just a matter of pulling down one flag and hoisting another; a lot of things will have to be changed, not least of which are the Acts and other legislative instruments that will have to be amended to remove the word "Crown", etc. There are also some other costs, and I am not talking about just the referendum itself. I believe that the Constitutional Convention cost \$40m. That is a fair amount of money, but we have spent it. Everyone has had their say. We have heard the views of all of the proponents, whether they are for or against, including people of all shades of grey in the republican movement—they all have a different position—but that money has been spent. We are also committed to the referendum in November, which is estimated to cost another \$55m. So we are already up to \$100m just to give everyone their democratic say, to make sure no-one is being repressed and no-one's views are not going to be heard. We are going to evaluate what people have said for and against the proposed system of government.

The flag referendum is going to cost another \$55m. The new flag itself is going to cost another \$50m. The cost of various other items is another \$250m—medallions, coins, currency, uniforms, documentation and, naturally, celebrations for the new form of government. When one totals all that up, one gets to over \$450m.

Mr Knuth: We are going to be broke.

Mr HEGARTY: I take the interjection. We need to spend a lot of money on services. We on this side of the House—and I know the thinking members on the opposite side of the House—want to spend the money that we are entrusted with wisely on behalf of the community, to provide better hospitals, to provide more police officers, to provide all the necessary things—more assistance for disadvantaged people and people who are disabled. There are myriad problems that we could solve if the money was available; yet here we are finding money for a democratic process about which I do not think anybody, apart from those whom I have mentioned—that elitist group who have an agenda—is much concerned.

In addition to those Commonwealth costs I have just outlined, there are the individual State's costs and the Territories' costs. They are going to be duplicated. They have been conservatively estimated at \$125m per State, downgraded from an initial figure of \$250m per State. In other words, there is no firm amount; everyone is still working through the figures to see just what it will really cost each State and Territory. When one adds all of this agenda together, one gets around \$1.5 billion—just to get this show on the road.

When the republican debate was held last year, a number of eminent people spoke in favour of or against the republican models. One of the members of whom I took note was the Honourable Richard McGarvie who, as a matter of interest, is a former Labor Party member from Victoria, Supreme Court judge and the former Governor of that State. He said that the changes incorporated in the model sound innocuous, but are really changes of drastic potential. Here is a man not from the monarchist side of the spectrum, so to speak, a man who shares the views of the members opposite, yet is obviously learned enough and courageous enough to warn the Australian people of what these changes really mean. When people of eminence such as he—and others, of course—sound alarm bells about the road that we are moving down, one has to take some notice.

One has to consider that we are not just removing the "GG" name from the door at Yarralumla and replacing it with "President"; we are doing some pretty drastic things to the Constitution. As the member for Indooroopilly outlined in his contribution, the powers that are going to be transferred to the Prime Minister, if this particular model is adopted, are very considerable. One criticism is that, if the dismissal of a president occurs under a system such as has been proposed, naturally the Opposition of the day will take the side of the dismissed president. Then, of course, we are going to have a country without a head of state for a while, and what are we going to do then? We are going to end up with a political fight, and the bipartisanship of the model whereby the Federal members of Parliament elect the

president will come under pressure. All these problems are before us because we have no definitive model on which to base a decision when we go to that referendum in November.

In supporting this Bill, the Opposition is in no way endorsing any of the things the republican model may bring forth. As I have said, I am happy with the existing situation. I do not think we are scrutinising whether we need to consider a change, with this being one of the changes under consideration. Our current system is working perfectly well—as well as it was when it was established by the founding fathers nearly 100 years ago.

I reinforce that the Opposition's support for the Bill, to provide the Commonwealth with the mechanisms to prepare to give the Australian people their democratic right in November, in no way reflects my support for the referendum as the precursor to a republic being accepted. I am prepared to consider the Bill but I in no way endorse it, nor is it to be construed that I support the republican movement.
