modernist project. It can be seen as reflecting a Kantian, rationalist epistemology in which knowledge unfolds in a pattern of eternal and unchallengeable truths derived from objective scientific enquiry (Kelly 1995: 74). To Kelly, this is fundamentally undemocratic, even anti-democratic, as it is unable to accommodate questioning of the prevailing orthodoxy. Indeed, this form of rationalist epistemology can be directly linked to the worst excesses of what he calls the ‘politics of knowledge’ - totalitarianism, and the wars, ethnic cleansing and genocide perpetrated in the name of the nation-state (1995: 78).

In Kelly’s view of democracy, the individual human being possesses worth in his or her own right having a distinctive personality and character, not merely as a participant in rationality or the owner of a rational mind. The epistemological perspective of the Enlightenment now presents an obstacle to the further deepening of democracy (Mouffe 1993: 10). Real or ‘deep’ democracy can accommodate a range of views and opinions, which may not always conform to those approved by society, or even the majority of society. Kelly draws sustenance for his view of democracy from postmodernist ideas as they provide a view of knowledge which, in rejecting all forms of universality, acknowledges individual differences of perception and plurality of values, and recognise the dangers of manipulation through the control of discourse. At the same time, they are able to ‘proclaim the potential empowerment of every individual and to provide a sound theoretical base for co-operative action’ (Kelly 1995: 72).

Postmodern thinking, as a rejection of universals and as an acceptance of difference appears to be on the side of democracy (Kelly 1995: 70). Of course, this view can be seen as being altogether too generous to postmodernism by attributing it with qualities it does not have. Its destructive qualities may be seen to be in direct conflict with the progressive nature of democracy. To many on the left, the rise of postmodernism sits far too comfortably with the ascendancy of neo-liberalism. The possibility of democratic social transformation becomes more problematic when postmodernist talk amounts to little more than conversation, ‘a sound and fury amounting to nothing at all’ (Brosio 1994: 616). Postmodernism thus becomes part of the problem, rather than a solution. In a similar vein, Pearl and Knight are
critical of postmodernists who are happy to engage in discourse, but view any specific action with deep suspicion (1999: 25).

A second, and more obvious problem with the democratic potential of postmodernism is that democracy itself can be viewed as an example of the totalising theory which postmodernism rejects, and thus postmodernism cannot endorse democracy. It makes the very claims for truth and universality of knowledge Kelly suggests threatens the life of democracy. After all, ‘democracy’ appears to the only form of political organisation given serious consideration by the world at the start of the twenty first century. However, this is a ‘one size fits all’ view of democracy. It is democracy as symbolism rather than substance. It is democracy seen as an organising mechanism, rather than a way of living. It reverts to Schumpeter’s view of democracy as merely a political method rather than an endorsement, an insistence on fundamental principles of freedom, equality, human rights and popular sovereignty. ‘Democracy as method’ of the type proudly practised in many contemporary political settings presents a distorted view of its own underlying principles as being unchallengeable and unproblematic. In this way, it can be seen as fundamentally anti-democratic. Too often, contemporary liberal-democracies hold pluralism and diversity of opinion to be central tenets, while in fact punishing or at best tolerating diversity (Parker 1996: 192). Even Brosio is prepared to mitigate his skepticism about postmodernism to some extent if it establishes a plurality of sites from which voices can be heard as this is of great educational and political importance in a democracy (1994: 618).

In these ways, postmodernist ideas reinforce, rather than undermine the model of democracy advocated here. In a strong, open and deep democracy, values are not simply accepted but are themselves problematic (Kelly 1995: 83). There is a need to stimulate on-going debate about what democracy may be. Kelly’s views are reinforced by E. H. Carr’s stinging reminder that when we speak of democracy as something we have possessed for many centuries we are guilty of self-deception, and ‘we would have a far more convincing slogan if we spoke of the need, not to defend democracy, but to create it’ (Carr 2000: 13).
How persistent is the questioning demanded by the Discovering Democracy Program? An encouraging start is offered by the responsible Minister, David Kemp in his comment that ‘effective democracy is not a static, inflexible concept, but a dynamic active principle that needs to be continuously cultivated, adapted and revitalised’ (Discovering Democracy 1997b: 5). One wonders whether Kemp is aware of the strong similarity between his statement and that of Dewey (1961) who called on the meaning and idea of democracy to be constantly discovered and rediscovered, to be remade and reorganised. Yet, on another level, this is less surprising because as Brosio suggests, Dewey’s progressivism presented little threat to orthodox liberal-democratic/capitalist society (1994: 513). However, once a more rigorous examination of Discovering Democracy is conducted these hopeful signs are cast into doubt. Hirst brings us back to earth with a jolt with his blunt observation that in Australia, ‘Our citizens don’t rule — they elect other citizens to rule’ (1998: 1).

There is little evidence of a willingness to look forwards to further reform and transformation of the system of Australian democracy within Discovering Democracy. As we saw in Chapter Six, the emphasis is on looking backwards to the struggles of Suffragists or Chartists that have brought us to where we are now. What struggles lie in the future for Australian democracy? As I argued in Section 6.4, Discovering Democracy adopts a largely minimalist view of citizenship. Citizenship is cast in the light of encouraging Australians to exercise their existing rights and responsibilities as citizens. A section entitled ‘What is Political Activity?’ (Discovering Democracy 1998b: 103) reflects a fear to confront politics head on. There is little indication as to how citizens might develop an informed, reasonable and responsible political conception of their interests as members of a democratic society (Hogan and Fearnley-Sander 1999: 58). While raising the possibility that political situations may arise at school (although even here, the situation is actually at the local bus stop rather than within the school grounds) the treatment is too brief and superficial to provide students with any meaningful insight into the nature of political engagement. For instance in one example, students are ‘hanging around’ at a local bus-stop disturbing other waiting passengers, yet the politics involved are not confronted. In this situation, a ‘good result’ is one in which peace is restored, and the ‘fuss dies down’ (Discovering Democracy 1998b: 104). Issues of power or
justice are not mentioned and existing power relationships are disguised or 
reproduced in the name of tolerance. Notions of conflict and ideology are largely 
invisible. Politics disappears to be replaced by, to use Giroux's words, a 'façade of 
elections and plebiscites' so characteristic of many attempts to reinvigorate civics 
and citizenship education in contemporary liberal-democracies (1983: 237). Above 
all, a civil society is a peaceful society, and citizenship is a demonstrated ability to 
get along with each other. While it is legitimate to argue in this way, it forms an 
extremely distorted view as to what politics is, and provides a shaky basis on which 
students can develop an understanding of the nature of political activity and 
democratic citizenship.

To be fair, the difficulties faced by Discovering Democracy should not be 
underestimated here, and provide a reminder of the political dimensions of civics 
and citizenship education. Throughout the Discovering Democracy Program, it is 
evident that political considerations presented a challenge for the writers. This is 
because, on the one hand, good citizenship can be seen as the ability of citizens to 
live together in harmonious communities, while on the other, it is also associated 
with active participation in struggles and campaigns for rights and justice. In terms 
of the example mentioned in the previous paragraph, the first view results in the 
'fuss' dying down, while the second results in the causes of the fuss being 
identified, addressed and resolved. There is obvious tension between these two 
views. Can good citizenship be both 'nice and nasty'? And as Pring (1999) asks, 
should citizenship education get 'political'? This is a recurring dilemma for civics 
and citizenship education. It is the prissy form of citizenship and overt nationalism 
reflected in earlier forms of civics education that has been associated with its 
decline. Moreover, Chapter Five cast serious doubts over the effectiveness of such 
approaches in either increasing the levels of civic knowledge, or altering levels of 
citizen participation. For these reasons, contemporary models of citizenship 
education such as Discovery Democracy have realised a need to move beyond the 
citizen as the acquiescent patriot. However at the same time, there is the sense of 
moral panic surrounding contemporary societies that are undergoing what Francis 
Fukuyama calls, the 'great disruption' (1999) that calls for educational strategies 
that aim to calm and settle, rather than stimulate and agitate. 'Nice, tolerant' 
situations are portrayed as producing a 'win-win' outcome. 'Nasty, political'
situations often produce a ‘win-lose’ one. Discovering Democracy tries to cover both bases, but is unable to provide a convincing picture of either. For example, it cites civil rights struggles in the USA, the Franklin Dam dispute and the Eureka Rebellion in which civil disobedience was a crucial strategy in bringing the issue to a head, so can students infer from this that breaking the law is a legitimate tactic of active citizenship? While such a query may invite accusations that it cannot be seen in such black and white terms, or that such case studies need to be placed in their proper historical context, it is likely that many adolescents see such matters in such ‘simplistic’ terms.

