

Chapter Nine: The Referendum Debate: A Note on Press Coverage

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The “quality” press played a large part in the debate preceding the republic referendum of 6 November, 1999. The Victorian group promoting the “No Republic” case asked me to examine every copy of *The Age* (and *The Sunday Age*) and *The Australian* during the 12-13 weeks to voting day, to enable some assessment of the manner in which those newspapers handled this important public debate. For this purpose, the numbers of column-centimetres of print (excluding head-lines) devoted to each side of the topic were carefully recorded.

The material was sub-divided into news/comment, editorials and opinion pieces, and the number of letters (full and brief) published, classifying each as pro - or anti-republic or neutral in tone. The results are given in the accompanying tables and bar-charts.

The way in which the material was classified into “Yes”, “No” and “Neutral” is central to the outcome: one reader’s bias is another’s fair reporting. Editorials, opinion pieces and letters of course generally speak for themselves. It is the classification of news/comment which is bound to be most contentious. Accordingly examples are given, to invite evaluation of the accuracy of my assessment. (News and comment, formerly kept scrupulously separate, are now routinely merged by many journalists, hence their combination for present purposes).

News/comment took many forms:

- Simple reporting of facts, such as Brendan Nicholson’s *Now or never: Costello* (*The Age*, 1/11, p.1) or Mike Steketee’s *Poll unlocks the yes vote* (*The Australian*, 25/10, p.1). Both were classified as neutral.
- Articles slanted to the “Yes” or “No” case. Scott Emerson’s *Two eras – one way forward* (*The Australian*, 6-7/11, p.9), which featured youthful Juliet Mitchell and centenarian Ted Smout, was clearly in the “Yes” category. *Whitlam pillories PM’s fear* by Steve Connolly and Lyall Johnson (*The Age*, 28/10, p.4) was another such. By contrast, and despite its headline, Dennis Shanahan’s *PM’s case falls short on symbols* (*The Australian*, 27/10, p.6) presented the “No” case favourably.
- Articles of strongly “Yes” or “No” persuasion, yet with a segment devoted to the reverse or to a neutral stance. An example was *PM warned to stay out of debate* (Brendan Nicholson, *The Age*, 2/11, p.6), in which 25cm tended to the “Yes” side and 2cm to “No”. Ben Holgate’s *Cultural Spirits rally for republic* (*The Australian*, 5/11, p.19) had 41cm devoted to the “Yes” side, 4cm to “No” and 5cm were “Neutral”. With all such “divided” articles, the appropriate lengths in centimetres were allocated to the tallies of “Yes”, “No” and “Neutral”.
- Opinion pieces masquerading as news/comment. A good example with a “Yes” bias was Paul Kelly’s *Costello offers alternative vision for conservatives* (*The Australian*, 28/10, p.1).
- News/comment in the form of a puff from celebrities for the “Yes” vote. One of the most notable was *It’s time but a republic wasn’t meant to be easy* (Michael Gordon, *The Age*, 5/11, p.1), with a photograph of previous Prime Ministers Fraser and Whitlam triumphantly hand in hand with Premier Bracks. *Dad reigned at Winton’s royal parade* (Matt Price, *The Australian*, 28/10, p.7) was another example.

Journalists notable for impartial reporting were Nicolas Rothwell (*The Australian*) and Tony Wright (*The Age*). By contrast, Graeme Leech, who edited most Melba columns in *The Australian*

during the period under review, would have to qualify as having presented the most consistently one-sided viewpoint.

During the three months prior to the vote two other major events occurred: East Timor's referendum and the subsequent unrest there, and the long drawn out Victorian State election. These events probably accounted for the dearth or even absence of republic material at certain times, especially in the Opinion sections.

Coming now to the results of this survey, and considering news/comment first, week by week, it may be said that there was not one week when column-centimetres in the "Yes" camp did not exceed those in the "No" camp, usually overwhelmingly.

This was true of both newspapers. Indeed, in only 4 of the 12 weeks did even "Neutral" exceed "Yes" in *The Australian*. In *The Age*, that balance was 7 weeks to 6.

Consider now the results in summary, embodied in the grand totals of column-centimetres for the full 12 or 13 week periods. (These appear for each newspaper in the bottom line of the appropriate table).

For *The Australian*, the sum total of news/comment on the "Yes" side was 4,246cm. The "No" total came to 1,468cm, and "Neutral" amounted to 4,276cm. Thus "Yes" overshadowed "No" by almost 3 to 1.

The pattern for *The Age* for news/comment was even more unequal, with "Yes" totalling 2,531cm, "No" 530cms and "Neutral" 2,835cm. The ratio of allotted space for "Yes" to "No" was close to 5 to 1 (although, as indicated above, the proportion of "Neutral" news/comment in *The Age* was slightly greater than the proportion of "Yes" material, whereas in the case of *The Australian*, "Yes" material actually even exceeded "Neutral").

