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A changed environment for the republic debate

A period in which Queen Elizabeth has celebrated her Platinum Jubilee and most Australians mark her birthday on Monday may seem an odd time for a new government to be discussing an Australian republic, but [David Muir](#) suggests the May federal election has changed traditional ideas about the debate.

THE 2022 FEDERAL ELECTION has rewritten many assumptions about Australian politics and those surrounding referendums are among them.

Paul Keating's [truism](#) – when the government changes, the country changes – is already evident in Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's approach to constitutional reform.

It was 1999 when [questions on constitutional reforms](#) were last put to voters, yet within days of the Albanese Government taking office it [foreshadowed](#) not one but two referendums.

Not plans on the never-never to maybe do something at some vague time in the future, but concrete plans – a referendum on [constitutional recognition of First Nations](#) in this parliamentary term and one on a republic in the next.

Of course unless the Coalition matches the commitment, Labor needs to be re-elected for a republic referendum to proceed. So let's welcome the commitment but note the concrete may not be set just yet.

Still, the PM and his Assistant Minister for the Republic [Matt Thistlethwaite](#) seamlessly inserted the issue and their commitments in the midst of [Platinum Jubilee celebrations](#) and just before 70% of the nation takes a public holiday on Monday to mark the Queen's Birthday.

Even though [her actual birthday](#) is in April most states and territories will mark the event on 13 June except Western Australia which waits until September while Queenslanders have a holiday in October.

While a republic referendum preceded by a vigorous public debate may not occur until after the 2025 election, Thistlethwaite has signalled his preference for [public discussions](#) this term to begin informing voters about the issues involved.

By being unafraid to embrace such basic steps Albanese has set himself apart from prime ministers since Keating.

Keating did what national leaders are supposed to do on issues of national identity – lead.

Albanese says he will lead the debate on First Nations' constitutional recognition, but unlike his immediate predecessors the republic is also on his to-do list.

John Howard agreed to hold a republic referendum but there is the lingering theory that he did so only because he thought – correctly – voters would reject the republic model on offer.

Prime ministers who followed showed zero interest in the republic or said we should wait for the Queen's reign to end before starting the debate.

Even Malcolm Turnbull, a former Australian Republic Movement head, was willing to have the debate in the 1990s when everyone including Her Majesty were 30 years younger, but ducked for cover as prime minister when he could actually do something about it.

This morbid "death watch" approach has always been an excuse for inaction because the British royals from Her Majesty down know the debate is not about them.

It has always been a debate for Australians to have about the future of our nation and has never relied on the presence or absence of any individual royal.

Indeed, waiting for the Prince of Wales to inherit the throne risks a damaging "get Charles" campaign which is why the [Real Republic Australia](#) believes the debate should have started years ago.

It is also why we refrain from denigrating the British royals who, notably the monarch, have little or no choice about their roles in life.

They are not asked but are told to serve, so to attack them personally is disrespectful and won't change a thing.

Thistlethwaite's idea for starting the republic conversation is a positive because referendum questions have a dismal track record, thanks to the high bar set by the Constitution itself for anyone seeking to change it.

It [demands](#) a majority of "yes" votes across the nation encompassing all states and territories plus a "yes" vote by a majority of the states (excluding the NT and ACT).

This so-called "double majority" is one reason only eight referendum questions have passed [out of the 44](#) put to voters since Federation.

Significantly, the last two (failed) referendum questions in [November 1999](#) were on the same subjects now being revisited in the two promised referendums.

Back then voters were asked to approve the idea of inserting a preamble to the Constitution acknowledging First Nations and a proposed Australian republic under which our head of state would be chosen for us by a minimum two-thirds majority vote of Federal Parliament.

That model – dubbed the "politicians' republic" – was [soundly rejected](#).

Much has been said about the change in the mood of Australian voters evident at last month's election although the precise nature of the shifts in allegiances and outlook are yet to be fully researched and precisely isolated.

One thing is clear, many voters do not want politics as usual, nor do they want the usual type of politicians representing them.

This change has significant repercussions for the promised referendums.

For instance it has been assumed that a referendum only passes if it has the support of both major parties.

But the latest [primary vote shares](#) suggest there are now no "major" parties, so does the old rule hold?

Or will we see more reasoned and nuanced debate about First Nations' recognition and a republic, rather than a replay of past unsuccessful constitutional reform efforts that saw one side of politics suggest a change which the other side automatically opposed?

One thing that hasn't changed is voters' desire to make their own choice for our head of state.

As a delegate to the [1998 Constitutional Convention](#) elected on the ticket of former Brisbane Lord Mayor, the late [Clem Jones](#), I supported a directly elected head of state as the model that Australians would support in a referendum.

The 1999 rejection of the "politician's republic" with an appointed head of state cemented my outlook.

I believe the same view would be detected among voters if polling and reporting focussed less on "us versus the royals" and more on attitudes to various models.

The Real Republic Australia will soon release a discussion paper about our model for a directly elected head of state with codified powers.

We do not support the old "politicians' republic" or variations such as the [Australian Republic Movement's latest model](#) that inserts every politician in the nation into the process by restricting the candidates offered to voters to a shortlist approved by MPs in federal and state parliaments. That is nowhere near direct election.

The republic debate — especially reporting and analysis of it by media outlets and pollsters — must focus on the real issues.

Chief among them is the model which has always and will always hold the key to a successful republic referendum.

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Paul Keating
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