In profiling a range of ‘politically active Australians’, again a safe approach is adopted by returning to the traditional politics of large national institutions. Moreover, the strongly historical flavour of the materials is brought to the fore by selecting people such as Ben Chifley (1885-1951), Edith Cowan (1861–1932), Jessie Street (1889–1970) and Sir Doug Nicholls (1906-88) for study. Citizenship is regarded as a product of history and the legal system, and citizens are those who have gone before (Gill and Reid 1999). The printed materials do not select any living Australians for students to consider, and while the accompanying videotape does interview more contemporary figures, they represent organisations far removed from the experiences of the Lower Secondary (Years 7 and 8) students the materials are directed towards.

In appointing the prominent Australian history academic, John Hirst, Chair of its Civics Education Group, the Howard government made no secret of its desire to strengthen the historical tone of Discovering Democracy. In reference to the teaching of our parliamentary institutions, Hirst notes:

To watch parliament seizing power from the monarch is the best way of understanding the positions they now occupy. It would be very hard to explain, without the recourse to history, that a bill needs royal assent before it becomes law and that the assent is always given. (Discovering Democracy 1997a: vii)

This reflects Hirst’s view that the best way to teach civics and citizenship to young people is to move from what could be described as the ‘unknown to the known’. He
does not share Enslin's concern that a focus on the myths of nationhood is 'at odds with the education of the citizen as an autonomous person with the capacity for critical thinking' (2000: 81). More powerfully, Davidson parodies Hirst's view of the strange birth of Australian democracy, by arguing it was 'still born' (1997: 217). Hirst wants, in his words, to 'blow students' minds' by starting with the story of King Canute, and he defends the relevance of Aboriginal children in the Pilbara studying Charles I (Discovering Democracy 1999a: 8). This also demonstrates the higher priority Hirst wants to place on the knowledge or 'civics' component of citizenship education. Other policy makers shared this emphasis on civic knowledge. Sue Ferguson, Project Director of the Discovering Democracy Program, recalls that in a planning meeting of the Civics Education Group, Parliamentary Secretary, and later Howard Government Minister, Tony Abbott, 'kept on talking about a text book . . . that he thought what we [the Curriculum Corporation] would do is produce a text book, and the kids would read it.' She also related a meeting in which Group member, Greg Craven noted that he thought the Curriculum Corporation would produce the materials and teachers would 'just follow them slavishly'. When I suggested to Ferguson that such comments showed that many politicians, policy makers and academics had little understanding of the practical demands of modern education, she replied it showed they had, 'none at all . . . absolutely none' (Ferguson, interview 2000). In recounting the tension that existed between policy makers and the Curriculum Corporation, at least in the planning stages of Discovering Democracy, Ferguson went on to say that the Corporation had to explain to policy makers such as Abbott that such an envisaged 'textbook approach' simply would not be appropriate in many contemporary Australian educational settings.

Ferguson suggested a similar process of 'educating the experts' occurred in relation to the Group's Chair, John Hirst. While generally complimentary of Hirst's role as Chair, Ferguson expressed some frustration at what she perceived as a desire to personally shape the Discovering Democracy materials. Having a clearly stated wish to restore a stronger knowledge base to Discovering Democracy, Hirst wanted to have a 'hands on' role in the school materials to prevent the Program being taken in directions he wanted to avoid. To then be informed by the Curriculum Corporation (the nation's premier curriculum development organisation) that such
an approach 'will not go and the kids won't learn' (Ferguson, interview 2000) presents Hirst with a major dilemma. How could Hirst, a self-proclaimed 'untrained teacher' (Discovering Democracy 1999a: 8) insist that the knowledge component of the Program be advanced in the face of the pedagogical expertise of the Curriculum Corporation? He acknowledged this difficulty in his comment that the Discovering Democracy materials had to be 'teachable', and that he was quite willing to recognise the skills and experience of the Curriculum Corporation in the preparation of the Discovering Democracy materials (Hirst, interview 2000).

As we saw in Chapter Four, an overemphasis on knowledge has been identified as one of the major reasons civics and citizenship education went into period of decline over the past thirty years. Despite this, Hirst has a desire to 'blow students' minds' with stories, characters and events from time periods and places far removed from the everyday existence of young Australians' lives. When I pointed this out to Hirst in 1997, he replied,

Our agenda and strategy are different from yours. We are briefed to do history (which is not your approach). I recognise the problem you highlight but my view is you make politics more interesting by transferring the issue to remote and distant regions. Give students an intellectual challenge. Don't let them set the agenda otherwise you'll be stuck with the immediate, the local, the mean.

He concludes somewhat ambiguously:

Your approach is closer to what is regarded as good sense, but we are on different paths. Good luck to you. It's a bloody hard task. Let's try all ways (Hirst 1997).

Under the influence of the Curriculum Corporation, Hirst's position shifted somewhat. By acknowledging the need for the materials to be 'teachable' he deferred to the expertise of the Corporation, the body charged with producing the materials for school use. While still maintaining the need to privilege the knowledge component of civics and citizenship education ahead of those concerned with skills, attitudes and values, he declared that if young Australians did not know that there are 148 members in the House of Representatives, 'that's not something
I'd be worried about' (Hirst, interview 2000). Instead, he suggested broader principles of democratic government such as the independence of the judiciary and basic tenets of the Westminster system are of greater relevance, and that students should acquire such knowledge, not just by learning it, but also by activity and inquiry. This concession seems fortunate given Tudball's observation that the knowledge component is the aspect of civics and citizenship education of least interest to teachers, and the tendency of teachers to 'hunt and peck' through *Discovering Democracy* in search of those parts considered to be of most relevance and interest (Tudball, interview 2000).

In the materials designed for middle secondary students, the section entitled, 'Getting Things Done' (*Discovering Democracy* 1998a: 171) examines 'how ordinary Australians can make a difference in a democracy'. Here the early 1980s fight to save the Franklin River in Tasmania is used as a case study in Australian political action. It provides a comprehensive explanation of the issue, and allows students ample opportunities to express their views on the effectiveness and fairness of the outcome. Yet, once more the issue is a relatively safe one. While the events of the Franklin Dam were probably part of the lived experience of those who prepared the materials, viewed from a student's perspective, it is an historical event, far removed from their lives. It seems that contested matters can only be handled through the safe veil of history (Gill and Reid 1999: 35). The *Discovering Democracy* Units make no genuine attempt to 'Get Things Done' that may address issues and concerns of immediate interest to adolescent Australians. As well, as minimal citizenship, it is delayed citizenship. The omission of young people from the *Discovering Democracy* Program reinforces the notion that adulthood is the necessary precondition for Australian citizenship. It is argued here that this may add to the feelings of alienation and disenchantment that are contributing factors to Australia's civic deficit.

