

Neo-liberal republicanism has no place in this country

New Zealand Herald 5th November 1999 p A17

Noel Cox says that in the unlikely event of republicanism triumphing in the Australian referendum, we should not be swayed to gallop in the same direction

Republican sentiment in New Zealand has never been as strong as in Australia, which is this week to vote on whether to retain the Queen as head of State. But in 1994 Jim Bolger, then Prime Minister, raised the issue of New Zealand becoming a republic by the turn of the century.

The reason given was that "the tide of history is moving in one direction", towards republicanism as a fulfilment of national identity.

Although Mr Bolger knew what he was proposing did not have popular support, he seriously underestimated the level of opposition to his proposal from within his own party, and ultimately weakened his position within the Government. Nor was the response from the left wing opposition as favourable as he might have wished.

The immediate origins of Bolger's call for a republic belong in the neo-liberalism adopted by successive governments since 1984. The wish to bury the colonial inheritance, to face towards multiculturalism, and to locate New Zealand firmly in Asia was a conscious, market-related choice forced by external developments.

The arguments raised by those advocating change are that New Zealand is a South Pacific nation, with a focus on Asia. Especially political arguments revolved around nationhood, what New Zealand stands for, and its feeling of self-respect.

Most important among the symbolic aspects, and that upon which Mr Bolger relied, was that it was inappropriate for "the Queen of England" "to be Head of State and to have power to appoint a Governor-General to exercise her royal powers on her behalf in New Zealand".

National identity required a New Zealand head of State. Attacks upon the Crown have been motivated, not because of criticism of the way in which the political system operates, but because of the connection with the British monarchy.

The position of the Crown, however acceptable and useful the system of government may otherwise be, is potentially undermined by the very symbolism which is one of its strengths. This is the essence of the Australian republican movement. Yet this very aspect is of importance in New Zealand because of the Treaty of Waitangi, and for other reasons.

Recent changes in New Zealand society, economy and government do not necessarily indicate that a republic is likely to be adopted in the short to medium term, even if Australia opts for one.

Since 1984 economic, political and social life have undergone revolutionary change. Structural changes, including MMP, have left people exhausted, and inclined to look with disfavour on proposals for further change.

The Fenian element, so significant as the intellectual basis of much of Australia's republican movement, is also largely absent from New Zealand politics. The Crown can be seen equally representative of all people. It is not necessarily confined to those of British ancestry.

Indeed, to the Maori, it was often seen as an ally against the colonial (and later) government. For it is at least symbolically important that the Treaty of Waitangi was signed by the Maori chiefs with the representative of the Queen, and not with the European settlers.

Whilst most criticism of the monarchy focuses on what republicans call the "self-evident absurdity" of sharing a head of State with another country, people seem to be more concerned

with the effectiveness of the political system. Symbolism was all very well, but the system works reasonably effectively. For most purposes the Australian head of State is the Governor-General anyway, and he has never been a party political figure.

The same cannot be necessarily expected of a President, especially one liable to removal by the Prime Minister.

The inherent disadvantage of a republic, whether in Australia or New Zealand, would be that the highest office becomes a matter for party political contest, or of factional division.

A monarchical system of government removes the office of head of State from the realm of party politics. Any republican system risks the politicisation of the highest office, whether the president is elected or appointed.

Public dissatisfaction with politicians is widespread, on both sides of the Tasman. There has yet to be shown any good reason for changing the role of head of State of Australia, or New Zealand, into just another prize for politicians.

Opinion polls confirm that voters in Australia are concerned by the details of the proposed republic. If they had to have a president, most would prefer one directly elected by the people, rather than appointed by politicians.

The polls suggest that the Australian referendum will fail to achieve the necessary majority support. A failure to achieve what they seek is unlikely to silence the republicans. New Zealand should learn from the Australian experience, and not let a matter of national identity become the cause of division.

Whatever Australia decides, New Zealand can choose go its own way. We have our own unique political system, especially the Treaty of Waitangi, and fortunately lack the more extreme nationalism/republicanism that has bred across the Tasman.

A republic in Australia makes the a New Zealand republic neither more nor less likely in the short term, as we are a distinct country and society founded on a compact between the Crown and the Maori people.

Any move to a republic here would require careful consideration of the future role of Maori in society and government. If the protracted process of settling land disputes is any precedent, such a debate would require many years of effort before any conclusion could be reached.

Noel Cox, vice-chairman of the Monarchist League, is a barrister and part-time lecturer in law at the Auckland Institute of Technology