

Constitutional Inquiry

PRIME Minister Helen Clark announced a constitutional inquiry on November 13, saying that "with the best will in the world I find it hard to see how our current arrangements reflect the identity of proud, independent, 21st century New Zealand". The word "republic" did not come up in her speech, though, and she later called the inquiry a simple "stocktake".

Peter Dunne, the inquiry's chairperson, suggested that any change was some time off, but the inquiry could set the scene for a republican debate. He emphasised, as he has consistently done, the need for a public debate and referendum on the republic.

Clark has kept her distance from the republican issue though, ensuring that it wasn't in the terms of reference and emphasising in interviews that the terms of reference do not ask the inquiry to recommend any changes. Dunne said, however, that "if we identify a process for undertaking change, we are obliged to indicate where we think change might be required".

Don Brash, National leader, was sceptical about the PM's motive for the inquiry, saying that "we see this whole issue as a political tactic on the prime minister's part to bury the Treaty of Waitangi substantially until after the election and to move towards her long-term goal of making New Zealand into a republic". National decided not to participate in the inquiry after a few days consideration.

Winston Peters, NZ First leader, decided not to participate straight away, having not got his way in the interminable negotiations over the inquiry's terms of reference. Incidentally, the Republican Movement has not been able to identify any republican MPs in NZ First. We'll give a bottle of wine to the first person with evidence to the contrary.

Rod Donald, Greens co-leader, attacked Dunne for being biased on the Treaty, the Greens and even the republic – the last one was a little surprising as the Greens are pretty biased towards a republic too – but still acknowledged that Dunne was usually a fair chair.

Act will participate in the inquiry, but Rodney Hide said that "Helen Clark's constitutional debate is all about carving up the economic cake rather than providing the conditions for baking a bigger one. Her aim is to make New Zealand a socialist republic rather than a free and prosperous country."

The wider debate is still some way off and public response to the stocktake will influence how willing MPs are to take the issues further.

How the inquiry will work

ALL parties will be represented on the inquiry (if they want a seat, that is), which will be chaired by United Future Leader Peter Dunne.

The committee will be asked to review how NZ's constitutional arrangements have developed and to analyse the current arrangements. It will look at how other countries have carried out constitutional reform and recommend how New Zealand might do it, if change is desired in the future.

The committee should report back before the next general election, which can be held in September 2005 at the latest.

A separate "public dialogue" process will be run by the State Services Commission on the Treaty of Waitangi.

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"It's a stocktake, it's a setting of the scene. Beyond that there would have to be some political will to set up some further form of inquiry, so it's very tentative at this point."

—Prime Minister, Helen Clark

"...by Clark's cautious standards, today's announcement is a bold step, given she will have to weather headlines shouting that republicanism is back on the agenda"

—NZ Herald Political Correspondent, John Armstrong

"It's hard for me to avoid the conclusion this is a political gimmick."

—National Ldr, Don Brash

"We're not joining in a process which is really a complicated exercise in deception. We're just not wasting any time with what is a road to nowhere and a propaganda spin campaign by this Government."

—NZ First Leader, Winston Peters

"Constitutional laws should not be changed quickly or casually, but neither should they be preserved in formaldehyde. It is one thing to respect the past and quite another to dwell in it."

—Journalist, Gordon McLauchlan

"Can some sort of model of modern constitutional application be devised...to await the day the country is ready to accept it? Probably it cannot be devised by a committee of MPs but a well-chosen commission might manage it."

—Editorial, NZ Herald



Former G-Gs Lead the Charge

TWO former Governors-General led the charge to a republic last weekend, leaving only one former Governor-General still backing the monarchy. The present one, understandably, did not comment.

Sir Paul Reeves (1985-90) said that his knighthood had become part of him since he got it in 1984, but "if renouncing knighthoods was a prerequisite to being a citizen of a republic, I think it would be worth it".

Dame Cath Tizard (1990-96) said she supported a republic in principle

and, as governor-general, had discussed the issue with the Queen: "She is quite sanguine about these things. She has always said it is a decision for New Zealand to make, and 'whatever decision New Zealand makes, of course we would accept it'."

Sir Michael Hardie-Boys (1996-2001) was still in the Queen's corner said "if it ain't broke, don't fix it".

The support of former Governors-General is new, but two former Prime Ministers also support a republic, as does the current one. Jim Bolger,

however, remains the only Prime Minister to actively support a republic while in office. Helen Clark has chosen a more conservative course, picking off some trappings of monarchy, but reluctant to push the underlying issue.

It is important, though, that many of those who have got nearest to the top position in New Zealand support a republic. If even those who have the closest relationship with the Queen are comfortable with change, it shows the way for us all.

Is the Stealth Mode Now Off?

by Dave Guerin

HAS the stealth mode finally been turned off on Labour's drive for a republic? Will Labour now make a real push on nationhood as they stride confidently towards a third term? Well, no, not really.

Helen Clark has taken some major strides upon the road to a republic. She has made symbolic changes like the removal of knighthoods and damehoods. She has made substantial changes, such as the establishment of the Supreme Court. She has even pushed the odd grassroots action, like her annual essay competition for school students based around some major war anniversary. If she does not have another term, she will go down in republican history as someone who conscientiously tidied up constitutional and national identity issues that were not finished by Jim Bolger.

That may seem harsh, but there are two reasons why it is so. The first is that she has done all of it herself, along with her Ministers. There has been no debate and precious little public involvement. No republican arguments were used for the Supreme Court establishment until the last week before the Bill was passed, when things started looking rosey.

The second reason is that, to become a republic or enhance national identity, a PM must put his or her mana on the line and encourage people to take the step with them. Jim Bolger was willing to do that, but his party was not. Neither Helen Clark nor her party are willing to push the issue at present, and they do not appear to have the heart for it in any case. It is just not important enough for them.

The constitutional inquiry suffers from the low risk approach taken to recent constitutional/nationhood changes. In those cases, executive power or a Parliamentary majority could be employed, but the road to a republic will involve enthusing people around a vision for the nation. That vision is simply not evident at the moment.

That doesn't mean that we should throw the inquiry back into the water for being below constitutional size. This inquiry is the first official opportunity to explore a republic in this country – even if it doesn't say so in the terms of reference. Looking on the bright side, Clark has called republicans' bluff. If we want her to push for a republic, we've got to go out and show that it's politically feasible. That is a big challenge for us and one that I hope that you will all take on in the coming months.

National Council

THE Republican Movement's AGM on 11 August 2004 included the election of a new National Council.

Dave Guerin was re-elected as president, and 3 national councillors were also elected: David Farrar, Lewis Holden and Savage.

David Farrar manages a polling and research company, and has worked in Parliament for 8 years.

Lewis Holden is a law and commerce student at Victoria University and maintains the one and only New Zealand republican blog at www.holdenrepublic.org.nz.

Savage was the first Republican Movement president and is a freelance writer and filmmaker.

The Republican Movement would like to thank the previous councillors Paul Williams and Evan Roberts for all of their support.

Kiwis & Kangaroos

THE TRANS-TASMAN relationship has picked up over the past month, with Dave Guerin, Republican Movement president, recently meeting the Australian Republican Movement national director in Sydney. The following week, the ARM chairperson was in Wellington on business and was able to meet with three members of the National Council. We will be drawing upon the recent Australian experience with their Senate Inquiry for our Constitutional Inquiry.