Wise and Baron (1999) take a more maximalist approach to citizenship. A major point of divergence within the curriculum materials prepared under the banner of citizenship education is the expectation of *when* citizenship may be exercised. If active participation by citizens is to be encouraged, at what point in life can it reasonably be expected that such participation commence? The strong message
being directed at students by the Discovering Democracy Program is, 'Not Yet'. Restrained, responsible adults, within the boundaries of existing practice, exercise democratic citizenship. Wise and Baron (1999a) devote a chapter entitled 'Getting Involved' to active citizenship exercised by young Australians. The issues considered are of immediate concern to young people, and provide examples of situations in which the actions of young people can exercise citizen efficacy by 'making a difference.' Attention is directed to a 1994 case in which female students at a Melbourne secondary college mounted a campaign to change the school dress code, to allow girls to wear trousers to school (1999: 45). This case, which attracted considerable media attention, resulted in a back down by the school. It was an intensely political situation which models perfectly the ways in which people exercise their rights to effect change in a democracy. Moreover, like many political struggles whether in a local, national or international arena, it was not particularly 'nice'. Tempers frayed, accusations and untruths were spread, and relationships soured. It was a relatively black and white issue, in which no compromise was possible, and clearly, one side of the issue won, and one lost. (See Figure 7.1, p. 202)

This case study clearly brought into the open, rather than disguised, the power relations involved. When confronted by the superior authority of the school administration, the students then empowered themselves further by taking the issue to the media, and threatened to ask the Equal Opportunity Commission to rule on the matter. It brought into sharp focus questions of the role of the school as a place of social reproduction, or a place of emancipation. Most relevantly, it is a situation to which students can immediately relate. It does not seek to fire students’ imaginations with gallant tales of Chartists or the Magna Carta, but rather it involved something Hirst may well think of as 'the immediate, the local, the mean'. The message is clear: students can make a difference, not just in relation to national issues at some date in the distant future, but on issues of immediate concern to personal and group identity.
In 1994 the students at a large Melbourne secondary college invited the media to cover the issue of girls not being allowed to wear trousers to school. Dianne Mitchell was prepared to take her case to the Equal Opportunity Commission when the school decided to alter its policy and allow girls to wear trousers. Dianne’s case also provided a catalyst for change to the dress code plan for government schools.

Figure 7.1: Source: *Give and Take: an issues approach to civics*. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, p. 45.

Similarly, a chapter containing material on the Australian electoral system is presented as a mock election campaign run by Year 9 students. In devising this strategy which has been successfully implemented at a range of Victorian secondary colleges, the authors again sought to reverse Hirst’s idea of starting with the abstract and unknown. Instead of modelling the election on existing Australian political parties, students devise their own party (see Appendix 6). Obviously, this allows students to develop a party philosophy and policies that reflect their own interests and concerns. The entire election can be devised to mirror the stages of an Australian House of Representatives election including the preparation of campaign materials, speeches by candidates for election, How to Vote cards and party publicity materials. However, the crucial step is to move from the ‘known to the unknown’ by having the Australian Electoral Commissions’ Electoral Education Centre (EEC) conduct the election in strict accordance with the rules covering Australian preferential voting. This reinforces students’ understanding of key
elements of the Australian system of election such as compulsory attendance at a polling place, the secret ballot, and most significantly, the operation of full preferential voting. Following a campaign in which members of their own cohort have campaigned to be elected, all students are naturally eager to know ‘who won’. However, if there is no winner on the first preferences (a very likely event given that the election is unlikely to be dominated by one or two candidates), students have to follow an explanation of the preferential system by an EEC representative in order to ascertain the successful candidate.

The notion of persistent questioning is characteristic of a deeper form of democratic citizenship. It is emblematic of the maximalist citizenship this thesis advocates. More significantly, it is citizens who should be posing the questions. Schools provide the most appropriate venue Australia possesses for this questioning to be practised. Indeed, rather than ‘answer the questions’ following the presentation of a slab of propositional or historical knowledge, young Australians should be encouraged more actively to ‘ask the questions’ about their prevailing political cultures and systems of government.

7.2 Defensible stances

Chapter Four drew attention to both the problematic and increasingly fragmented understandings of citizenship within a nation-state. The nation has increasingly come to be seen as a problem in the ‘long peace’ the world has witnessed since the Second World War. Internationalisation, cosmopolitanism and globalism/globalisation are regarded as threats to the nation’s survival. These developments place the governments of sovereign states in a difficult position as on the one hand, they embrace the economic imperative of global markets, while on the other, striving to retain aspects of a distinct national character. How closely can current efforts to revive civics and citizenship education in Australia be linked to a desire to reinvigorate interest in Australia as nation?

Kennedy (1995:16) talks of ‘multiple citizenships’, and urges that ‘much thought needs to be given to conceptions of citizenship education that move beyond the
immediacy of national identity’. Similarly Print (1995a: 9) suggests that increasingly people need to regard themselves as citizens on a range of different levels depending on the context. There is certainly evidence to suggest that educators have taken up Kennedy’s ‘challenge, however it is worth pausing to consider a number of intriguing issues raised by the concept of multiple citizenships. Despite variations in emphasis and interpretation, civics and citizenship education remains closely connected to the nation-state. Whatever else they may incorporate, most Australian curriculum materials prepared to meet the perceived needs of ‘new civics’ in the 1990s and early 2000s inevitably contain references to participation in affairs of state. Voting in elections, understanding the legislative process, joining a pressure group, and the evolution of Australian democracy. These are typical of the matters considered worthy of study. Indeed to bodies such as the Parliamentary Education Office (PEO), and the Electoral Education Centre (EEC), they form the core of their activities. The covers of the Discovering Democracy materials featuring photographs of Edmund Barton, and the Commonwealth Parliament House, provide a clue that the contents is strongly focussed on the evolution and operation of Australia’s formal civic institutions. This is hardly surprising as a program funded by the Commonwealth government, and operating under its imprimatur is not in a strong position to cast doubt over the future viability of the nation-state. The thrust of the materials is to strengthen young Australians sense of identity with the nation, not weaken it.

In introducing the Discovering Democracy Program, David Kemp’s (1997b) Ministerial Statement is laden with words such as ‘we’, and ‘our’. The meaning is clear, and on one level, quite unremarkable. Kemp is unashamedly talking about a particular group of people: ‘Australians’. To which it may be asked: ‘And what’s wrong with that? After all, isn’t that what civics and citizenship is about?’ However, to be told that a major aim of civics and citizenship education is to reinvigorate young Australians’ sense of national belonging, while at the same time recognising the increasingly flexible nature of citizenship adds a somewhat daunting new component to the matter.

If civics and citizenship education is an attempt by educators to convince young people to pick up the national citizenship ‘ball’ again, it may face a difficult task.
As Phillips and Beresfords' (1996) findings suggest, young Australians may have already concluded that, based on the way they see the world, the nation-state is becoming less relevant. Mellor (1998) largely confirms the lack of interest of Victorian secondary students in formal, institutional forms of politics. As we saw in Chapter Four, Crick argues that many of the conventional and innocent-sounding points of departure for citizenship education may take students on a very short or poorly navigated journey. More significantly, they may create a positive distaste for, or resistance to, the content presented to students as education for citizenship (1999: 340).

If we accept that Australians, especially young Australians live with multiple citizenships, the process may be seen as a ‘juggling act’ in which each person tries to keep several types of citizenship in the air at the same time. An individual struggling to express personal identity; a member of a friendship group; a member of an ethnic community; a national citizen; and a global citizen. These are some of the dimensions of multiple citizenship. If the juggling becomes too difficult to maintain, one citizenship ‘ball’ is dropped or dispensed with. This will be the one of least immediate relevance or importance to the ‘juggler’. For many young Australians, this may be citizenship based on national identity. In fact, adolescence may be considered the very worst time for young people to be asked to confront the issue of what it means to be an ‘Australian’. They are trying to establish their own identity to resolve confusion and arrive at a sense of wholeness and uniqueness as a separate person (Evans 1998: 7). Furthermore, while other dimensions of multiple citizenship are to some degree mutable, nationality is something over which adolescents have no control. While it is possible to re-invent ones’ personal identity, for better or worse, we are ‘stuck’ with our nationality. It can be argued that before wading into an analysis of their national identity, adolescents need the opportunity to consider aspects of their own personal identity.

