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IRELAND SHOWS THE WAY ON CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

The Albanese Government should examine the genesis of referendums being held in Ireland on International Women's Day this Friday as a model for achieving non-partisan – not just bipartisan – backing for beneficial constitutional changes in Australia, according to the Real Republic Australia.

Chair of the [Real Republic Australia](#), David Muir, said the Albanese Government had so far failed to articulate a way forward on constitutional change following the October defeat of the Voice to Parliament referendum.

“What's needed is a process that the Real Republic Australia [has been advocating since 2021](#) – a system of Australian Constitutional Assemblies similar to those used in Ireland where average voters, not politicians, assess potential constitutional or policy changes and secure a non-partisan consensus,” Mr Muir said.

“The Irish use a system of [Citizens' Assemblies](#) consisting of 99 average voters selected to best represent the wider Irish community and led by an independent expert chair. Politicians, media representatives, and anyone aligned with interest groups advocating for a specific change cannot be members of an assembly.

“Each Citizens' Assembly examines a proposed constitutional change or public policy issue on a part-time basis over two years and can spend that time hearing from experts, weighing up the pros and cons of a suggested change, and dismissing misinformation that can otherwise gain traction in a later referendum campaign.

“It is up to the Irish Government to decide if it accepts or rejects an Assembly's recommendations, but in the end the government is presented with recommendations determined by average voters without a party political axe to grind.

“Each Assembly can secure non-partisan support for a proposed constitutional change not just bipartisan support that, as Australians know, can be impossible to achieve simply because political parties can't resist playing politics.”

The format of the Citizens' Assemblies was developed after a special Convention on the Constitution was established in 2012 using randomly selected voters and resulted in six subsequent referendums including the removal of constitutional bans on divorce, the termination of pregnancy, and blasphemy, as well as the introduction of same-sex marriage.

Since then four Citizens' Assemblies have examined issues including gender equality, the governance of Dublin, biodiversity loss, challenges of an ageing population, fixed-term parliaments, and responses to climate change.

Two referendum questions updating references in the Irish Constitution to the concept of family and the role of women will be decided by voters on 8 March, International Women's Day.

They will be the 39th and 40th [proposed amendments](#) to the [Irish Constitution](#) of 1937 and, if approved, will amend the wording of Article 41 of the Constitution by:

- extending existing constitutional protections of “the family” by altering the description of a family by adding the words “whether founded on marriage or on other durable relationships”, and
- deleting outdated terminology often criticised as reinforcing the mindset that “a woman's place is in the home”.

Mr Muir said while the two proposed changes were important in the Irish context, for Australians the more important issue was how the suggested changes were determined.

“The two referendum proposals for Friday are the end result of a [Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality](#) established by the Irish Parliament in 2020,” he said. “The Assembly delivered [its report](#) in June 2021 and the government agreed to put two recommendations to voters in March this year while not agreeing to a referendum suggested by the Assembly that the Constitution be amended to refer explicitly to gender equality and non-discrimination.”

Mr Muir said Prime Minister Anthony Albanese should consider the Irish system if he was serious about achieving beneficial constitutional change.

“The Prime Minister has taken a republic referendum off the agenda. So while he has said what his government won't be doing, we have no idea what it will do to secure constitutional changes that deliver real and lasting benefits to all Australians,” he said.

“For example, Anthony Albanese recently spoke in favour of four-year terms for the Federal Parliament. But he has done nothing to achieve them even though such a change would deliver significant savings to taxpayers.

“Australian Electoral Commission figures show the 2022 federal election cost taxpayers [more than \\$522 million](#) – \$150 million more than the 2019 poll. It doesn't take much to work out that soon each federal election will cost taxpayers \$1 billion, but eliminating one election every 12 years means that money can go to other services, infrastructure, or cost-of-living relief.

“Local government constitutional recognition – [supported by the National Party](#) – can also deliver savings by giving certainty to the direct federal funding of council projects and eliminating any requirement to double-handle funds at the state level.

“Scrapping the so-called constitutional [nexus](#) in Section 24 of the Constitution that demands the House of Representatives be twice the size of the Senate also means savings. If the nexus is not broken and our population doubles, then at some time in the future if we have a lower house of 300 MPs, taxpayers will need to support 150 Senators on the public payroll.

“All of these constitutional changes mean savings to taxpayers. All we need to achieve them is a process that delivers non-partisan, not just bipartisan support for proposed changes.

“Ireland shows that a government willing to engage its own citizens in a coherent and non-partisan process can achieve meaningful constitutional changes.

“The Irish Constitution has been the subject of 38 referendums since 1937 and 32 of those have been approved by voters. Our record is just eight referendums out of 45 succeeding since Federation in 1901,” Mr Muir said.

He said at a bare minimum Mr Albanese needed to outline his plans for a proposed Australian Constitutional Commission supported by two Labor Party federal conferences despite no details being available about how it would work.