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## **A new year's resolution: Get back on the reform horse**

*After the defeat of the referendum on a First Nations' voice to federal parliament, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese may be having second thoughts about further attempts at constitutional reform, including establishing an Australian republic. [David Muir](#) believes the PM should not walk away from beneficial constitutional reforms but instead go further than seeking bipartisan support for any future referendums and instead embrace a new process to deliver non-partisan backing for change.*

IN 2024 AUSTRALIANS need to snap out of the mind-set that the [14 October referendum result](#) means we should never try to change the [Australian Constitution](#) without bipartisan support.

Some people are even more pessimistic and say we shall never see another referendum at all. Ever.

Both views arise predominantly from those who supported the Voice and disagreed with the referendum result. Those who backed the "no" case may well include many who see no impediment to more referendums on various issues.

The point is that just because a specific referendum failed doesn't mean we should abandon efforts to reform our Australian Constitution, or stall reforms while waiting for possibly unattainable bipartisan support.

Instead we should consider an alternative approach that goes beyond mere bipartisan support to secure a level of non-partisan support that offers the best chance of achieving reforms delivering real and measurable benefits by improving the way we are governed.

For instance, [Australian Electoral Commission](#) figures show the 2022 election for the House of Representatives and half the Senate cost \$522.4 million.

By reforming our Constitution to mandate fixed four-year terms we would save more than half-a-billion dollars every 12 years in current day values. That's a saving of more than \$1 billion in today's values in little more than two decades.

It would also achieve greater fairness by taking away from prime ministers the ability to game the system and give themselves an advantage when picking an election date.

A second beneficial reform proposal – [supported](#) by National Party leader David Littleproud – is the constitutional recognition of local government.

It has been defeated at two referendums and [a third was scrapped](#) in 2013 when reinstated prime minister Kevin Rudd changed the federal election date set by Julia Gillard, thereby voiding the mandated timetable for the referendum she had planned.

Local government recognition could deliver real savings to taxpayers through the more efficient transfer of funds from the federal government directly to councils instead of funnelling them via state bureaucracies.

There are clear and quantifiable benefits in such reforms. Even an Australian republic would bring tangible advantages by enhancing our status as a truly independent nation with our own head of state to promote Australia and all it has to offer to the world in terms of investment opportunities, tourism, lifestyle, education and training and more.

That sort of global promotion is something that our current head of state King Charles III [does exclusively for Great Britain](#), not us.

To achieve constitutional reforms we need to start now to embrace new ways to harness non-partisan support for change. We should not shy away from future referendums just because one has fallen over. In 2024 we need to get back on the reform horse.

For Australians to decide their position on a referendum question they must be engaged and informed well before they turn up to vote.

Last-minute ad campaigns or sloganeering to convince people of the value of supporting reform won't cut it.

Having voters better informed can best be achieved by having them involved in a non-partisan process preceding any referendum.

In 2021 the [Real Republic Australia](#), which advocates for a [genuine directly elected head of state](#), proposed its own [roadmap for reform](#) involving new entities we labelled Australian Constitutional Assemblies that are based on the [Citizens' Assemblies used successfully in Ireland](#) to achieve constitutional and other law reforms.

Like the Irish template, our suggested Assemblies would form part of a long-term reform program with each comprising 99 average voters proactively chosen to broadly reflect the composition of the wider Australian community.

Led by an independent expert chair, each Assembly would examine a specific proposed constitutional reform, hear evidence, quiz experts and advocates, filter facts from fictions, and report its recommendations to the federal government which would decide when to hold a referendum.

In the case of a republic referendum an Assembly could hear submissions on possible models and draft a shortlist to be put to voters in a non-binding plebiscite with the most popular model then proceeding to a referendum.

In that way the model on the ballot paper will not belong to the government, politicians, nor the Real Republic Australia, the Australian Republic Movement or any other group. It will be the people's preferred choice and it will have the best chance of success.

The right model is crucial to any republic referendum. [The 1999 referendum](#) failed because the wrong model was on the ballot paper. But imagine if no model had been proposed and voters were asked to say "yes" and allow the parliament to devise a model afterwards. Even dedicated republicans would not have copped that.

By holding a community-led Australian Constitutional Assembly well before any referendum, any fake arguments, urban myths, and deliberate untruths can be floated, tested against the evidence, and answered or dismissed early in the process rather than cloud any referendum campaign.

The Albanese Government has proposed an [Australian Constitutional Commission](#) to help drive reforms but little information is available about it. If it is like previous constitutional commissions – comprised largely of [well-credentialed lawyers or jurists](#) – it will not have the necessary roots in the community that are the advantage of bodies like our proposed Australian Constitutional Assemblies or the Irish version that are driven by average voters.

Under our proposal the expertise of legal and constitutional experts can still be harnessed by an Assembly of average voters through submissions and a public hearings.

Such a non-partisan process anchored in the Australian community and set to work long before referendum day is the key to long-overdue and beneficial reforms.

***David Muir AM is chair of the Real Republic Australia that advocates for a directly elected head of state and other constitutional reforms and was a delegate from Queensland to the 1998 Constitutional Convention elected on the ticket of former Brisbane Lord Mayor, the late Clem Jones.***