National identity emerges as a prominent theme in Discovering Democracy. However, interestingly, it adopts a less than celebratory tone by suggesting that:
National identity is not something that is fixed and which is clearly understood and accepted by all - it is continually changing. This unit is about some of the factors that make Australia the sort of nation it is and the way we want it to be. *(Discovering Democracy 1998a: 137)*

The ambiguity of this statement lies in the fact that it contains elements of both a 'thick', modernist national identity based up on a single entity called the 'nation', and also a 'thinner', postmodernist concept more consistent with Kelly’s notion introduced in Section 7.1. This sees a genuine democracy allowing citizens the opportunity to exercise their distinctive personalities and characters, capable of freely expressing views as to what sort of society they want to live in.

Issues of national identity are addressed in the section of *Discovering Democracy* entitled, What Sort of Nation? It is here that the Program is at its strongest. To present students with material under a heading posed as a question is encouraging, as it invites open conjecture about matters such as core national values. It implies a freedom of expression that lies at the heart the persistent questioning that is vital to the maintenance and restoration of the health of democratic citizenship. It approaches Gutmann's democratic ideal of citizens sharing in deliberatively determining the future shape of their society (1987: 289), and adopts the discursive nature of democratic conversation Merelman prefers to one that is prescriptive and restricted (1998: 516). In asking students to consider what sort of nation they want to live in, a series of images of Australia is presented as a means of clarifying and understanding Australian national identity and values. An interesting and stimulating selection of images is presented including works by McCubbin, Mary Gilmore, D H Lawrence, Charles Meere and John Brack. Notable is passage from A B Paterson's 'A Bushman's Song' *(Discovering Democracy 1998a: 139):*

I asked a bloke for shearing down on the Marthaguy.
'We shear non-union here', he said. 'I'd call it scab,' said I.
I looked along the shearing board before I chanced to go,
Saw eight or ten dashed Chinamen all shearing in a row.

It was shift, boys, shift, there was not the slightest doubt
It was time to make a shift with leprosy about
So I saddled up my horses and whistled to my dog,
And left the scabby station at the old jig-jog.

Such an image may present a variety of problems for contemporary middle secondary students (and possibly their teachers). Firstly, the level of cultural knowledge required to interpret the passage is quite high. Where or what is the Marthaguy? What is a shearing-board? Are students aware of the importance of the wool industry in Australia's development? Can students and teachers, many of whom have never seen a sheep, let alone been inside a shearing shed, hope to appreciate the context of the poem? Secondly, the overtly political nature of the passage may be difficult to comprehend. The drastic decline in the proportion of workers who have joined trade unions in Australia in recent years is strong evidence of an apparent irrelevancy of unionism in modern Australian workplaces. The notion that a worker who decides not to join a union be referred to as a 'scab' may be perplexing given that a large majority of Australian workers now choose not to join unions. Finally, of course the explicit racism within the passage presents a challenge to any teacher seeking to build an understanding of Australian identity to younger Australians. The bushman prefers the company of his horses and dog to that of the Chinamen.

To extract the 'values' expressed in this sentiment is a subtle and delicate task. The material does not clearly convey an impression that any of the sentiments expressed by Paterson are somehow 'unacceptable' in contemporary Australian society. For instance, a student whose unionist father was involved in a protracted industrial dispute about the use of non-union labour at his workplace may be empathetic to the description of non-union labour as 'scabs'. Delving further, if the non-union labour threatening his father's employment were recently arrived migrants, the student may also empathise with the overt racism of the passage. An exercise following the thirteen images of Australia presented, asks students to decide which ones they believe presents a misleading picture of modern Australia. A further question asks, 'Which of the images come closest to your idea of Australia as a nation today? Explain your answer' (Discovering Democracy 1998a: 142). Presumably a student could select the Paterson poem as most representative of contemporary Australia,
provided an explanation was offered. Moreover, this choice may be made from a range of perspectives. To a member of an ethnic minority who is the subject of racial taunts and vilification, it may simply represent the reality of their life in the suburbs of Australia, while the perpetrator of that abuse may gain succour from the words of one of Australia's greatest poets. This student may declare: 'If it's good enough for Banjo Paterson, it's good enough for me'.

Later in the same unit, a range of contemporary issues is used as a means of examining and clarifying students' understanding of national values. The role of the market in modern Australia; globalisation; and the distribution of wealth and income are all addressed. In each case, students are asked to think about, and respond to a range of situations such as the question: 'Is it better to have cheaper goods for the majority of Australians and more unemployment, or more expensive goods and less unemployment?' Similar 'tricky' questions are posed about the role of welfare, changing industrial relations and the power of transnational corporations. It is quite clear, there is no 'correct' answers to these questions. Students are encouraged to examine relevant source materials, think about the issues raised and respond according to their own feelings. In this way their own values are expressed and clarified.

While I feel quite comfortable with this approach, it does raise some questions about the role of civics and citizenship education in the national identity debate and democratic citizenship. If students, and Australian citizens, are encouraged to have open minds about issues such as the fairness of income and wealth distribution, is it acceptable for them to adopt the same approach to matters such as race and gender? In dealing with controversial issues, Discovering Democracy emphasises the importance of students formulating 'defensible stances'. Part of this is an insistence that all points of view be heard (Discovering Democracy 1998c: 3). Advice to teachers accompanying the Program materials states that students should be given the opportunity to make informed choices about issues of importance to themselves and others. Somewhat ambiguously, it then suggests that while Discovering Democracy should promote broadly agreed democratic values, the materials will offer ways that 'teachers can approach contested issues through disciplined inquiry and reflection' (Discovering Democracy 1998c: 3). Based on a knowledge of
Australian history, literature and politics, it is quite possible for a student to construct a defence of the White Australia Policy, yet how likely is it that it will be as 'defensible' as the student who defends tolerance and diversity? Can one 'defend the indefensible' in contemporary Australia? Discovering Democracy suggests it is possible to defend increased taxation of the wealthy; defend increased levels of tariff protection for Australian industry; and defend state funded welfare as an automatic right granted to all citizens. However if we are to encourage such defences, and the implied criticism of orthodox political and economic views they contain, we must also be willing to tolerate defences of views on social and cultural matters some may find uncomfortable.

However, accepting such a view of defensible stances may be difficult to sustain in practice. In calling for a strengthening of the ability of the nation 'hold' its citizens, to provide enduring social cohesion, Miriam Dixson in her book, The Imaginary Australian (1999) constructs a defence of a core Australian culture, loosely based on the 'old' Anglo-Celtic tradition. Keenly aware that she is in a sensitive area of the national identity debate, Dixson strenuously avoids polemics, and builds her case on elaborate and refined methodology. It is Dixson's clear intention to move the debate beyond the 'obsessive replays of surface motifs' (1999: 162) to engage more fully with the imaginary areas of a nation's identity. To this end, Dixson employs a range of strategies. Relying heavily on British and European sources with strong Leftist credentials, Dixson constructs her defence of the nation on the work of Tom Nairn, Benedict Anderson, Anthony Smith and Julia Kristeva. When her argument is located in the Australian context, she displays a marked reluctance to directly engage her foes. Making repeated vague references to 'post-structuralists', or the 'post-1970s new class' in Australia, Dixson assumes we know exactly whom she is talking about. While making extensive references to the writers mentioned earlier, Dixson almost refuses to cite any significant Australian sources to support her accusation that new class ideology has 'swept aside an earlier and more affirming focus of Anglo-Celtic core culture' (1999: 169).

