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978-0-521-57618-5 - The Captive Republic: A History of Republicanism in Australia

1788-1996

Mark McKenna

Excerpt

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## Introduction

From the vantage point of the late twentieth century, the history of republicanism in Australia is the history of an imagined destiny. The Australian republic is a two-century-old dream not realised, the captive bird that waits patiently for the door of the cage to open.

The belief that Australia would 'inevitably' become a republic was already planted in 1788 when the First Fleet sailed into Sydney Harbour. After the American War of Independence in 1776 many people in Britain accepted that the colonies in the New World would eventually assert their independence and separate from the parent state. In Australia, a republic was long recognised as the end point of the colonies' political development—an ideal that would be realised when Australia finally matured into an independent nation.<sup>1</sup> For more than two centuries the familiar metaphor of Australia as a child awaiting maturation often carried within it the notion of a republican 'coming of age'. Today we are accustomed to public statements from politicians proclaiming the inevitability of the republic. But if we cast our eyes over the history of republican debate in Australia we begin to understand that the idea of an inevitable republic has been the Achilles' heel of Australian republicans. The inevitable republic may be truth, it may be furphy, but Australians have used it to delay the coming of the republic as much as they have used it to legitimise the republic's arrival. In the 1990s we have come to accept that the republic will come of its own accord—without any struggle and with little involvement on the part of the people. Like detached bystanders, we stand on the shore and wait for the boat to come in.<sup>2</sup>

This book is an attempt to understand the role of republican ideas in Australia's past—a political history based on a selective record of the arguments that have gathered around the word *republic*. It is a history not only of republicans but of the political debate which they have helped to stimulate in the press, parliaments and public meetings of Australia since 1788. To some extent it is also a history which is episodic. Republican debate in Australia has been at its most intense at times of national or political renewal. Throughout the book, I have intentionally focused on

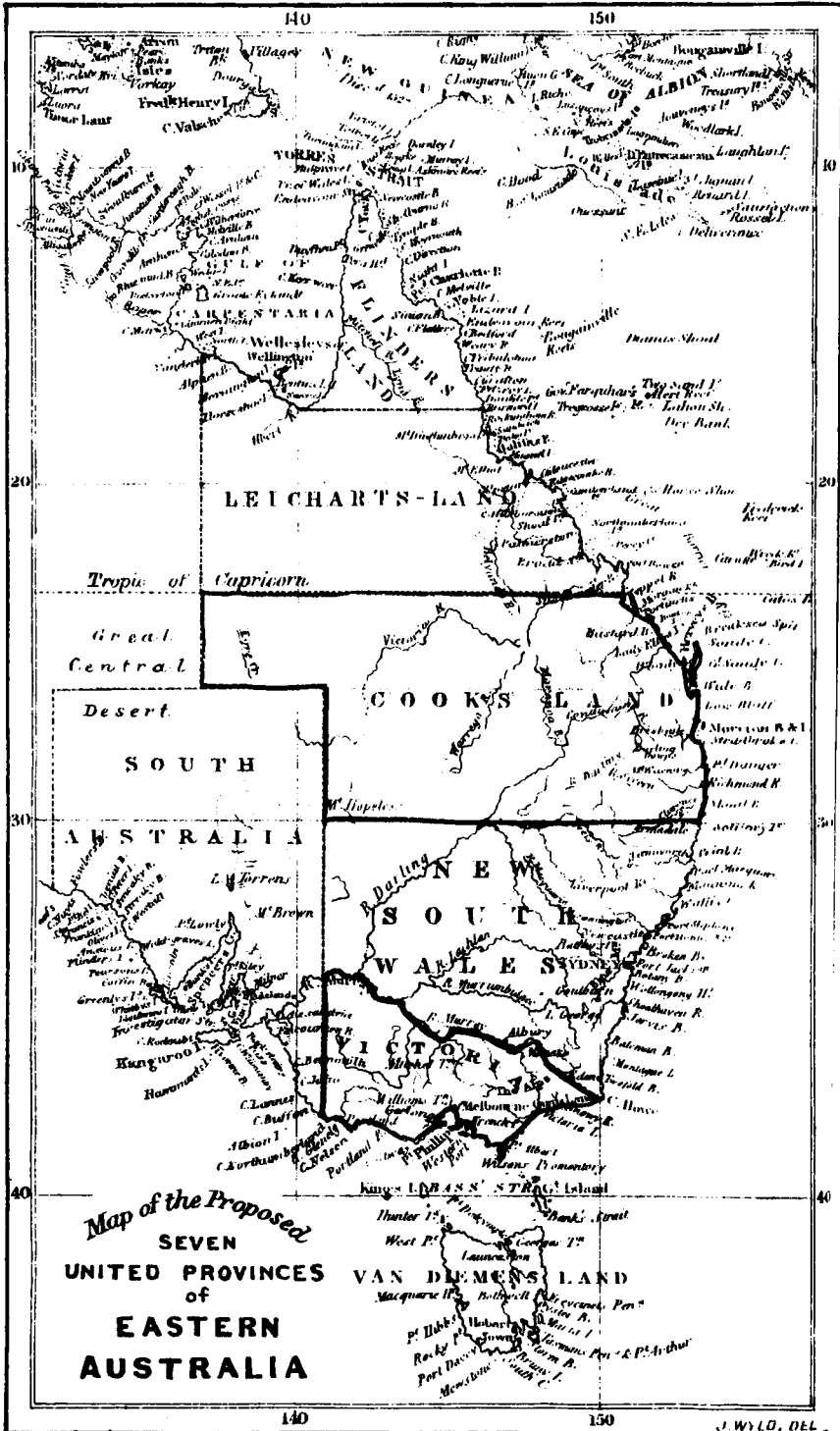
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these periods—especially when republican arguments (in one form or another) played a crucial role in the formation of colonial or federal political institutions. Consequently, certain colonies, such as New South Wales, and particular decades, such as 1845–55 and 1880–1901, have received greater attention.

