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# Public won't back a 'politicians' republic', so Turnbull needs to offer a better model

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# Public won't back a 'politicians' republic', so Turnbull needs to offer a better model

## **Abstract**

The word republic has many meanings - but they can probably be reduced to two. The first simply means a political order in which there is no king or queen at its apex. The Romans who invented the term *res publica* (public matter) were adamantly opposed to the idea of having a king. Julius Caesar was assassinated because it was believed he wished to make himself king. The second describes a political system composed by individuals motivated by an idea of virtue and by a series of institutional arrangements through which power is divided so it is not concentrated in the hands of an individual.

## **Keywords**

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# Public won't back a 'politicians' republic', so Turnbull needs to offer a better model

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Malcolm Turnbull is now more circumspect when it comes to the matter of an Australian republic.

AAP/Dan Himbrechts

The word republic has many meanings – but they can probably be reduced to two.

The first simply means a political order in which there is no king or queen at its apex. The Romans who invented the term *res publica* (public matter) were adamantly opposed to the idea of having a king. Julius Caesar was assassinated because it was believed he wished to make himself king.

The second describes a political system composed by individuals motivated by an idea of virtue and by a series of institutional arrangements through which power is divided so it is not concentrated in the

hands of an individual.

The Commonwealth of Australia has always contained republican elements of the second kind, even as it describes itself as an indissoluble union under the Crown. These include the separation of powers between the Commonwealth and the states, an independent judiciary and a bicameral legislature.

However, as Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull indicated in his speech on Saturday night on the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Australian Republican Movement (ARM), republicanism for him is to be understood only in the first sense.

For Turnbull, it is a simple matter of removing the monarchy from the Australian polity and replacing the monarch with a president who is an Australian. It is a simple identity issue: the Australian Commonwealth requires an Australian head of state.

All of that sounds reasonable and sensible, one might think, except for the simple fact that the Constitution was designed on the assumption Australia was, and would continue to be, a constitutional monarchy. To become a republic may require something more than just crossing out “governor-general” in the Constitution and writing in “president”.

### **What for an Australian republic?**

Turnbull, who chaired the ARM between 1993 and 2000, now acknowledges that the road to an Australian republic is full of traps for the unwary.

The republicans lost the 1999 referendum because they thought that all they needed to do was appeal to their fellow Australians’ nationalism. They wanted “change” without doing anything that might alter, in any real fashion, the existing political order.

Unfortunately, for some, this looked too much like a sleight of hand that had as its real objective a consolidation of power in the hands of the politicians. Those who took this view said, if we are going to have a change, let’s make the president an expression of the will of the people and elect them.

Republican politicians took fright at this idea primarily because it might upset the balance of power in the existing system. In other words, they feared the prospect of real constitutional change, especially making the system more democratic – perhaps because they had the memory of Pauline Hanson fresh in their minds.

In the event, the Australian public showed what they thought of the prospect of a “politicians’ republic”.

Turnbull is now more circumspect when it comes to the matter of an Australian republic. He still favours a politicians’ republic but recognises that the only way a republic will succeed is if it has the backing of the majority of Australians.

Hence, Turnbull supports a plebiscite on the preferred model. He has indicated that if the people

want a popular republic, then that is what they will get to vote on. He has urged the ARM to get down and do some hard work, spreading the good news of the republic and winning over the Australian people. He recognises the massive task ahead of the republicans.

## **Erosion of support and trust**

All of this raises the question of whether the Constitution could be made more republican in the second sense of the word. There can be little doubt that the republican elements of the Constitution and of Australian political life have been eroded in recent times.

One key area is the concentration of power in the hands of the Commonwealth government and the reduction of the states to little more than mendicants of the Commonwealth. Another is the increasing power of the prime minister, who has become much more than just the first among equals.

Turnbull claims the Constitution works well, and that the only real barrier to its perfecting is making the head of state an Australian. This is somewhat disingenuous. There are matters for concern in our constitutional arrangements.

Former prime minister Tony Abbott recognised this when he set up an inquiry into Australian federalism.

Ironically, the matters for concern in the Constitution relate to republicanism in the second sense. For many Australians there has been a discernible decline in the virtue of our political actors, except perhaps on the Senate crossbench. There has been a concentration of power in the hands of the political elites, and specifically in the federal government.

Turnbull acknowledges the distrust of politicians is even greater now than it was in 1999. He appreciates that advocating a “politicians’ republic” is not a smart move in 2016.

Perhaps what he should consider are measures through which the Constitution and the political order could be made more republican. He should be considering ways and means of increasing the amount of virtue among politicians.

 **Republic**   **Constitution**   **Malcolm Turnbull**   **Political history**   **Australian republic**