

Republicanism

Mark McKenna and Wayne Hudson (eds), Australian Republicanism: A Reader, Melbourne University Press, 2003

Reviewed by John Uhr

For well over 200 years, republicanism has been debated in Australian society. This collection of key documents traces the persistent republican hopes and the equally persistent anti-republican fears. The book has all the recent highlights: the Australian Republican Movement (ARM) core statements, the Keating government advice and early promises, the 1998 Constitutional Convention debates and the 1999 referendum arguments. But more than this, the book publishes the political arguments over republicanism, opponents as well as advocates, since the early 1880s.

Why did the recent experience fail to deliver constitutional change, and what is the future of republicanism in Australia? This book has the answer: based on the extensive documentation now published in this impressive new reader, the republic debate could also have a long future, including unresolved wrangling over competing models of an Australian republic. This sad prospect is not the primary intention of editors McKenna and Hudson, but it is one conclusion that is consistent with the historical record. One of the surprising strengths of this book is the depth of diversity it provides for those wanting to track the various strands of republicanism in the Australian experience of this venerable political belief.

Mark McKenna is an ANU political historian who has written the main cultural history of republicanism in Australia. Wayne Hudson is a political theorist at Griffith University who has published extensively on citizenship. Together they provide a useful running commentary on the documents they select. Be prepared for extensive coverage of the royals: typical of the national mood that has conditioned the republican option is this classic contribution from former Prime Minister Menzies in 1954: 'We love the Queen. We honour the Queen. We serve the Queen'. This very readable collection of documents, and commentary on the history of republicanism in Australia takes its cue from the quandary over the Queen and the British monarchy she represents.

The sad truth that emerges from this book is that republicanism in Australian has been preoccupied by the vices of the British monarchy, almost to the exclusion of any sustained investigation of the countervailing virtues of the post-monarchy nation: an alternative republican polity without the trappings of a constitutional monarchy. Australian republicanism spends more time making fun of the mindset of the Menzies monarchists than spelling out the detail of republican institutions, including, but not confined to, an Australian head of state. This reader shows just how enduring this reactionary strategy is, with the implication that time is on the

side of the monarchists, even though the monarchy does not attract majority support.

The book begins, even on the cover, with a portrait of the current Queen. This is no criticism, because this image nicely captures the problem confronting Australian republicans: selecting alternative images to convey solutions to this highly personalised problem. In many ways that monarchists appreciate, the visible person of the current Queen papers over the deeper problem with the office she holds as Queen of Australia. Republicans call on Australians to imagine an Australian – ‘one of us’ – as our head of state. But the answer is not an Australian monarch, despite the fact that such a monarch would pass the ‘one of us’ test. Monarchy too must go: but should it go because it is foreign or because it is bad in principle? And if it is bad in principle, what precisely is the principle being used as the standard of judgment? As this welcome reader shows, the historical answers to these questions have varied enormously.

The editors do a major service by confronting readers with the hard truths about Australian republicanism. The main story is one of nationalism (folk pride) crowding out democracy (self-government). The cover portrait signals the major preoccupation of the readings selected for inclusion in this book, almost all of which deal with the case for or against the monarchy in Australia. At many times, these readings seem like lost pages out a companion reader on Australian nationalism, where national identity is defined by ‘republicans’ simply in terms of being non-British and by non-republicans in terms of some sort of imperial identity energised from England, as exemplified by Menzies. A very prominent theme of Australian republican sentiment is nationalism, occasionally revealing anxieties of xenophobia. At its best, republican nationalism substitutes an Australian scale of public honour for the traditional one inherited from Britain. For instance, *The Bulletin* of 1887 inveighs against ‘that crowd of place hunters whose centre of gravity is England instead of Australia’ (p. 84). But as this reader shows, this not-unattractive assertion of national pride has often become a plea for racially exclusive chauvinism, complete with sexist stories about male political mastery.

The main republican application of this nationalist sentiment has been the menu of minimalism: republicanism defined in terms of severance of the constitutional link to the British (and indeed to any other) monarchy. This version of republicanism is more radical than it sometimes appears: it is not simply a substitution of an Australian head of state for the British monarchy but a thoroughgoing rejection of monarchy as such. But is it also an embrace of political equality and a commitment to substantive social democracy over and above the formality of constitutional democracy? Or is it a ‘meer breeches pocket question’ with calculations of personal cost, as the *Peoples Advocate* wondered in 1849? (p. 35).