In one sense, it is not surprising that it was the colonies on the eastern mainland which harboured the most explicit forms of nationalist republicanism. In Tasmania, a colony which did not achieve manhood suffrage until 1900, the emergence of a strong working-class political movement was retarded by the legacy of convictism. In Western Australia, the transportation of convicts continued until 1868, while responsible government did not arrive until 1890. In the 1890s, at the height of the labour movement in the eastern colonies, commentators remarked on the rudimentary nature of its development in Western Australia. In South Australia, a colony founded on Protestant virtues and the ‘civilising’ influence of agriculture, it was faith in land reform, God and British traditions of parliamentary reform which characterised the majority of labour reform movements.<sup>3</sup> When we encounter commitment to republican principles in colonies such as Tasmania and South Australia, it is not in the anti-British mould of the Sydney *Bulletin*. In the chapters that follow, I have tried to write in detail the republican history that has not yet been told, to explain the role played by republicanism in the decades before the granting of responsible government in the 1850s and the Federation of the colonies of 1901. I should add that the book is not a cultural nationalist’s tale of republican heroes marching bravely on through an imperial wilderness. Nor is it a history that seeks to nail down any one republican idea as more appropriate or more politically correct. If there are republican traditions in our past they are beholden to no political ideology, party or creed, and they bear as much relevance to the conservative traditions of Australian politics as they do to our radical and socialist traditions. When we think of republicanism today we often imagine a political concept which is anti- (or at least non-) monarchical. We think of severing the last ties with Great Britain—perhaps an Australian president replacing the British monarch as head of state, one final but small step in the realisation of Australia’s complete independence.<sup>4</sup> While this may be the meaning which *we* associate with the concept of an Australian republic in the 1990s, we have to be extremely careful not to impose our contemporary sense of the republic on the past.

### Lang’s vision

This map appeared opposite the title page of John Dunmore Lang’s major republican work, *Freedom and Independence for the Golden Lands of Australia*, published in 1852. Lang’s vision of an Australian republic excluded the infant colony of Western Australia and split the area north of New South Wales into three separate provinces named in honour of Australian explorers. (Image Library, State Library of New South Wales.)

