



## Trust matters: Politics, trust & the republican cause

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The views expressed are the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Democratic Audit of Australia.

Good evening and thank you for all for coming tonight. I want to thank the Australian Republican Movement for inviting me to deliver this lecture; it is a real honour. I also want to thank Alison Henry, Terry Fewtrell and my sister Emily who has accompanied me here from Sydney. A special thanks to Yellow Edge who kindly sponsor this lecture series.<sup>1</sup>

I am proud to say my connection with the ARM stretches back over fifteen years. My first encounter was during the early days of university. The ARM had set up a stall for orientation week, with a large banner stating 'Join the Republican Movement'. My initial response was surprise that the American Republican Party was interested in recruiting Australian students. Then someone pointed out to me that this was in fact about Australian republicanism, rather than American conservatism, after which I duly signed up.

I suppose my own republican allegiance stretches back to childhood. Once – I must have been about five or six years old – my primary school had organised an excursion for all the students to line Adelaide's Anzac Parade and wave British flags as the Queen and Prince Phillip passed by in their cars on one of their royal visits. I was excited, largely because everyone else seemed to be so thrilled about it all. My mother on the other hand was, to borrow a Queenly phrase, not amused and made me stay home. When I asked her why, she responded: 'She might be the Queen but she's a person just like you. She wouldn't stand in the blazing heat for hours to see you, why should you return the favour?' That made a lot of sense to me as a five year old and so I stayed home and helped her with the washing.

Whether born or bred republican, it has long been a truism that the political views of young people are greatly influenced by their parents, particularly the more vocal and influential parent (which is not always the father, mind you).

And so this leads me to one aspect of what I want to discuss tonight, which is about the current generation of young Australians and their attitudes to a republic. We all

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was given as the 2006 Republican Lecture, 29 November 2006, Canberra. Thanks also to Natasha Cica, Hugh Mackay and the ARM National Committee for their feedback.

hope they will see a republic in their lifetime, but will they be the ones to demand it, to vote for it and determine its shape and its character?

At a Sydney Institute speech earlier this year, a woman in the audience asked me whether young Australians were at all enthused about Australia becoming a republic. As much as it pained me to say so, I had to tell her that it just wasn't on their agenda. In the research for my book, *The World According to Y: inside the new adult generation*, I asked young people to nominate the political issues of importance to them. They largely pointed to international issues, in particular climate change, war, terrorism and the immense gap between rich and poor nations. In terms of national issues of relevance, they nominated refugees, the rising cost of housing and education as well as the aging population.<sup>2</sup> The republic was not mentioned by one of the fifty plus young people I interviewed, bar one young man who happens to be on the ARM executive.

My findings are supported by most national polling, which shows that support for a republic amongst young Australians struggles to climb above 50 per cent. In 2005, Newspoll found that younger people were lukewarm about a republic, with 43 per cent of 18 to 34-year-olds in favour compared with 52 per cent of 35 to 49-year-olds. A year later we saw a slight improvement in the Newspoll figures, with 45 per cent of the 18 to 34 bracket in favour of a republic.<sup>3</sup> But as academic and former ARM chair John Warhurst has rightly pointed out, these numbers aren't as telling as the percentage of respondents designated as uncommitted, what Warhurst describes as 'the often-forgotten, very important third category of undecided/don't know/don't care'.<sup>4</sup> In 2006, 29 per cent of those young Australians surveyed by Newspoll were undecided either way about a republic, 3 per cent more than those who were against the idea. I want to come back to the uncommitted later on because they are both a challenge and an opportunity for the republican movement.

Of course the picture gets rosier for us if we look at polls concerning the prospect of King Charles and his royal consort Camilla. In the same 2006 survey, Newspoll found

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<sup>2</sup> On the political attitudes of young Australians, see chapter 7 of my book, *The World According to Y: Inside the New Adult Generation*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> See [www.newspoll.com.au](http://www.newspoll.com.au) for results of a January 2006 poll on the republic.

