

BOOK REVIEW

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Glenn Patmore, Choosing the Republic (UNSW Press, 2009) 256 pp

Glenn Patmore has been an active campaigner for an Australian republic for at least the last 15 years. It is therefore a pity to have to report that his latest book on the topic is something of a disappointment. It rambles. There may be two reasons for this. The first possible reason is that the book was put together from three articles previously published separately, but it seems to me that the stronger reason may be that the author is in two minds about a couple of matters.

The first matter on which the author seems to be in *at least* two minds is the question of the intended audience of the book. Is it for an audience of senior school-students and lay-persons; for republicans, intended to re-stoke their passions; or is it simply a historical narrative, meant to explain the failure of the republican campaign of 1993-9 to future historians or visitors from Mars? Various parts of the book seem to be for each of these audiences. Chapter 4, 'Glimpsing the Governor-General', provides a fairly clear explanation of the Governor-General's role as if written for a lay audience – but fails to explain what the Governor-General in Council means, and how the Executive Council is both the same as and different from Cabinet, so it is not *quite* a text for a lay audience. On the other hand chapter 3, 'Altering the Constitution', and chapter 5, 'The Politics of Minimalism', seem to be written for the future historian. I wonder if a reader from either group will persist through the constant changes in tone and level of knowledge assumed of the audience.

The later chapters are clearly enough addressed to the question of what to do next, but here again the author is in two minds. On the one hand, he clearly recognises that the reason for the failure of the campaign of the 1990s was that the people rejected the 'minimalist' model on offer, but he is too loyal a member of the Australian Republican Movement (ARM) to blame the failure on the ARM's pig-headed insistence on that model, in the face of mounting evidence from opinion polls that the people wanted to elect a President themselves – and their capitulation to John Howard's insistence that the Prime Minister should have power of instant dismissal of the President. As to what should be offered next time, there are passages where he seems to take for granted that the next republic proposal will have to offer a directly-elected President, but he devotes most of chapters 6 and 7 to the worry that a directly-elected President might have too

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much power over an indirectly-elected Prime Minister. This is despite the fact that quite early in chapter 6, he has quoted A J Ward – an *international* scholar of politics if ever there was one – to the following effect:

About half the parliamentary republics in the world have popularly elected presidents and half do not, and it does not seem to make a dime's worth of difference, because every elected president operates within a framework of clearly understood and very limited powers.²

What Ward did not add was that the constitutions of some parliamentary republics (for example, Iceland) do not make the limited nature of the president's power particularly clear, but that nevertheless the presidents of those nations behave just like the Queen does in Britain, and Governors-General and Governors all over the Commonwealth do. That is, they *already* act, as Patmore suggests an Australian President should do, as a 'constitutional guarantor of democratic continuity'. Why, then, do we need to agonise so much about the dire prospect of a directly-elected President in Australia? Are Australian voters more stupid, or Australian politicians more combative, than those elsewhere? Or would Australians just prefer to invent *a priori* hypotheses about things that *might* go wrong in a republic, and not bother to learn from the way that republics work in the rest of the democratic world?

The tragedy of all this is that in the major work of the 1990s republic debate, Malcolm Turnbull's *The Reluctant Republic*,³ Turnbull took care to canvas the various kinds of republic that then existed, and made it clear that they all 'worked'. Since, under Turnbull's leadership, the ARM chose to nail its flag to the mast of parliamentary selection of the President, Australian republican thought has turned inwards and produced works like the one under review. Maybe Turnbull and Patmore should now get together and produce a more positive work about the way in which republics with popularly elected presidents work in the rest of the world, and could work here? They could start with the A J Ward quote, above, and continue from there in a positive vein. Negativity about a republic, from republicans, will keep the constitution frozen forever.

² G Patmore, *Choosing the Republic* (UNSW Press, 2009) 125.

³ (Heinemann, 1993).