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Since European settlement began in 1788 republicanism in Australia has represented a diverse range of phenomena trading under one label.

The term 'republic', like the word 'democracy', is a perfect example of the essentially contested concept, a concept about which there can be no precise agreement.<sup>5</sup> In any period, traditional understandings of the republic, such as the 'classical' republic which was based partially on the Aristotelian notion of government as a balance of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy, have coexisted with other more or less democratic notions of the republic. In short, the protean republic and its derivatives—republicanism and republican—have always been labels to be fought over.<sup>6</sup> Writing in *Federalist* Number 39, one of eighty-five papers written by Alexander Hamilton, John Jay and James Madison in 1787–88 to encourage voters in New York State to ratify the American Federal Constitution, James Madison asked the following question: 'What, then, are the distinctive characteristics of the republican form? Were an answer to this question to be sought not by recurring to principles but in the application of the term by political writers to the constitutions of different States, no satisfactory one would ever be found'.<sup>7</sup>

Madison's point is perhaps even more valid today. Although a particular state might carry the title 'republic', the word tells us little about the form of government within that state. This would be true in either a historical or contemporary context. Thus, the monarchical element incorporated in the Venetian republic of the fifteenth century in the form of the elected Doge varied from the form of government found in the Cromwellian republic of the 1650s or the post-revolutionary republics of France in the late eighteenth century. Equally, the form of government found in the modern republic of the United States bears little similarity to the republic of Iraq. In the late twentieth century a president's penchant for military uniform may be a more accurate indicator of the form of government than the appellation 'republic'.

When we turn to the more abstract discussion concerning the 'true' or 'real' principles of republican government we still find considerable room for disagreement. Madison, for example, may have identified the principles of republican government with representative federal democracy, but there were also many Anti-Federalists in late eighteenth-century America who held more democratic notions of republicanism which were traditionally connected with smaller states.<sup>8</sup> This should remind us that 'republican principles' in any period are likely to be contested. In the contemporary republican debate in Australia, for example—at least in the broadsheet press and the academic community—there is an ongoing debate concerning the principles of republican government which may or may not be incorporated into any new or remodelled constitution.<sup>9</sup> Republicans want Australia to become a republic, while monarchists want

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Australia to remain a crowned republic.<sup>10</sup> In this light, the Australian republic is 'captive' because of the very fluidity of political language, a notion of political change which is both propelled and impeded by its own historical baggage. Even when participants in the republican debate attempt to locate republican principles in the word's etymology (that is, the Latin *respublica*—the public thing) or 'traditional' republican principles such as popular sovereignty, the rule of law, checks and balances, or the goal of a virtuous citizenry, they are unlikely to agree about the definition of such principles or where, when and how they might be applied.<sup>11</sup> As the American John Adams remarked: 'the word republic, . . . may signify anything, everything or nothing'.<sup>12</sup> Although the word 'republic' has remained the same, its meaning has not. Thus, the history that follows is not the history of a movement or even that of a consistently understood idea.

When I began work on this book in 1990, before the current republican debate began, I expected to write the history of a marginal and somewhat eccentric strand of Australia's political culture which had made little impact on the development of our political institutions. I had read all of the secondary sources on republicanism, what few there were. The majority of historians had tended to dismiss republicanism as a 'flicker' or phantom, the fringe-dweller of a predominantly loyalist and imperial political culture.<sup>13</sup> When republicanism did get a mention, it was usually in association with the Sydney *Bulletin* of the 1880s or John Dunmore Lang's republican lectures in the 1850s. A paragraph or two in general histories, an article occasionally on the 'radical' republicans of the late nineteenth century, but rarely anything more substantial.<sup>14</sup> Republicanism seemed to be the derivative and 'exotic flower' of a minority.<sup>15</sup> In one way, this view was understandable. By relying on the few explicitly republican publications or political movements for source material, and often writing from within a political culture which expressed little discernible interest in a republic, it was only natural for historians to assume that republicanism was of little significance. There was no point in writing the history of an aberration. In part, however, this image of republicanism also stemmed from the way in which republicanism had been perceived as a predominantly anti-British phenomenon. Throughout the book I have attempted to challenge this one-dimensional view of republicanism by acknowledging the hybrid character of republicanism in Australia.

