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Someone is missing from the republic debate

Paul Keating's attack on Malcolm Turnbull's failure as prime minister to advocate for an Australian republic has put the spotlight on the process for seeking the views of voters and choosing a model, but someone important is missing from the debate, says David Muir.

[Paul Keating](#) always delivers a precisely targeted and colourful attack on public figures he decides are not living up to his expectations, especially if alleged offenders drop the ball or oppose issues he championed.

Such is the case with [Keating's criticisms](#) of the fifth person to occupy the prime minister's office he vacated in 1996 after firmly placing the republic issue on the national agenda.

[Malcolm Turnbull's](#) sin was his stand, or lack of it, on the republic.

In 1995 Keating used the status of the prime minister's office and invested enormous political capital to kick-start the republic debate with a clear plan that could have seen a republic by the Centenary of Federation in 2001.

He took a hands-on approach and set out a process for letting Australians decide on a republic, but not before personally explaining it to Queen Elizabeth II who apparently took it all quite calmly, did not view it as a personal attack, and declared it to be entirely a matter for Australians to decide, according to [Troy Bramston's recent biography](#) of Keating.

By contrast, after the 1996 election John Howard was presented with a way to kill off a republic without leaving any fingerprints when the hastily developed model emerging from the 1998 [Constitutional Convention](#) was for an unpopular "politicians' republic" — selection of a head of state by the government and approved by parliament.

As a delegate to that Convention I can say it spent too much time debating the threshold question instead of engineering a direct-election model that would have won voter support.

Every prime minister since the 1999 referendum defeat has failed to breathe life into the republic issue to the extent Keating did.

Malcolm Turnbull, a former leader of the [Australian Republic Movement](#), deserved Keating's tongue-lashing for his wishy-washy suggestion that our nation must wait for the end of the Queen's reign before even starting to discuss a republic.

But it has been more than Malcolm Turnbull who has gone missing in action in the fight for a republic.

What are the plans of the sixth person to occupy the prime minister's office since Keating departed?

[Scott Morrison](#) seems to have uttered few words on the republic in his career and then only to say he prefers [the current system](#).

Opposition Leader [Bill Shorten](#) has outlined [a plan to hold a plebiscite](#) in his first term if elected to test the threshold question on becoming a republic.

There are shortcomings in Shorten's plan. For a start, it appears it would take two terms of office before we start sitting down to flesh out how a model chosen in a second plebiscite would work.

While it is obviously far simpler and more desirable to ask the threshold question and a question on a preferred model in one go, the fact remains Shorten has put a plan into the public arena for discussion.

Which is why sticking to the current Constitutional arrangements is a big risk for Morrison given the would-be prime minister has a plan for voters to consider.

Morrison, as the sixth prime minister since Keating, needs to show us his plan — if he has one — so voters can compare it with Shorten's at the next election.

By sitting out the debate Morrison is missing the opportunity to harness public support for other Constitutional reforms.

The Real Republic Australia continues to advocate for the direct election of our head of state which we believe is the model Australians will embrace.

But we also believe we need to widen our focus and not confine the debate to a republic and our head of state.

We need a package of other Constitutional reforms put to voters including reforms to deliver greater political stability and certainty.

We must break the Constitutional nexus that demands the House of Representatives have "as nearly as practicable" twice the number of seats as the Senate or else some future generation of taxpayers will be supporting a lower house of 300 MPs and around 150 Senators.

A referendum on a republic should include a question allowing voters to make permanent the original six Senators for each Australian state while keeping two each for the Territories.

That would end the type of fractured Senate we have today where Senators elected on a handful of votes frustrate the mandates of governments formed in the lower house.

Greater stability would also come if referendum questions were passed approving fixed and synchronised four-year terms for both houses of parliament.

Fixed election dates and a marginally longer term would also lower costs for taxpayers as fewer elections are held and would stop prime ministers gaming the system when setting election dates.

Reducing the six-year terms for Senators and synchronising elections for both houses would mean the composition of both houses would reflect the wishes of voters at each election.

It would end the situation where Senators elected well before a change of government can frustrate its mandate and cause instability even though voters have expressed a new mandate since those Senators last faced the people.

Greater stability would also result if a referendum supported extending to the House of Representatives the current casual vacancy system of the Senate.

This would put an end to disruptive and costly by-elections such as the five we saw [in four states on 28 July](#).

This package of reform proposals — along with recognition of indigenous Australians and Constitutional recognition of local government — are ideas the Real Republic Australia wants to see debated and put to voters along with the republic question.

These Constitutional changes will secure real benefits and greater stability in our federal political system.

They are all issues Scott Morrison could embrace and campaign for, even if he doesn't back a "yes" vote for a republic question at the same referendum.

But he needs to start by taking part in the debate.

[David Muir](#) is a Brisbane lawyer, Chair of the [Real Republic Australia](#), and was a Queensland delegate to the 1998 Constitutional Convention in Canberra elected as part of the team led by former Brisbane Lord Mayor, the late Clem Jones, advocating a directly elected head of state.