It is obviously a newspaper's right to express its own view in its editorials, and it is no surprise that every relevant leading article in both papers, without exception, urged readers to vote "Yes".

In the opinion pieces, most readers would hope to see a roughly equal division for and against a proposition as fundamental as changing Australia's Constitution. However, space in both papers was allocated not much less than 2 to 1 in favour of the "Yes" case.

Happily, the spread of views among Letters to the Editor (presumably reflecting roughly the "balance" of letters received on the topic) was much more even, with *The Australian's* ratio 8 to 7 in favour of the "Yes" vote, and *The Age's* 6 to 5 in favour of the "No" vote.

In the event, the referendum was lost convincingly, and in every State as well as the Northern Territory. The advocacy of the "quality" press, as exemplified by *The Age* and *The Australian*, may have convinced inner city voters, but clearly failed to sway the wider population. Could it be that the urgency with which these newspapers (particularly *The Australian*) relentlessly pressed their case rebounded upon them? Or was it perhaps that the uniformity of views expressed simply made some readers suspicious? To paraphrase R W Emerson, "the louder they proclaimed the advantages of the republic, the faster we voters counted the blessings of the present system".

The Australian

Week Ending	News/Comment (i)			Editorials (ii)			Opinion Pieces (iii)			Numbers of Letters (iv)		
	Yes	No	Neutral	Yes	No	Neutral	Yes	No	Neutral	Yes	No	Neutral
22 Aug	120	109	125				198	55	38	4	10	4
29 Aug	91	40	138				56	97		4	5	
5 Sept	206	86	98	6			82	45		6		2
12 Sept	60	3	49			18				3	1	
19 Sept	156	18	125			16			41	2	7	1
26 Sept	131	46	84	18			162			7	3	
3 Oct	45	53	101	26		16	186	106	40	4	5	4
* 10 Oct	260	209	531	46			46	31	40	12	15	
17 Oct	758	260	551				185			10	10	1
24 Oct	663	163	384	24			179	67	56	13	9	1
31 Oct	1072	259	972	46			170	296	59	21	17	3
6 Nov	684	222	1118	140			603	285	25	71	54	3
Total of 12 weeks	4246	1468	4276	306		50	1867	1031	299	157	136	19

The Australian: referendum coverage, in column-centimetres (sections i, ii, iii) and numbers of letters (section iv). Articles read, 522.

* The 19 page booklet, *Royalty or republic: your guide to the referendum* was not surveyed.

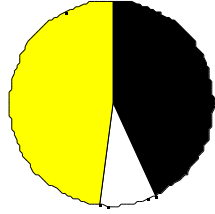
The Age

Week Ending	News/Comment (i)			Editorials (ii)			Opinion Pieces (iii)			Numbers of Letters (iv)		
	Yes	No	Neutral	Yes	No	Neutral	Yes	No	Neutral	Yes	No	Neutral
15 Aug	246		219	15			56			10	8	5
22 Aug	101	6	155				105			4	7	10
29 Aug	105	16	82	15			45	49		3	6	1
5 Sept	63	19	117	15			89	48		1	1	1
12 Sept	77	17	75	15					41	1	1	1
19 Sept	52	13	32									
26 Sept	65	11	83			15	167	91				
3 Oct	129	33	189	26						1	1	2
10 Oct	126	121	291	16				49		2	7	
17 Oct	86	43	336				274	237		12	15	4
24 Oct	253	42	127	16			258	144		1	2	3
31 Oct	620	138	678	86			304	268	58	24	29	
6 Nov	608	71	451	16			500	208	156	41	40	6
Total of 13 weeks	2531	530	2835	220		15	1798	1094	255	100	117	32

The Age referendum coverage, in column-centimetres (sections i, ii, iii) and numbers of letters (section iv). Articles read, 331.

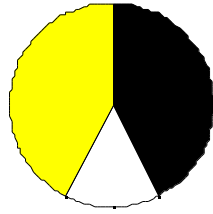
**Totals Over 13 Week Period
Prior to Referendum**

The Age : News/Comment Totals



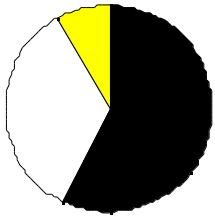
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The Australian : News/Comment Totals



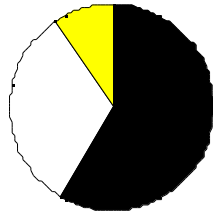
■ Yes □ No ■ Neutral

The Age : Opinion Piece Totals



■ Yes □ No ■ Neutral

The Australian : Opinion Piece Totals



■ Yes □ No ■ Neutral