<sup>4</sup> John Warhurst, 2006, 'Younger people and the republic', *The Canberra Times*, 7 April.

that support for a republic amongst young Australians rose to 50 per cent if a crowned Charles was thrown into the mix. This is consistent with a 2005 Roy Morgan poll, which showed that whilst 51 per cent of Australians want Australia to be a republic now, 61 per cent would want a republic if Charles became king.<sup>5</sup> As journalist George Megalogenis comments in his book *The Longest Decade*, ‘does anyone seriously expect the monarchy in Australia to survive the passing of Elizabeth II?’<sup>6</sup>

And so the prospect of today’s young Australians living under a republic seems bright if Charles and Camilla are the succession plan for the British monarchy. Combine this with the fact that, as Warhurst points out, ‘the monarchists are shrinking at a rapid rate generation by generation’<sup>7</sup>, then we can feel even more confident about our future. Despite the fact that the republic is currently a low priority issue for Australians both young and old, and despite the huge popularity of Princess Mary and Princess Diana’s two sons (which I think has more to do with celebrity and good looks than our constitution or government), our movement certainly has time on its side.

But waiting around for our robust Queen to pass away or our even more robust Prime Minister to retire is clearly not enough for energetic republicans like us. And so I want to return to those young Australians in the third category of ‘undecided/don’t know/don’t care’. Some political scientists and media commentators would label this group ‘apathetic’. Indeed young people are often described as disinterested and ignorant about formal political processes. Whilst the general political knowledge of young people is not what it could or should be, I would dispute the label ‘apathetic’. Instead of apathy, what I found in my own work could more accurately be described as ‘disengagement’:

- Disengagement from a political system dominated by the two major parties, which doesn’t seem to provide young voters with a real choice.

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<sup>5</sup> See [www.roymorgan.com](http://www.roymorgan.com) for results of a February 2005 poll on the republic.

<sup>6</sup> George Megalogenis, 2006, *The Longest Decade*, Melbourne, Melbourne: Scribe, p. 289.

<sup>7</sup> Warhurst comments further:

... age is everything. There are very few strong monarchists (those with strongly anti-republican views) in the 18-34 year age group. Only 10% of the 18-34 year old group is strongly monarchist. Whereas, 18% of 35-49 year olds are strongly against a republic. And wait for it, 28% of 50 year olds and above are strongly against a republic.

- Disengagement from a political culture that has seen ‘the rise and rise of the technocrat and super-spinner’.<sup>8</sup>
- Disengagement from political parties that don’t allow enough internal democracy to satisfy the needs of a generation that expect flexibility and options in all their endeavours, who are enthusiastic about direct democracy.

So rather than apathy, what I found amongst young men and women was something more like powerlessness, either to change the political culture or to make progress with national political issues.

Now it’s no great revelation to say that young Australians are wary and cynical about politics. This is the natural result of growing up in a conspiracy theory age where it is well accepted that politicians cheat and manipulate in order to seize and hold onto power. The young people I interviewed for my book used words like ‘lie’, ‘distrust’ and ‘corrupt’ in connection with politics without any sense of false bravado. It seems that this is a generation that anticipates being duped by authority figures. Why take an interest or invest in a system that you expect is going to lie to you about important stuff? Better to disengage than be fooled.

Why has there been this turning away, this disengagement amongst young Australians? I believe the tendency of some people in older generations to blame young people themselves – labelling them as selfish, shallow, in the thrall of consumerism or intrinsically conservative - is both unfair and inaccurate, primarily because it ignores two facts.

First, let’s not kid ourselves, Australians have never placed much trust in politicians. As political scientists Judith Brett and Anthony Moran comment:

Political elites regularly bemoan the political apathy of ordinary people, seeing their poor knowledge and limited interest as a failure or lack, rather than as a reasoned response to experience. Predictably, they call for more civics education in school, rather than for

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<sup>8</sup> Natasha Cica, 2006, ‘Truth and other romantic fantasies: Reflections on war, politics and the media’, Webber Lecture 2006, The Hutchins School, Hobart Tasmania, 8 August

institutional reforms that would give people more reason to engage. They also always imagine that things were better in the past.<sup>9</sup>

Secondly, since the beginning of the millennium, social researchers such as Hugh Mackay have remarked on a general trend of disengagement across generations, and social classes. Mackay argues that by the turn of the century, Australians were becoming fatigued by the ‘heavy agenda’ of social, economic and political issues including the republic. Both social research and TV ratings showed that we were beginning to disengage from ‘the big picture’ and turn our attention to more personal, domestic and local matters – home renovation, cooking shows, celebrity weddings and unreality TV. As Mackay observes:

It was as though Australians had decided the items on the big agenda were beyond their control; they wanted to narrow the focus and turn it inward, concentrating on an agenda within their control.<sup>10</sup>

At the same time, Australians were experiencing a long stretch of economic stability and prosperity that is only just now showing signs of wobbling. This prosperity spread, at the very time the current crop of young Australians were maturing into young adulthood. It was a time when, as Megalogenis states, Australians started to ‘reduce the checklist of things they wanted government to do for them and their sense of what governments should be held accountable for’.<sup>11</sup>

In many ways the 1999 republican referendum, in which I was heavily involved as an organiser for the YES Coalition, was a real low point in terms of the ebb and flow of public trust in politics. The NO case was effective because it played on public cynicism about politicians. I think the monarchists MPs who endorsed and advocated this line should be ashamed, particularly those who argued they couldn’t be trusted to appoint a head of state but could be trusted to determine whether Australian women could have access to RU486. These monarchists MPs, in publicly degrading their own profession, have contributed to the continuing erosion of trust in our public

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<sup>9</sup> Judith Brett and Anthony Moran, *Ordinary People’s Politics: Australians Talk About Politics, life and the Future of Their Country*, Melbourne: Pluto Press, 2006, p. 303.

<sup>10</sup> Hugh Mackay, *Media Mania: Why Our Fear of Modern Media is Mislplaced*, Sydney: UNSW Press, 2002, p. 79-80.

<sup>11</sup> Megalogenis, *The Longest Decade*, p. 297.

institutions and representatives. It has taken me some time to come to terms with the fact that there are some politicians who actually rely, even thrive, on the public's cynicism about politics. They actually want voters to have low expectations. It makes their jobs so much easier.

Whilst disengagement from and distrust of politics and politicians is at a premium, our political institutions and the integrity of those who work within them is more solid than we think, particularly if we compare the problems we face with those evident in other comparable democracies. I want to look briefly at two examples – Italy and the United States. Both happen to be republics, but this in no way implies that their republican status is the problem. In comparing Australia with the political systems in Italy and the United States, we at once see how fortunate we are but, simultaneously, how vigilant we must be in seeking to improve and strengthen political trust in this country.

First, I turn to Italy, where my mother and her family come from, and from where I have recently returned from a month long visit. Commentators and political reformers alike describe Italy as a 'blocked democracy'.<sup>12</sup> We are all familiar with some of the problems Italy has faced since the establishment of the republic: extraordinary levels of political corruption driven by too close associations with big business and in some cases organised crime, corruption that has infused parts of the judiciary and created an impenetrable, almost Kafkaesque bureaucracy. It is also a political system based on 'excessive amounts of financing', which can often only be obtained illegally.<sup>13</sup> Whilst there has been a revolving door government in recent times, with constant political turmoil and scandal, the political class that rules Italy has remained entrenched. Former Prime Minister Giuliano Amato describes the system as run by 'the old parties and the old men'.<sup>14</sup> Now there have been extraordinary examples of the Italian people protesting against the violence of this 'old' order, such as the various protests after the murder of leading anti-Mafia campaigner Judge Giovanni Falcone. But on the whole, Italians seem to accept the culture of corruption as an immutable fact of life and mobilise their many talents and energies in navigating it so they can get on living *la*

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<sup>12</sup> Charles Richards, *The New Italians*, London: Penguin, 1995, p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> Italo Calvino quoted in Richards, p. 62.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Richards, p. 13.

*bella vita*. As journalist Charles Richards comments, it is only when governments go beyond ‘the usual level of corruption’ that the voting population rebels.<sup>15</sup> The Italian public’s acceptance of corruption is a greater threat to Italian democracy than a judge or a politician in the pocket of a corporation or criminal enterprise.