By seeking to distance herself from the action in this manner, further problems arise. In November 1999, Dixson appeared as a panelist and speaker at a seminar sponsored by The Age newspaper, entitled 'National Identity: Advance Australia
Where? (The Age 1999). Other speakers included the Federal Treasurer, Peter Costello, cartoonist Michael Leunig, Chairman of the Cape York Land Council, Noel Pearson and Professor of Asian Studies at The University of South Australia, My-Van Tran. Dixson’s more high profile colleagues delivered spirited, witty and in most cases largely predictable addresses. For instance, Pearson’s audience of educated, middle class adults as well as many Melbourne secondary school students could anticipate what they were in for. He did not disappoint, delivering an ‘off the cuff’ evaluation of the links between reconciliation and Australian nation formation. He received a rousing response. Similarly My-Van Tran said precisely what one would expect her to say. ‘For me, multiculturalism poses no conflict with national identity, it only adds value to it. In fact multiculturalism, in its inclusive sense is very crucial to our developing nationhood and Australian identity’ (Tran 1999). In contrast, Dixson delivered a dense and somewhat ponderous speech including numerous references to academic literature. The humour, the optimism, the unequivocal endorsement of Australian cultural diversity projected by her fellow speakers was gone. Instead Dixson (1999 b) spoke of fragmentation and disintegration of Australia as a democratic nation. Quoting Professor Don Aitkin, Dixson expressed concern that Australia was no longer one society, but many mini-societies that have the capacity to attract our primary loyalty and sense of belonging at the expense of a sense of loyalty to, or identity with the nation. She received polite applause.

If, as she claims, Dixson wants to reinvigorate greater national dialogue and conversation about issues of Australian identity, she missed a vital opportunity at The Age National Identity seminar. Dixson asks the questions that ‘may not be asked’, and demands that issues be ‘put on the table honestly’. Yet, in what manner could such a process begin? At The Age seminar, Dixson displayed a curious reluctance to become embroiled in the discourse she advocates Australia should have. Rather than stating her arguments in an unconstrained, outspoken manner, Dixson shied at the first hurdle, perhaps for fear of offending her fellow speakers or of being jeered by an audience she suspected (probably with some justification) did not share her views. However, she paid a price for obscurity: personal conversation between a range of young members of the audience and myself suggested few had appreciated or even understood the thrust of Dixson’s comments.
However, the dilemma faced by Dixson is not uncommon. There is real difficulty in putting issues of national identity on the table for open discussion and debate. In 1999, the commercial educational video production company, Video Education Australasia (VEA 1999a) commissioned an independent film company (Rees Films) to produce a video on racism and Australian identity for use in Australian secondary schools. The producer engaged me to act as educational consultant on the project. In planning the film, the producer and I determined it would endeavour to ask some of the questions that ‘may not be asked’. To this end, the film includes a segment relating to racial humour. In the course of an interview in the film, Mary Kalantzis notes that:

You can have a Greek making a joke about a Greek, or an Irish about an Irish (sic) and that’s OK, but when you get a Greek making a joke about an Irishman, or an Irishman about an Englishman, if they’re not feeling equal, if there’s a historic sort of sting to it, people will get offended. (VEA 1999a)

Based on these comments, and based on the spirit of risk-taking I advocate earlier in this Chapter, the producer decided to incorporate some racially based jokes in the film. This decision was taken for several reasons. Firstly, it is fundamentally dishonest to address the issue of a style of humour without including some, albeit rather ‘mild’ examples. Second, Kalantzis’ comment suggests that provided such humour is not used in order to reinforce existing power imbalances, it is acceptable. Finally, it was my view that an adolescent audience would be more likely to engage with a film that was taking issues seriously, and prepared to address them ‘warts and all’ rather than skirt around such matters by producing another piece of media carrying little more than a noble, but oft repeated anti-racism message. In one example, a young Greek man was filmed telling several jokes about his own ethnic and cultural group, while another has a young Sri Lankan telling a joke about the English, the former colonial governors of what was then Ceylon. Both clearly fit Kalantzis’ criteria for acceptable racial based humour, yet both ended up on the cutting room floor when the video reached post-production editing. Clearly, as a producer of educational materials, VEA was not prepared to risk accusations of
perpetuating racial stereotypes with possible adverse consequences on sales of its products.

Throughout this thesis, I have stressed the importance of improving the state of Australian democratic citizenship. Much of this relates to endorsing a form of participation exemplified by the concepts of persistent questioning and the adoption of defensible stances outlined in this Chapter. Both these strategies endorse and encourage the sort of civic nosiness and critical inquiry that is required to confront Giddens' paradox of democracy (Giddens 1999) in Western liberal-democracies. In the manner suggested by Drysek (1996), it adds an element of democratic authenticity to the rather sullied and tired symbolic forms of government that is a major contributing factor to the civic deficit.

None of this is without its risks, and as the examples above show, it is not a view that all are likely to share. Indeed, by now it will be abundantly clear that it is almost anathema to what some see civics and citizenship education as being designed to achieve. However it is fundamentally contradictory to on the one hand, implore greater levels of participation by citizens in their polity, but on the other hand, place anti-democratic restrictions on what that participation may involve. Even a superficial glance at the Discovering Democracy materials reveals democratic turbulence and fervour, a history of persistent questioning, and the adoption of defensible stances. Given such a tradition, it would be paradoxical for governments wishing to restore life to active Australian citizenship, to diminish the significance of such civic behaviour in contemporary Australians.

7.3 Constructing civic knowledge

Hogan and Fearnley-Sander's forthright critique of Discovering Democracy suggests that it is an education for heteronomy rather than moral autonomy and democratic citizenship (1999: 60). While this is a view with which I clearly have sympathy, the difficulties in following Hogan and Fearnley-Sander's prescription should not be underestimated. Clearly, there are difficulties and sensitivities involved in producing a civics and citizenship education program in hard-copy
format. *Discovering Democracy* is designed to be used throughout all States and Territories of Australia, by a huge range of teachers, many of whom have little or no experience in the teaching of such materials; let alone extensive knowledge or either contemporary Australian politics or the theory and history of democratic citizenship. Hogan and Fearnley-Sander’s call for greater focus on civic and moral agency and citizen efficacy rather than civic knowledge, presupposes teachers possessing a good, basic understanding of different models of citizenship, the theoretical foundations of democracy and so on. While to Hogan and Fearnley-Sander, such knowledge may be somewhat passe, it is clearly not to many Australian teachers. This is indicated by a recommendation that professional development of Australian teachers be the major focus of further funding in *Discovering Democracy* Project from the year 2000 onwards (Evaluation of the *Discovering Democracy* Program, 1999).

A further problem that needs careful attention is the difficulty of translating educational ideas and strategies into text. While it is possible to convey ideas relatively easily in relation to the historical and institutional knowledge they are critical of, have Hogan and Fearnley-Sander given adequate consideration as to how to achieve this in relation to the normative principles of power and ‘the social organisation of interests i.e. who gets what and how’ (1999: 58) which they correctly suggest is largely missing from *Discovering Democracy*?

In preparation of materials for civics, citizenship and political education, I have grappled with the difficulties of converting concepts that can readily be explained and contextualised in a classroom into the printed word so that both teachers and students can interpret and apply them in meaningful ways. As pointed out earlier in this Chapter, I would argue this is particularly challenging in the case of citizenship and political education as many of the concepts are of themselves ideological and contentious in nature. For example, *Give and Take - An Issues Approach to Civics* concludes with a chapter entitled ‘Global Citizens’. It attempts to introduce middle secondary school students to some of the implications globalisation may hold for Australian citizens. While it presents some basic material Hogan and Fearnley-Sander would describe as ‘propositional knowledge’, the chapter's basic aim is to stimulate students' thoughts on a range of matters linked to the emergence of global
markets and institutions. Particular attention is devoted to the impact of global or transnational business on Australians as consumers, workers and citizens. The material clearly has a critical edge, in most cases expressed as open-ended questions, rather than statements or assertions. For example, in relation to the possible market power of transnational corporations, the text reads,

A further area of concern about transnational corporations is their ability to influence the decisions of governments. In democratic societies like Australia, we elect governments to make important decisions and run the country to meet the needs of the people. If the people do not like the way the government is performing, they are able to express this view by voting against the government at the next election. This is a fundamental characteristic of a democratic society.