Broadly speaking, there have been four distinct but still overlapping republican experiences in Australian history. The British, the French, the American and the Australian—the latter being a largely derivative variation on the themes of the first three. Perhaps now, in the late twentieth century, we possess a uniquely Australian republican language in the form of patriotic minimalism. To understand the interplay between these

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republican models it is probably best to begin with the most straightforward—the French.

From the earliest years of the colony, the French Revolution of 1789 evoked images of violence and anarchy. In the minds of the governing classes the French republic and Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* sparked fears of bloodshed and mob rule. The French model of a republic was seen as a threat to British institutions and the British way of life. Few Australian republicans embraced this revolutionary model of a republic, but the image of a French republic steeped in gore certainly helped to stigmatise the notion of a republic in Australia.<sup>16</sup> This revolutionary republic was kept alive by the revolutions in Europe in 1848, the Easter Rebellion of 1916, the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the many Third World dictatorships which emerged from colonial rule in the twentieth century carrying the title 'republic'. Even in the 1990s it was still possible to find Australians who believed that a republic would mean the end of civil society and gentlemanly behaviour.<sup>17</sup> Traditionally, these fears were also due to the spectre of Irish republicanism. Yet one of the most interesting aspects of the history of republicanism in Australia is that the Irish have left little evidence of their involvement in campaigns for an Australian republic. Only rarely did republicanism slide overtly into separatism, and when it did it was usually at the instigation of colonial governors and politicians. For the most part, Irish settlers kept any republican sentiments focused on their homeland. The majority of republicans who appear throughout the book (especially in the nineteenth century) are English or Scottish-born. Despite the dominance of sectarian concerns in Australia's past, the link between Irish Catholic sectarianism and Australian republicanism has always been more imagined than real.

Closely connected to the French (and English) republican experience was the American. In the Australian colonies the most common understanding of American republicanism was of armed resistance to colonial rule. The American War of Independence in 1776 and the American Constitution of 1787 transformed the image of republican government in the New World. The Americans had demonstrated that a group of British colonies could successfully overthrow British colonial rule and declare their independence. They had shown that republican government could be reconciled with federal government, representative democracy, individualism and free market economics. The American republic—at least rhetorically—had enshrined the principle of popular sovereignty.<sup>18</sup> For some, like John Dunmore Lang in the 1850s, it was a beacon of prosperous, democratic and independent government. For others, it was the alternative Yankee solution should Britain fail to administer the colonies justly. On occasions, republicans in Australia dreamed of a grand Anglo-American empire and cried out for protection from the American

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'Eagle'. In the 1880s some Australian republicans shunned the American republic because of its social inequality. The American republic served as both a warning and as a model for change.<sup>19</sup> After the loss of the American colonies, Australian colonists were more easily able to remind the Colonial Office in London of the dangers involved in ignoring colonial grievances. While the American example increased the potency of these threats, it also ensured that they would be less likely to be carried out. Neither the Australian colonists nor the British government desired a repeat of 1776. Yet while Australian republicans may have been inspired by the American example, they rarely viewed the American republic uncritically. Instead, they sought to vary the American model to suit their own environment.<sup>20</sup>

To grasp the English republican model we have to be prepared to accept that the non-monarchical concept of a republic was not the only one present in colonial Australia. We know that the classical notion of republicanism which inspired the medieval Italianate and Dutch republics, Machiavelli and many of the seventeenth-century English Commonwealth men was not necessarily antagonistic to monarchic or aristocratic elements. Anti-monarchical sentiment, at least prior to the French Revolution, was only occasionally a characteristic of republican principles.<sup>21</sup>