I want to turn now to my second example, the United States. We all know that American political parties have relied heavily on large donations from the corporate world. In his book and award-winning documentary *The Corporation*, Canadian constitutional lawyer Joel Bakan argues that corporations in the United States have turned the political system and public opinion against government regulation of their activities. They have done this through lobbying and PR campaigns but more effectively through political contributions. As Bakan states: ‘Corporate donations now fuel the political system and are a core strategy in business’s campaign to influence government’.<sup>16</sup> Corporations have an ‘enormous and arguably disproportionate influence’ in the American political system in ways that undermine the rights of voters within that system.<sup>17</sup> How do American voters feel about their marginal status? Like the Italians, if polling is to be believed, the average American citizen seems to grudgingly accept the corrupt influence of rampant corporatism on government. In a recent CNN poll, 36 per cent those polled believed their own member of congress was corrupt and 50 per cent believed most members of congress are corrupt.<sup>18</sup>

Australia holds up well when we compare it to these two examples. As Professor Kenneth Mayer, a political scientist from Wisconsin, writes, ‘Australia prides itself on a strong democratic tradition, and in key respects outdoes [countries like] the United States in protecting the integrity of the political process’, for example in terms of the ‘efficiency and neutrality of election administration’.<sup>19</sup> Australia ranks slightly above the United States and well above Italy on Transparency International’s index of

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<sup>15</sup> Richards, p. 13.

<sup>16</sup> Joel Bakan, *The Corporation: the pathological pursuit of profit and power*, Free Press, New York, 2005, p. 104.

<sup>17</sup> Bakan, p. 106.

<sup>18</sup> See [www.cnn.com/2006/POLITICS/10/19/congress.poll/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2006/POLITICS/10/19/congress.poll/index.html).

Interestingly, in the same poll showed that the vast majority of respondents – around 80% - were confident their vote would be counted in the next election. Considering the scandal around vote counting in Florida in the Bush/Gore election in 2000, this shows a stubborn faith in the system, albeit not its representatives.

<sup>19</sup> Kenneth R. Mayer, ‘Sunlight as the best disinfectant: campaign finance in Australia’, discussion paper 31/06, October 2006, <http://democratic.audit.anu.edu.au>, p. 2.



political corruption.<sup>20</sup> As commentator and strategist Natasha Cica comments, Australians are surrounded by reminders that ‘our society remains substantially open’ and that we are not living in ‘the political fiction of Orwell and Solzhenitsyn’. Yet, Cica warns that ‘if we’re not careful we could conceivably end up there, of course – any society could.’

And what are the warning signs? Like Italy, Australian politics is increasingly dominated by an entrenched political class, the members of whom are far from representative of our diverse community. Like both Italy and America, the major parties are excessively reliant on corporate (and in the case of the ALP also union) donations for election campaigns, which is particularly concerning considering Australia’s relatively lax campaign finance disclosure laws.<sup>21</sup> And finally, the element that concerns me the most, the increasing political disengagement of the voting populace and the presumption that our political representatives are largely derelict in their democratic duties.

Herein lies the republican movement’s greatest challenge. It is a much harder task than simply developing a model for electing a head of state or deciding on the design for a new flag. Harder but more important and more urgent. Simply stated, it is to give people a reason to engage, to raise their expectations of government. In a 2003 speech, Hugh Mackay identified a ‘disengaged electorate’ as one of the republican movement’s significant hurdles. His solution for getting people to engage again was not to wait but to ‘seize the agenda and promote our cause in a bold and more engaging way’, to ‘restore our confidence and optimism’ in public life.<sup>22</sup> John Warhurst agrees, arguing that:

Republicans can't rely just on their huge lead among activists and among the committed. They must continue to search for the key to

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<sup>20</sup> See [www.transparency.org](http://www.transparency.org). See also Australian’s ranking on the Bribe Payers Index 2002.

<sup>21</sup> As Mayer points out, Australian disclosure laws are far more limited than their American counterparts. Disclosure reports are not available to the public until six months after an election, there are no restrictions on contribution sources and levels and there is less media scrutiny of political contributions than in the United States. Mayer argues these lax disclosure laws threaten to undermine democratic accountability. See Mayer, pp. 3-4, 6. See also Graeme Orr and Joo-Cheong Tham, ‘Big parties, big money’, *The Age*, July 25 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Hugh Mackay, 2003, ‘The question is: are we up to it?’, speech at NSW Parliament House, 4 July, reproduced in Sally Warhurst (ed), 2004, ‘*Well May We Say ...*’: *The Speeches That Made Australia*, Melbourne: Black Inc, pp. 305-6.

unlocking the hearts and minds of the uncommitted. There is not much opposition there, but there is lack of commitment. That lack of commitment shouldn't be criticized, but engaged with on its own terms

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This is particularly true for the uncommitted group of young Australians I have discussed today.

