

Introductory Remarks

John Stone

Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to this eleventh Conference of The Samuel Griffith Society – our fourth here in Melbourne.

When the Board of Management was considering this Conference early this year, it was already obvious that, by the time it came about, we would probably not be far away from the long awaited referendum on the republic issue, and what had by then become the associated issue of a referendum on a new republican Preamble to our Constitution.

As members are aware, the central constitutional issue for this Society – the issue which originally led to its foundation in early 1992, and which has been at the heart of its concerns ever since – is federalism. As such, the Society has been concerned with the distortion, I would even say perversion, of our federal Constitution which has resulted from the ever-increasing growth of centralist power in Canberra. That growth has come at the expense of the wider dispersion of power which the framers of our Constitution – and those who approved it, the then people of the six colonies – intended.

Although, in recent years, the Society appears to have been seen in some quarters as having been established to combat the idea of a republic, that has never been the case. Indeed, we have a sprinkling (though I do not think it is more than that) of members who are themselves republicans of one brand or another.

To say, however, that the republic issue was not originally seen as central to our concerns is not at all at variance with saying, as I now do, that over the years it has become one of those concerns, and a major one at that.

One reason for that lies in our purpose to ensure, to the extent that we are able, that if changes are to be made in our Australian Constitution, “it is desirable that the widest range of thought and opinion should be canvassed before any conclusions are reached”. Those words, which appear in our “invitation letter” to prospective members, were in fact penned by Sir Harry Gibbs himself, not long after he had agreed to my request to him to become our inaugural President.

The more specific reason why, over the years, the republic issue has loomed larger in involved on the republican side, from the Hon our concerns is simply that, more and more, it Paul Keating on the one hand to the Rt Hon has become evident that it is a barrow pushed Malcolm Fraser on the other, each of them by the centralists. One clue to that – though equally avid in their lust to place power in the there are many others – is to be seen in the hands of the Prime Minister of the day.

dramatis personae

It has never been the practice of this Society to organize our Conferences around a single theme – other than, in a general sense, that federalist theme that I referred to earlier. Nor have we done so on this occasion. Nevertheless, with the onset of the referendum (or referendums) so imminent – only seventeen weeks away this day – it seemed appropriate on this occasion to focus a significant proportion of our proceedings on that issue.

As you all know, therefore, our program this weekend contains in all six papers (including our two Dinner addresses) devoted generally to this topic. Last night most of us heard the first of them – a brilliant address from the National Convenor of the No Republic Campaign, Professor David Flint, who, I am proud to say, is also a member of the Board of

this Society. Professor Flint's address was capped by an equally outstanding Vote of Thanks from Sir David Smith. Tonight we are also looking forward to an address by Dr Geoffrey Partington, who will lay out for us some of the strands of the web of kinship which, republicanism notwithstanding, continues to bind this country (in common with a number of others) to its essentially British, including of course Irish, past.

This morning, however, we are devoting four papers to this matter – two dealing with the proposed “model” for a republic to be put to us by way of referendum later this year, and two dealing with the associated question of a republican Preamble, which was originally intended to be put forward in a separate referendum at the same time, but whose precise status now appears somewhat uncertain.

The first of those papers will be given to us by Professor Greg Craven, who is well known to members of this Society for the series of lapidary papers which, over the years, he has delivered to our successive Conferences, usually on topics to do with the nature and workings of the High Court of Australia. Those papers, which in my view have been enormously influential, have placed us forever in his debt.

I say that because, as many of you will know, Professor Craven has now ranged himself on the side of those supporting a “Yes” vote next November. Indeed, he is a member of the officially appointed Committee, under the Chairmanship of Mr Malcolm Turnbull, to disburse the funds provided by the Government for the “Yes” campaign.

Now he will not be surprised to hear me say that his activities in that regard do not commend themselves to me. But that, of course, is all the more reason why we should hear the arguments which lead him to his present views.

Since I am personally chairing this morning's session, it seems appropriate that I should now conclude these introductory remarks, don my Chairman's hat, and formally introduce to you Professor Craven, which I now do, with pleasure.