If we wish to understand the English republican model we should first ask what particular understanding of the English Constitution was brought to Australia's shores by the early British immigrants. Nineteenth-century England was a society 'steeped in the rhetoric of constitutionalism and the rule of law'.<sup>22</sup> All classes placed great faith in parliamentary and legal processes as the appropriate mechanisms of reform. When conservatives sought the maintenance of existing institutions or liberals or radicals sought reform, all appealed to the English Constitution. These appeals frequently consisted of invocations to the anti-absolutist principles embodied in Magna Carta or the Glorious Revolution of 1688.<sup>23</sup> The right to trial by jury, to be protected from excessive punishment, the right to petition and, above all else, the right to resist arbitrary rule. After 1688 the monarch was restricted to an essentially constitutional role, parliament was sovereign and the old notion of the divine right of kings had been eradicated.<sup>24</sup>

Thanks largely to the work of historians such as J. G. Pocock, we are aware that the language used by Englishmen to protect their Constitution (as outlined in the English Bill of Rights of 1689) relied heavily on classical republican principles.<sup>25</sup> Implicitly, the first of these principles was that 'true' republican government was based on a balance of the threefold order—Kings, Lords and Commons, the classical model of a republic which did not necessarily exclude monarchy. According to Henry Parkes, every

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Englishman who arrived in Australia understood the most ideal form of government as a balance between the threefold order. For Pocock, classical republicanism was represented by the articulated desire for balanced government, the separation of powers, civic virtue, and the resistance to arbitrary rule, a tradition of political thought which originated in Ancient Rome, was filtered through Renaissance Florence and enshrined in the Stuart Restoration of 1660 and the Bill of Rights in 1689, before finally providing the foundation for the anti-absolutist arguments of the American revolutionaries in the late eighteenth century.<sup>26</sup> It could embrace or be synonymous with the trappings of proper citizenship status, such as trial by jury. It could be associated with the granting of responsible government. It opposed oppression and tyranny and feared corruption and patronage. It was not principally a doctrine about monarchy but about constitutional rule. Finally, it was neither anti-British nor necessarily anti-monarchical.

Although this language dominated the grievance rhetoric of colonial politics in Australia—especially in the early nineteenth century—it was never referred to as ‘republican’ by those who used it. More often than not, Australian colonists saw themselves as exiled Britons appealing for citizenship rights under the British Constitution. Their sense of the word ‘republic’ was overwhelmingly dictated by the modern anti-monarchical concept of republican government as encapsulated in the American and French models. To refer to themselves proudly, actively and openly as ‘republican’ would have been thought to be anti-British. Yet when they were pressed to explain their understanding of a republic they frequently retreated to the classical model, equating republican government with balanced government, representative democracy, and insisting that their precious English Constitution was essentially a republic in disguise. After the Glorious Revolution in 1688, maintaining the monarchy in Britain was one way of concealing the steady democratisation of the English Constitution—as Lord Balfour admitted in his introduction to Walter Bagehot’s *English Constitution*, published in 1867 ‘[Monarchy] provides the disguise which happily prevents the ordinary Englishman from discovering that he is not living under a monarchy but under a republic’.<sup>27</sup>

The classical republican inheritance of the English model sought to enshrine one form of a republic—not the American or French, but the essentially conservative and disguised English form. Again, we should remember that this pre-modern language of republicanism was not anti-monarchical but anti-tyrannical, a fact which explains why the Australian colonists were frequently able to declare their loyalty to the monarch and, in the same breath, threaten a republic. The threatened republic was the means by which the English Constitution was to be protected and extended to the colonists. Thus, their grievance was never with the



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monarch—the very person who embodied the principles of balanced government—but with those individual ministers who sullied the Constitution by maintaining unjust policies.