However, what control do we have over large transnational corporations? We did not elect them to a position of power in the same way we elected the government, and we do not have the same ability to remove them in the way we remove governments. And can our governments effectively control the activities of large transnational corporations? Many corporations control far greater amounts of money than many countries and may have the potential to influence government decisions (Wise and Baron 1999: 135).

This passage is followed by a photograph of Microsoft boss, Bill Gates, and Australian Prime Minister John Howard taken during a visit by Gates to Australia (see Figure 7.2, p. 215). The photograph is accompanied by the caption asking students to consider who is the more powerful person, the Australian Prime Minister, or Gates. Arguably, students are offered a significant hint as Gates is photographed holding a large stock-whip, ironically presented to him as a gift by the Australian government. A short activity follows the photo in which students are asked to think about people they see as possessing powerful positions in the world today.

An interesting comparison can be drawn between Give and Take, and Aldous' contribution to civics and citizenship education, Becoming Active Citizens (1996). Both books recognise the importance of multiple citizenship and each concludes
with a chapter relating to membership of a global community. Yet the approaches adopted are starkly different. While Aldous (1996: 132) mentions transnational corporations as an increasingly important global entity, no attempt is made to critically analyse their activities. Her emphasis is on formal, international institutions such as the United Nations (UNO), and the International Court of Justice. The approach is almost entirely descriptive. Aldous devotes a page to an exercise in which students are asked to select one UNO body, and investigate its role and functions. Among the bodies are the World Trade Organisation and the International Monetary Fund.

8.8 John Howard and Bill Gates: Who is the more powerful person?

1 Think of six people you believe have the most power in the world today. (You can list them by the position they hold, or by name if you know it.) Rank them from 1 for the most powerful through to 6.

2 How do the people on your list exercise their power?

3 Do you feel that the person ranked as number 1 has too much power? If so, in what ways could that power be controlled?

Figure 7.2: Source: Give and Take: an issues approach to civics. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press. p. 135.
Leaving aside the dubious level of interest Year 9 or 10 students may have in such organisations, there is no attempt to clarify students’ values as to the relative merits or effectiveness of such bodies.

Of course, the critical approach taken by Wise and Baron can itself be subjected to critical review. It may reflect a form of civic engagement that is now largely obsolete to Gibbins and Reimers’ exponents of postmodern expressivist politics (1999), a ‘new tribe’ that has declining trust and confidence in institutions, government, the church and justice (Montgomery 2000: 23). A new politics has emerged in which the traditional ideological divisions reflected in questioning power relationships such as those between national governments and corporations, has been replaced by a form of lifestyle politics and consumer citizenship in which the symbols of Nike and Microsoft take on greater significance than that of national constitutions or flags. In this case, critical questioning of the type described earlier in this Chapter essentially models an archaic form of democratic citizenship, and one that has a dubious place in a contemporary Australian school text. In these circumstances Hirst may well be correct in stating that any analysis of the left and right in 2000, necessarily has to be a historical account (Hirst, interview 2000).

This is clearly the approach adopted by Discovering Democracy. In the section, ‘Parties Control Parliament’, a serious attempt is made to examine the Australian political parties, although as Hirst suggests, it seems the only way in which to tackle this is by means of history. To that end, extensive attention is devoted to times when there was a discernible left and right in Australia such as the 1949 federal election in which ‘socialist ideals’ and ‘free-enterprise values’ (Discovering Democracy 1998a: 27; also see Appendix 7) contested for government. However, contemporary Australian political ideology is largely invisible because in modern Australia ‘it is sometimes hard to pick the difference between left and right parties because both sides have to win votes from people who change their vote from one party to another from one election to the next’ (1998a: 26). While this statement is reasonable in light of the increasingly pragmatic nature of Australian party politics, it provides little insight into the basis of political beliefs, and what factors determine an individual’s political philosophy. More particularly, it does not contribute to students’ understandings of their own political views and values.
Democratic citizenship is diminished if dissenting voices are effectively silenced and politics disappears into a post-ideological zone formed around what De Maria (1999) calls a soft dictatorship based on an artificial consensus of political opinion. In *People, Power and Politics*, and *Give and Take*, prominence is afforded the anti-politics of Pauline Hanson’s One Nation. In Chapter Three of the thesis it was noted that Kennedy (1998) saw civics and citizenship education as a venue for teachers to ‘speak out against the voices of hatred and oppression that are becoming far too common in the Australian community’. It was suggested that Kennedy was referring to Hanson’s One Nation Party. However it is argued here that teachers using the education process in this way do not further the interests of democratic citizenship. In their consistent defence of democratic education, Pearl and Knight effectively argue that a democratic school is not one that ‘sexists, racists and homophobes enter at their peril’ (1999: 55). Of course, this cannot be understood to be an endorsement of bigotry and hatred. Pearl and Knight describe racism and violence against women and gays as an ugly force in contemporary society. However, they argue, and correctly in my view, that this ugliness cannot be successfully addressed by ‘festive interludes’ such as celebrations of diversity. Rather ugly forces need to be directly confronted and debated under principles of what Mouffe calls ‘democratic equivalence’ (1993: 19). This process may not always be pleasant, but this is far better than the violence unleashed when we fail to educate in genuine democratic citizenship and instead seek to maintain the façade of what Pearl and Knight refer to as managed democracy (1999: 336).

*People, Power and Politics*, and *Give and Take* are swayed by Brett’s (1998) advice that the emergence of One Nation is a sign of the dissatisfaction many Australians feel with their limited capacity to participate in civic affairs. To borrow from Wooldridge, Hanson is a symptom of an unhealthy democracy, one in which citizens have felt excluded and ignored. For this reason, rather than someone to be simply dismissed, Hanson is presented as someone offering an alternative view, a stance which while not defensible in the eyes of many Australians, added an important element to the discursive and deliberative nature of a deepened democracy.
In asking students, ‘What Do You Believe In?’, *People, Power and Politics* (Wise 2000a) suggests that democratic citizens are not only participants in civic life, but people with discrete attitudes and opinions. In fact, active citizens in a democracy must have something to be active about. Rather than belonging in long-past electoral campaigns, this range of opinion can be effectively demonstrated by placing it in contemporary settings and issues likely to resonate with young Australians. By constructing a profile of two Australian characters with vastly different, yet fairly commonly held political views (see Appendix 8), this range of political opinion can be established. This can be contrasted with the historical approach to political ideology adopted with *Discovery Democracy* (see Appendix 7). By asking students whether the two characters in the exercise would get along easily with each other clearly invites speculation that there is a broad range of issues upon which people can exercise their democratic citizenship. Further, in asking students to nominate which of the two characters with whom they would most like to have a conversation can be an effective way for young people to begin the process of values clarification.

