

From the Editor

MICHAEL WARBY

THE articles by Peter Reith and Kerry Corke in this issue of the *Review* refer to just some of the technical problems contained within the proposed changes to the Australian Constitution that will be put to the people on November 6.

The concern here is not why we are being offered a republic with an indirectly-elected President although, given the overwhelming popular preference for a directly-elected President, that is certainly an interesting question in itself. The question is—regardless of anyone's preference about monarchy versus republic and a directly versus an indirectly elected President—why is this particular, very technically-flawed, proposal even being put to the people?

Our Constitution has underpinned an admirable history of stable, democratic government. As John Carroll observed recently in *The Australian Review of Books*, it is hard to imagine a more stable political regime than Australia's. We are blessed with one of the oldest, continually-operating written constitutions in the world and one, moreover, which, unlike the US and Swiss Constitutions, did not require a civil war to 'bed down'.

In reference to an article which criticized the presumption of most of the media that, if the Prime Minister is going to be a monarchist, he should not actually try seriously to persuade people to agree with him, one republican was recently moved to say:

I'm a Republican myself but can't understand why the Prime Minister is supposed to be, as you put it, 'a public cipher' on the issue. A significant proportion of the Australian population support the Monarchy and the Prime Minister is hardly on the fringe of opinion.

But the Prime Minister and other monarchists are very much on the fringe of media opinion, particularly that of the Canberra Press Gallery. Previous issues of the *Review* have carried references to Professor Henningham's study of press and public opinion which showed that journalists are much more republican than the general public. And this sentiment is being manifested in the media coverage of the issue. There seems to be a rule in opinion pages in the 'quality' press—any monarchist article has to be matched by a republican one: the converse does not apply. Can any of us remember media coverage on any issue in the last 25 years being as partisan as it is on the indirect-election republic?

Media partisanship may be the most important single reason for our being offered such a flawed proposal. Clement Attlee described democracy as 'government by discussion'. Within one, public scrutiny is crucial. If, however, the media prefer 'proving' to their colleagues how 'kosher' they are because they have the 'right' attitudes to performing their professional functions, then public scrutiny will fail. The indirect republicans don't have to make their proposal stand up to close scrutiny: their media guardians will frustrate any such scrutiny.

Paul Kelly is leading the media charge on this—as he did with the pillorying of John Howard's comments on Asian immigration back in 1988. When he is confronted with the technical problems of the proposal, Kelly's response is simply a version of 'trust us'. It will work because Australians will make it work.

This is, of course, an appeal to national vanity. It is a completely inadequate response. Constitutions are not built for people of good intentions displaying common sense about things upon which it is relatively easy to agree: if that were



always the case, we would not need a Constitution. Constitutions are built for the hard cases, the failure of commonality, the clash of principle.

What we are getting from most of the Australian media is moral vanity, and a consequent failure of professionalism. It is nowhere more marked than the stunningly puerile millenarianism—all that 'have to change by 2001' nonsense.

Journalists might reflect that the adoption of common attitudes reduces 'interpretative journalism' to the absurd: nothing more than the same value-set being disseminated across much of the media, particularly from the Canberra Press Gallery. The success of the relaunched *Bulletin*—where Max Walsh has clearly given instructions to his journalists to engage in good, old-fashioned straight reporting—suggests that this 1970s indulgence is something whose time has passed.

The media's moral vanity on immigration, multiculturalism and indigenous issues did a great deal to give Pauline Hanson her niche. Let us hope that the media's moral vanity on the republic does not inflict damage on our body politic through the replacement of a working monarchy with a deeply-flawed republic.

And there's a slogan for the 'No' campaign—'Annoy the media, vote No'.

IPA