Moreover, the republicanism of key figures such as John Dunmore Lang was not detached from this tradition. Lang's arguments for a republic centred on assertions concerning colonial maturity and American-inspired notions of federal democracy, they did not rest on an antagonism towards monarchy or the British Constitution. Thus, we should not be surprised to find Lang expressing his 'sincere respect and unfeigned attachment' towards the British monarch at the same time as he demands freedom and independence for the Australian colonies. From a contemporary perspective, Lang's loyalty to the throne may appear odd, but in the 1850s it was perfectly consistent with the prevailing doctrines of republicanism in Australia. For those colonists who advocated a republic before 1856, the notion of a republic was often inspired by the English revolutionary experience of the seventeenth century. This language, the language which also inspired many of the American revolutionaries, was not directed against the monarchy. Subsequently, in colonial New South Wales, loyalty to the throne and an expressed support for a republic were not necessarily antithetical. Just as Lang had no qualms about expressing his loyalty, the Sydney crowds who cheered Robert Lowe's threat of republican independence in 1849 had no difficulty marching behind the Union Jack and singing 'God Save the Queen'. This was because republicanism in early colonial Australia was fundamentally different to the republicanism articulated in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a fact which should not surprise us, given that the British monarchy during these years was not a nostalgic, largely theatrical 'other' but the very symbol of the colonists' right to be granted liberal democratic institutions. For the early colonists, the republic was not the cry of anti-British nationalists but more often the protective rhetorical strategy of British loyalists who wished to uphold their right to resist arbitrary rule.

Once we appreciate the enormous variety of republican thought in our past, we are more able to accept that republicanism in its various forms has had considerable impact on the evolution and development of our political institutions. During the first years of my research, when I began to look beyond the radical republican texts of the nineteenth century into the columns of the colonial press, especially during the critical decades before the granting of responsible government in 1856 and Federation in 1901, I found that the theme of a republic had pervaded most political discourse. It was not that I had uncovered any lost republican movement. Rather, I had realised two important aspects of the way in which republican debate had functioned. First, even though self-described republicans were a minority in Australian history, in the context of the debates which

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led to responsible government and Federation this minority had been the catalyst for a broad debate about the merits of republican government. The explicit debate may have originated from a stump in the Domain but it had ended up in the public culture of pre-Federation Australia. Secondly, I had been surprised by the extent to which the vast majority of colonial reformers between 1830 and the 1880s had successfully relied on the threat of a republic as a bargaining chip in their dealings with the Colonial Office. Such threats had been instrumental in ending the transportation of convicts to the colonies and securing the granting of responsible government.

Following the peaceful attainment of responsible government in 1856, the republicanism which emerged in the late nineteenth century was always going to be different from that which had been expressed before. Whereas republicanism in the early colonial period was most often justified as an antidote for tyranny or as the only means to citizenship and constitutional rule, the Australian nationalist republicanism of the 1880s and 1890s relied on different justifications. In these years, the republic was often justified as cheap and efficient—a predominantly utilitarian and pragmatic argument which also surfaced in England—largely because it was England that bore the cost of the civil list. Equally, Australians justified the republic as a form of autonomy. Essentially, this derived from the axiom of nineteenth-century nationalism that all nations should be self-governing. By the late 1880s republicanism was linked with an aggressive anti-British nationalism together with political philosophies such as socialism and secularism. It was during these years that a belligerent minority managed to provoke a wide-ranging debate on the republic, the breadth of which has not previously been acknowledged. In 1901 the prospect of a republic was effectively quashed by Federation under the Crown, but it was also true that many of those who participated in the Federation debates during the 1890s believed that an Australian republic was inevitable. After 1901 there was a significant lull in republican sentiment. While the reasons for this were varied, by far the most powerful was the fear of foreign invasion and the associated belief that the British connection offered the best possible protection for Australia's white Pacific enclave. White Australia and the British connection were inseparable for the first sixty years of the Federation.

After Governor-General Sir John Kerr dismissed Prime Minister Gough Whitlam in 1975, the idea of a republic was focused on the Office of Governor-General in the Federal Constitution. Rightly or wrongly, Sir John Kerr's action did much to encourage the perception that to become a republic Australia merely had to sever its links with the monarchy and replace the Governor-General with an Australian president. In the 1990s republicans such as George Winterton would argue that Australia was a