In a way, the answer is not yet in, because republicans have yet to test their mettle against anything more challenging than strains of minimalist monarchism. There are plenty of examples of this conservative position from the anti-Labor side of politics, but perhaps the most telling example in this collection comes from

that most rascally anti-Labor rat, Billy Hughes, who has a starring role here for his outstanding contribution to the anti-republican camp. Near the centre of the book is Hughes' speech of welcome for the visit of the Prince of Wales in 1920, just a few years after Australian involvement in the First War. No mention on this occasion of an independent new nation 'blooded' in battle, but instead hearty sentiments about the proud place of the British Empire in the Australian outlook, including Australian acceptance of the principles of civil liberty associated with British government. This is in marked contrast to the related extracts from the *Australian Worker*, condemning the vices of British and any other form of imperialism. Hughes, on the other hand, had a new relish for imperialism. A little later in the same year we find Prime Minister Hughes leading the parliamentary censure of federal member Hugh Mahon for alleged 'treason' arising from his outspoken defence of Irish republicanism. Here the little digger does make the link between the Australian war dead and the non-republican ideals of empire for which they died (see, for example, p. 156).

Many Labor figures were just as cool towards republicanism. Hughes had outgrown the radicalism of his youth, but even the anti-monarchist Labor radicals of his day, like Maurice Blackburn, were no less impatient with republican ideals that were 'side-tracking the working class movement just as much as the advocate of monarchy' (pp. 150-1). To cite Blackburn's wonderful example of Hawkey-eyed realism: 'The thing to do is to make the best of the existing form' (p. 151). This makes even Keating's republicanism look radical!

This book shows that the republican debate has from the beginning included a debate over ideas as well as institutions. But many of the leading ideas are slogans. For instance, the first reading is a newspaper report from 1806 about a convict charged with sedition for wearing a shirt with the name of English republican Tom Paine identifiable on the back. Clearly Paine pained the authorities, and this early republican suffered for his early adventure in identity politics. But later republicans had even zanier ideas. Consider what is probably Australia's original political manifesto proclaiming republicanism: the manifesto of the 1891 Australasian Republican Association (ARA), which should be better-known, does not even mention the monarchy. Could this be the missing example of maximalist republicanism? Enthusiasts should be wary, because the ARA was as much a racial movement as a radical movement. The manifesto calls for universal suffrage, triennial parliaments and the referendum (all good things), and opposes imperial titles (the closest it gets to mentioning monarchy). But its real passion was to preserve 'Australia for the white man' (p. 108), which rather undercuts its appeal in this fascinating model of the so-called 'Democratic Commonwealth' that the ARA contributed to the federation debates.

This collection contains many of the best anti-republican defences of the established Australian order. While journals like *The Bulletin* might rail at the 'dust covered customs' of England of no real relevance to Australia (p. 93), more mainstream journals like *The Age* newspaper had already sold their readers on the good sense of being 'loyal to the British crown but not to British absolutism': a classic expression of Australian self-government (p. 63). The conservative

version of this support for responsible parliamentary government warned Australians off republicanism because it was American, and therefore un-British. Thus the scallywag Wentworth called for a 'British not a yankee constitution' (p. 47), a view put with greater balance by the centrist Henry Parkes (pp. 38-9). What both public men feared was republican envy of the US, expressed in public sentiments along lines that celebrated 'that democratic habit of thinking which is the great and distinguishing characteristic of American society' (p. 56).

In the nineteenth century, the deepest forms of republicanism were American in sentiment. But in the twentieth century, some of the deepest have been Indigenous in sentiment, invoking a spirit of reconciliation between white and black Australia. Few examples of this most recent spirit are included here, with the notable exception of a speech by Gatjil Djerrkura (pp. 232-4). Also missing are those voices, other than Paddy O'Brien at the 1998 Constitutional Convention, of populist republicanism favouring direct election of the president. These two omissions weaken the representation of contemporary left-wing and right-wing republicanism.

But the real strength of the collection is the fresh picture it paints of what might be called the robust republicanism of the advocates of democracy in Australia. Advocates like John Dunmore Lang approached republicanism as an exercise in political self-government, seizing on the prospect of Victorian self-government to draw up a declaration of independence anticipating an eventual federation of like self-governing colonies committed to the core value of popular sovereignty. In such voices, Australian republicanism recovers its democratic credentials. But, as they say in the classics, there is more: Lang was one of those who appreciated that Victorian Britain was already in substance a republic, even if a disguised one, and that the Australian colonies were following suit. Even Parkes, who feared the 'wild ravings' of republicans, conceded that Britain was a disguised republic (and that the US was really a monarchy) and that Australia was safely on track to achieve closet republicanism (p. 126). This sentiment was aired during the 1890s federation debates, here extracted in contributions from that unlikely republican hero, the inaugural President of the Senate, Richard Baker, who acknowledged that Australia was 'practically a republic' (p. 137).

The contemporary who comes closest to this version of republicanism realism is Donald Horne, whose 1964 classic *The Lucky Country* made the same admission that Australia was, for all practical purposes, a republic (p. 181). Horne also made the original case for popular election of an Australian head of state, before discounting its likely effect: 'One might think that such a dignitary (an appointed President) would have to be elected by the Australian people but the Australian political leaders might prefer to sneak him through a back door' (p. 182). Perhaps Australians can take quiet pride in the fact that they live in a nation that is lucky enough to 'do' republicanism without 'being' a republic. Nothing, it seems, is all that new in the republic debate.

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