Of course this is all easier said than done. How do we go about doing it?

For what's its worth, my tip to any interested MP is not to protest your own integrity in question time and campaign material. As marketing gurus Al Ries and Jack Trout state, 'you can't position yourself as an honest politician, because nobody is willing to take the opposition position'.<sup>23</sup> What you have to become is a champion of our system as a whole, of the structures and institutions of law and government that have been built up by generations of Australians that deserve to be defended, refined and if necessary reformed for the good of all.

Despite what someone like Mark Latham would have us believe, we cannot afford to write off the political class in this endeavour, despite the problems with the culture of the parties and despite the fact that many parliamentarians are already committed republicans. Rather we need to enlist them in an on-going campaign of 'talking up' our democracy to the both the voting public and organisations outside party politics.

These organisations outside party politics are indeed a vital part of any push to broaden the appeal of republicanism. It is community and non-government organisations (some of which may not have any obvious connection with republicanism) with which our movement could form stronger alliances. It is these organisations that we could call upon when another referendum is upon us. (This would of course entail some kind of reciprocity - they would need to feel like they could rely on us as well). Indeed, this was one of the tasks we struggled with during 1999. We failed to create any grassroots momentum via community organisations and, in my experience, relied too heavily on political party machines.

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<sup>23</sup> Al Ries and Jack Trout, 1993, *The 22 Immutable Laws of Marketing*, New York: Harper Collins, p. 32.

What of young Australians specifically, how do we make the republican cause relevant to them?

Again, our connections with organisations outside party politics and government are crucial. In my work on the political attitudes of Generation Y, I found that most of their civic activity is focused around local and community politics. Similarly political scientist Ari Vromen has found that whilst young people may not measure high on the scales of traditional political activity (such as donating money, contacting MPs, joining political parties or unions) the vast majority of them are involved in community, campaigning and protest activities through church groups, parents and citizens groups, environmental and sporting organizations.<sup>24</sup> It is these groups and NGOs more generally seem more trustworthy, able and willing to make a difference. We can better reach young Australians by forming relationships with those organisations where they are most active.

As I mentioned previously, this is a generation enthusiastic about direct democracy.

They get to choose the next Australian Idol and the next evicted housemate on *Big Brother*. One of the reasons there is such comparatively low levels of youth membership of the major parties is that their ‘tow-the-party-line’ mentality seems too simplistic, too constraining for a generation used to direct involvement in decision making. They are also used to having their concerns and issues ignored by political parties eager to chase the votes of self-funded retirees, mortgage holders and three-child families.

Of course this has profound implications for a potential republican model. Generation Y are unlikely to be enthused by a model which denies them a direct say and which is

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<sup>24</sup> Ariadne Vromen, 2003, “People try to put us down’: Participatory citizenship of ‘Generation X’, *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 38(1), p. 82. Vromen’s findings are backed up by successive Democrats Youth Polls which show that, over the 2000–03 period, between 60–68 per cent of young Australians were involved in volunteer work such as environmental work, fundraising, teaching/instructing, coaching, counselling, food preparation, youth development, sport-recreation and emergency services. Statistics from Volunteering Australia show that on average young people volunteered 60.5 hours of their time per year, mainly for reasons of personal satisfaction and to help others in the community rather than to gain new skills or work experience. See [www.volunteeringaustralia.org](http://www.volunteeringaustralia.org).

filtered through a political system from which they feel alienated. Despite all the strong arguments in favour of the model we presented to the voters in 1999, the direct election model is undoubtedly a better fit for this generation and could help to build a critical sense of ownership of and connection to our public institutions.

If we look back at early republican sentiments, in the pre-federation era, they were largely focused on ‘opposition to tyranny’.<sup>25</sup> We are facing a new kind of tyranny of distance, namely, the growing distance between our citizens and our systems of government. Part of the challenge for our movement is to place our cause at the centre of a broader and braver campaign to build up public trust in those systems. If we don’t, then I believe we may struggle to get people to care about the republican cause, to believe it matters and has relevance to our lives today and to the lives of future generations.

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<sup>25</sup> Sally Warhurst in ‘*Well May We Say ...*’, p. 301.