**Conclusion**

This Chapter brings a new concept of democratic citizenship to the fore. It moves the analysis beyond the rhetorical by leveling a number of specific criticisms at aspects of contemporary Australian civics and citizenship education programs and texts. It finds fault with approaches that seek to deny or disguise the inherently political nature of citizenship, and it endorses Mellor’s (1996: 75) declaration that maximal citizenship in democracy is not about being ‘nice’. It also identifies some important principles and provides examples of how a more meaningful form of education for democracy might proceed. As such, it privileges the idea that in a democracy, citizens must feel encouraged and willing to offer views that may not accord to a real or imagined consensus or majority. They can ask persistent questions, adopt defensible stances, and engage in the construction of their own civic knowledge. These are important hallmarks of a maximalist approach to civics and citizenship education.
It is willingly acknowledged that this view of citizenship does not fall in behind that of many contemporary advocates of increased education in citizenship. It may present a threat to those who conceive of this area of the curriculum as being used to build a greater sense of social harmony and cohesion, rather than stimulate dissent and conflict. This reflects the tension between the ‘nice’ and the ‘nasty’ within civics and citizenship education that is a recurring theme throughout this thesis. In addressing the civic deficit, there is a need to confront the quandary caused by what Parker (1996) effectively describes as the double-failure of democracy. It is clearly difficult to achieve an appropriate balance between celebrating our democratic traditions and achievements, and engaging in the ongoing process of review and reinvigoration that is essential to the maintenance of good democracy. This is where the ‘risk-taking’ referred to in this Chapter becomes important. It is argued that more will be done to address the Australian civic deficit by shifting the focus off the celebratory aspects of citizenship education, and giving Australians the skills and confidence to engage in a critical analysis of their political system. Moreover, this should not be citizenship postponed. Young Australians need to be given opportunities to practise the skills of engaged citizenship in relation to matters of direct concern to them, even if in the eyes of Hirst, these constitute the ‘immediate, the local, the mean’. Lack of faith in the political process; lack of trust in politicians; lack of interest in government affairs; distorted and confused attitudes about key institutions and procedures: all these point to a system which in need of earnest examination, not mere celebration.

Schools offer the most obvious venue in which to advance different and divergent models of citizenship. This can be a form of citizenship in which students are taught the knowledge, the skills and the values underlying the minimalist, prissy citizenship this thesis critiques on the basis that it fails to truly engage citizens in their polity. Alternatively, it can be a form of education that models the arts of the deep, democratic citizenship characterised by persistent questioning of prevailing political practice and culture; the adoption of defensible stances on issues shaping society; and the inquisitive turbulence needed to acquire civic knowledge in a constructivist, rather than procedural manner.
Chapter Eight
Case Study: Educating the Republic

Introduction

The structure of this Case Study broadly mirrors that of the thesis as a whole. To that end, Sections 8.1, 8.2 and 8.3 reflect many of the issues and arguments raised in Part A, while Sections 8.4 and 8.5 reveal the stronger educational emphasis evident in Part B, specifically Chapters Six and Seven.

Throughout much of the 1990s, Australia engaged in debate as to whether a republic should replace the system of constitutional monarchy that had existed since Federation in 1901. This debate reached its peak in the referendum that was held in November 1999 to determine whether Australian voters approved of altering the Australian Constitution in the ways necessary for Australia to become a republic. The conduct and outcome of the republican debate provide a valuable insight into the nature of contemporary Australian citizenship and the nature of the Australian civic deficit. It also provides an extremely useful means of examining the ways in which education is seen as a means of narrowing this deficit.

In this Chapter, I will consider aspects of the republican debate, especially those deemed to represent important indicators of the state of Australian civic life. The argument that an Australian republic, at least in the form preferred by some elite sections of Australian society, can only be achieved if Australians can be further educated about the nature, structure and operation of their constitutional arrangements is also scrutinised. It will be argued that to attribute the failure of the republican referendum to such lack of knowledge is a mischievous, even cynical act likely to make many Australians more hostile to their role as democratic citizens.

The chapter suggests that education has a significant role to play in debates such as Australian republicanism. However, rather than agents of one or other republican
model, or conducting somewhat insipid analyses of arguments 'for and against', the republican issue provides educators with a rare opportunity to allow young Australians to transform their role as 'spectator citizens' into one in which they engage in the 'inquisitive turbulence' that Crick contends is the hallmark of true political, civic and citizenship education. In particular, this Case Study will show how maximal, democratic citizenship can be manifest in an approach which emphasises the persistent questioning and defensible stances that were endorsed in Chapter Seven.

8.1 The broad context of the Australian republican debate

The republican issue was a chance for Australians to recognise the potential to make things otherwise, not by means of an abstract plan imposed by experts, but through the conversation that is Australia, a conversation that questions and shapes all of its institutions (Wark 1997: xviii). That this public discussion largely failed to eventuate is emblematic of the state of civil life and citizenship in Australia. The so-called republican debate contained many elements of a de-politicised and antipolitical state. Despite an extensive publicity campaign, many Australians remained thoroughly confused or uninterested by the debate. Columnists were alarmed that it hardly registered on the Richter scale of public opinion (Steketee 1999a). While in the quality press, academics and constitutional lawyers squabbled over varying interpretations of obscure detail, much of the public remained detached - some bemused, some angry, some bored - a clear majority finally voting to retain existing constitutional arrangements.

Interestingly, republicanism was a primary driving force behind the renewed interest in civics and citizenship education within the Keating government (Goot 1995). The Civics Expert Group grew out of a recommendation of the 1993 Republican Advisory Committee, chaired by Malcolm Turnbull. Keating believed that as people became more aware of the Australian Constitution, they would want to see the remaining constitutional links between Australia and Britain severed. Under this view, the ignorance of Australian voters is responsible for the low success rate in the passage of constitutional referendums in this country. Lacking
the confidence to make an independent assessment of the matters presented in referendums, many Australians simply vote No in defence of the status quo. Moreover, voters are vulnerable to scare campaigns mounted by those opposed to constitutional change. For instance, in September 1988, the Hawke government presented four proposals for constitutional reform to the Australian people. In May of that year, support for these proposals ranged between 66% and 74%, yet after the proposals were subjected to intense opposition in which they were portrayed as a ‘grab for power’ by Canberra, voter support plummeted. None of the proposals was carried, three were defeated by the largest margins since Federation.

Keating believed that if implemented as quickly as possible, a civics and citizenship education program would boost a campaign designed to see Australia become a republic in 2001. Of course Goot (1995: 26) is quite correct in stating that such a boost would be marginal at best on a referendum held in 1999. Despite its origins, the terms of reference of the Civics Expert Group avoided any specific reference to the Australian republic debate. The Group’s Report also makes little mention of republicanism although its recommendation that civics and citizenship education should be a national educational priority in the years 1995 – 2001 (Civics Expert Group 1994: 110 italics added) is curious. Why were these years nominated as most significant? If a broad civics and citizenship education program was such a high priority, shouldn’t it become a permanent feature of Australian schools? However, fearing political opposition, non-partisanship is brought to the fore in the Report. If as Goot suggests, Keating’s enthusiasm for ‘new civics’ in 1993 and 1994 was at least partially motivated by republican sentiments, it is based on a somewhat dubious assumption. This is that increased knowledge and understanding of Australia’s constitution and system of government will, of itself, lead to increased support for an Australian republic. (Interestingly, in October 2000, Federal Labor leader, Kim Beazley, advocated a comprehensive civics education program in schools as a first step in process of Australia becoming a republic by 2010.)

As McKenna (1996) has documented, republican sentiment has a long history in Australia. Short of actually becoming a republic, Australia’s republic ‘debate’ reached its peak in the 1990s. However, given the lack of public engagement in the true meaning of what it may mean to become a republic, this debate did not ascend
to lofty heights. At least in the public arena, the debate leading up to the 1999 referendum was largely based on somewhat banal arguments ‘for and against’ the republican proposal. In his 1994 reference to Australia as a ‘reluctant republic’, Malcolm Turnbull declared the republic ‘is about nothing more than asserting our national identity’ and having the courage to consider who we are and where we are (Turnbull 1994: 7). Turnbull’s idealism extended to a belief that the republic debate provided a radical opportunity for Australians to become better acquainted with the nation’s Constitution, and hence empowered to debate and consider other proposals for constitutional change. Yet as the debate intensified throughout 1998 and 1999, this level of abstraction was lacking. As David Malouf (1999) noted, Australians failed to accept the opportunity the debate presented for them to re-build an understanding of citizenship and national identity.

