

Govt heeds republican call for civics education

ATTORNEY-GENERAL Margaret Wilson has announced plans for an independent commission to create a public education programme on constitutional issues.

Her announcement came the day after the Republican Movement called on the Government to sponsor a public education campaign on grassroots participation in our nation's constitution.

In a paper for the Building the Constitution conference in Wellington last month, the movement also asked the Government to encourage public debate on the methods and merits of moving to a republic.

The movement was seeking the conference's support for a "civics education" programme in schools and the community, and the conference's endorsement of an eventual "informed and consensual" move to a republic.

Republican Movement president Dave Guerin welcomed Ms Wilson's plans: "It is not good enough for government — good or bad — to be veiled from the public. And it is veiled now, because the Government doesn't show people how the system works, and how to get involved."

Public education would show New Zealanders how the system worked, in all its tattered glory, allowing people to make up their own minds about the future of the New Zealand constitution, he said.

"Sure, I hope that they'll come to the view that a British monarch is no longer the best head of state for us — that the key symbol of our national identity should be a New Zealander who shares our values. But I believe that people can discover that for themselves, by learning about our constitution.

"I'm delighted that the attorney-general has proposed an education campaign on public participation in government and the constitution, as we requested in our conference paper."

The Republican Movement conference paper is on the website at www.republic.org.nz/documents/ccpaper.pdf.

Woman's Weekly displays its colours

REGULAR *New Zealand Woman's Weekly* readers would be "aghast" that the country was moving towards republicanism, this month's editorial says.

"After all, this magazine does feature the British royal family in one way or another almost every issue — and if you didn't like the royals, I'm sure you'd be the first to let me know," editor Rowan Wakefield writes. "Those for republicanism say Her Maj is out of touch and no longer relevant to New Zealand life. But I have to ask, was she ever?"

The magazine acknowledges that a republic is a case of "when and not if", pointing to the Building the Constitution conference as the latest indication of New Zealand "turning its back on its English heritage".

"It is clear the nation is just as divided as our politicians over our connection with the Queen," writer Judith Thompson says. "What the Queen herself thinks of the prospect of more of her subjects deserting her is anybody's guess."

spoken

"I have nothing in particular against the royal family or other titled members of the British aristocracy except that what they represent is a pecking order based on some people being born superior to others."

— golfer Greg Turner

"While I have a fond affection for the Queen and the monarchy, I don't know if it's relevant to today's modern times to have her as our head of state. It should come up for public debate in the next few years."

— Wairarapa MP Georgina Beyer

"Ever since Prince Charles became an anti-genetic engineering campaigner, I've become an admirer ... But we should move toward becoming a republic, as part of becoming a genuinely independent nation."

— Green MP Sue Kedgley

"It seems to me that the Imperial Society of Knights Bachelor is like a Volkswagen owners' club. The only thing they've got in common is their Volkswagens. I don't know what they'll have to talk about, to be honest."

— Sir Robert Jones

"I never wanted to be a dame, because I already was one."

— former MP Sonja Davies

"People have construed the [Privy Council] issue in terms of colonialisation. I'm much more pragmatic than that. I think it's an expensive affectation in the legal system. We should be looking to ensure your average citizen has access to justice."

— Attorney-Genl Margaret Wilson



Building the Constitution conference

NEW ZEALAND'S links with the British monarchy are threadbare and archaic, the Building the Constitution Conference in Wellington was told.

The conference kicked off last month with endorsements of eventual moves to a republic, in speeches from Prime Minister Helen Clark and former prime minister Jim Bolger, now ambassador to Washington DC.

Business Roundtable head Roger Kerr argued that republican calls were themselves archaic and better-suited to the colonialism debates of the 1960s.

New Zealand would soon be confronted with proposals for greater internationalisation like dropping New Zealand currency in favour of the US dollar, he said.

But former Cabinet minister Deborah Morris told the conference that it was the monarchy that was archaic: "This debate is about our national identity, and I think for many young people the link back to Britain is

extremely threadbare," she said. "One of our greatest assets in New Zealand is being seen as an independent state of Aotearoa, New Zealand."

She pointed to survey evidence (New Zealand Study of Values, 1999) that support for a republic doubled from 16% in 1989 to 32% in 1998, and that opposition fell from 61% to 39%.

Republican Movement president Dave Guerin, a sanctioned observer at the conference, said the debate would be an outstanding success if it got people on the street talking about the constitution and a republic.

"Talk in the hallowed chambers is not enough — we need talk in pubs, in cafes, at hui and on street corners. I want to hear you ask, 'what does the monarchy mean to me personally?'"

"The figures show that New Zealanders increasingly want a head of state who is a Kiwi, who understands their values. And the constitutional experts at the conference are thinking about it, how it can be done. Now we just need to pull it all together so New Zealand as a whole is fully participating in the debate," he said.

"I have no doubt that when people begin to get involved in how the country runs, they will see the strengths and weaknesses of the current system. And in some areas of the constitution,

they will discover that the emperor has no clothes."

Parliament's Speaker, Jonathan Hunt, said the only anthem he heard when he was growing up in New Zealand was 'God Save the Queen'. "Now of course — though it's not the greatest tune in the world — our own national anthem brings a tear to the eyes of many people."

Mr Kerr said republicanism came into the "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" category. "I'm very fearful of a sort of Tasmanian scenario where we slowly drop off the face of the world in terms of international interest in us."

But Professor Jock Brookfield, of Auckland University, said that in regard to Treaty matters, "the constitution is broke, and something has to be done about that. And the right time to do it is when we move from a governor-general to a president."

Regarding a constitutional crisis, he said: "However unlikely this sort of crisis may be, we ought to be able to solve it in this country, within a defined constitution."

Constitutional lawyer Dr Alison Quentin-Baxter said that if New Zealand did become a republic with a president, then the country should consider vesting powers where they actually lay in reality, not where they lay in law.

the way forward

Dave Guerin

This year's ANZAC day provided a rare example of consensus in national identity.

Prime Minister Helen Clark's attendance at Gallipoli meant that the cameras were there in force to report on the young New Zealanders who every year make the pilgrimage to Gallipoli.

Of course, the secondary school students who won Helen Clark's essay competition were also there, and were media favourites for their thoughtful reflections on who we are as a nation.

While the republic wasn't mentioned once — not even by us — you could sense it in the air, along with a growing confidence in our national identity.

Ambassador The Onya Jim Bolger

NEW ZEALAND'S ambassador to Washington DC, Jim Bolger, is our second Onya winner.

He told the Building the Constitution conference that the issue of republicanism should not be allowed to die down.

"The role of the monarchy has evolved very rapidly over recent years, as has the role of the governor-general. It is a rite of passage to keep that momentum moving forward — it doesn't have to be fast."

While New Zealand's most recent

Governors-General had performed well, he said they would have had far more mana internationally if they had been president of New Zealand, rather than representing the monarch in London.

In 1994 Mr Bolger, while prime minister, called for New Zealand to start considering the issue of a republic.

Last month's inaugural Onya winner was Gallipoli national essay competition winner Anthony McMahon, of St Patrick's College Silverstream.

The Roll of Onya is displayed at www.republic.org.nz/onya.htm.