8.2 Republicanism and citizenship

Revival in Australian republican sentiment has broadly coincided with a resurrection of civic and communitarian ideas throughout much of the Western world. To its adherents, this form of civic republicanism suggests a growing commitment to the inter-related concepts of citizenship, civil society and community. It seeks to re-invigorate the popular sovereignty implied by republica, or ‘commonweal’. As we saw in Chapter Four, this may be expressed in a range of ways. The view with most relevance to the notion of democratic citizenship is that of a political community held together, not by a substantive idea of the common good, but a common bond, a public concern (Mouffe 1993). It places civic responsibility ahead of citizen rights, and views citizenship as practice rather than status. The civic republican tradition of civic participation is ‘the highest form of living-together that most individuals can aspire to’ (Oldfield 1990: 6). Politics is envisaged as the public activity of reconciling conflicts over identity and policy between free citizens in a shared space, and to be a citizen is to participate in civic affairs, implying that a failure to do so amounts to a loss of citizenship (Oldfield 1990: 159).
Of course, Australians displayed a decided reluctance to practise these skills in 1999. Kymlicka and Norman argue the civic ideal is markedly at odds with the way most people in the modern world understand both citizenship and the good life (1994: 362). Politics and public life no longer hold much appeal to people because of the attractions offered by personal life. Rather than pursuing civic involvement as an Aristotelian ideal, modern politics is directly linked to the personal material welfare of the citizen. In stripping away the civic idealism of citizenship, and demanding we confront the banalities of contemporary life, Kymlicka and Norman present a formidable challenge to those seeking to advance the notion that we have lost an understanding of ‘good citizenship’. Indeed, even an enthusiast such as Oldfield concedes his model of civic-republicanism is a hard school of thought in which citizens are called to perform stern and important tasks (1990: 5). Oldfield further challenges his own ideals by noting that the practice of a civic republican form of citizenship is hardly a natural or spontaneous practice for humans. Institutionalised politics as it is currently practised and represented has little to do with fun. Beck describes a generation for whom externalised democracy has lost its appeal, as ‘freedom’s children’ (Beck, 1998). They have largely turned away from a form of politics that seems incapable, or unwilling to address the issues that are deemed to be most important. As a result, in Beck’s words, they simply stay at home (1998: 4).

Much of the republican debate proceeded from the minimalist view of democratic citizenship this thesis critiques. Indeed, the model presented to Australian citizens in the 1999 constitutional referendum was commonly referred to as the ‘minimalist’ model. This model was constructed on the premise that Australian citizens should take the initial step towards a republic by replacing the Queen as head of state, with a President. Malcolm Turnbull was a leading advocate of this model, an extremely timid response given his lofty civic ideals of 1994 in which he talked of Australians with the courage to consider who and where we are. This minimalism represents a further de-politicisation of Australian politics. Indeed, vigorous attempts were made to prevent the matter becoming a political issue at all thereby diminishing the opportunity for Australians to practise and deepen their democratic citizenship (Davidson, 1997: 258). The minimalist model sought to present the republican issue as an instrumental, rather than a political one, transforming Australia from a
constitutional monarchy to a republic without undertaking a more thorough examination of the operation of Australian democracy. This stands in sharp contrast to Van Gunsteren's view that the government must assume a leading role in the 'reproduction of citizens', a process in the formation of people as autonomous individuals 'capable of sound judgement and members of a public community sharing a common fate' (1994: 47).

In this sense, the Australian public cannot be blamed for a lack of genuine civic involvement in the republican debate. Little encouragement was given to such engagement. Rather than active debate and engagement, advocates of the republican model on offer in 1999 constantly talked of 'simplicity', and the lack of change it involved. This suggests a citizenry incapable of entering into genuine discussion about the future of their nation. Watson characterised this as a republic 'without pomp or pain', the 'post-modern' republic. This is the de-politicised republic, the ironic republic built on pragmatism rather than ideology (1999: 21).

8.3 The republic, elites and the people

A fascinating aspect of the republican debate, and one with direct relevance to reaching an understanding of the Australian civic deficit is the way in which the campaign evolved into a further chapter in the on-going Australian culture wars. Following the referendum, the proudly republican newspaper, The Australian carried the banner headline, 'One Queen, two nations' (1999b: 1). In the following weeks, the quality Australian press ran numerous stories attempting to explain the result by portraying Australia as the 'fractured nation', the 'split society' or the 'severed country'. According to much of this analysis, a new class war had broken out between the 'people' and the 'elites'. Voting patterns matching support for the republic with electorates suggested that Liberal areas tended to be the strongest supporters of the republic. Indeed, in anti-republican Prime Minister Howard's own seat of Bennelong, support for the Yes case was 54%, and similar patterns emerged in other 'blue ribbon' Liberal electorates such as Kooyong, Higgins and Warringah. On the other hand, seats held by the Labor Party tended to reject the republican model on offer. Even more pronounced was the rejection of the republic in rural
areas. No House of Representatives electorate outside a capital city voted in support of the republic.

These patterns are confirmed by research showing the opportunity for Australia to replace a hereditary monarch with an Australian citizen produced a ‘class war in reverse’ (Morgan Research Centre 1999). The Morgan Poll found that support for an Australian republic rose sharply in line with income levels. The most pro-republican group was households with an annual income over $80,000, with 59% intending to vote Yes, while at the other end of the income scale, households with an annual income of $20,000 to $29,000 were only 32% in favour of the republican model. The Morgan Poll also detected a distinct relationship between education levels of respondents and their support for an Australian republic. Those with a tertiary education were far more likely to vote ‘Yes’ (56.5%) than those with education to the end of Year 10 (35.5%).

A consensus emerged that those Australians from less privileged, less affluent and less educated parts of society were suspicious, even antagonistic towards so-called ‘elite’ Australians (Rothwell 1999; Kelly 1999; Bone 1999; Manne 1999b; Steketee 1999b). For these forgotten Australians, ARM leader, Malcolm Turnbull became the perfect demon - a tall poppy, clever, rich, ruthless and impatient (Kelly 1999: 29). Some self-confessed members of the elites, were perplexed by support for a monarchical system based on superiority of blood, gender, class and religion, something ‘that is contrary to everything Australians have believed about themselves’ (Bone 1999). Clearly puzzled by the apparent inegalitarianism inherent in the support for the constitutional monarchy, newspaper columnist Pamela Bone presented her own educated middle-class as the traditional defenders of Australian values of justice and equality. Yet, to her consternation, it was this class that was now demonised, the subjects of spite and envy from the ‘ordinary Australians’ who rejected the minimalist republican model.

Of course, an alternative interpretation regarded this rejection as more consistent with Australian egalitarianism. To Ted Mack, it was the ‘egalitarian anti-authoritarian traditions’ of Australia that defeated the elitism of the Yes case based on ‘ridicule, humiliation and character assassination’ (1999: 15). While the Yes
case sought to highlight the apparent contradiction of rejecting their model as ‘elitist’, and then voting to retain the monarch as Australian head of state, in what Betts (1999) calls a ‘revolt of the parochials’, Australians may have been quite deliberately voting against an elite part of their own society, a group that had become disengaged from the mainstream.

The forces opposed to the republican model presented in the 1999 referendum fell into two main groups. Although they formed a rather unlikely alliance of monarchists and ‘radical’ republicans, each component represents an important aspect of the widespread discontentment felt with the practice of Australian politics and democracy. The core opposition to an Australian republic came from Australians for a Constitutional Monarchy (ACM).

A crucial strategy employed by the ACM clearly struck a chord with the alienated and disaffected. This was based on the central ACM slogan, ‘Vote No to the Politicians’ Republic’, designed to foster a form of the Hanson or Perot styled antipolitics or populism discussed in Chapter Three. Under the proposed republican model, a President would become Australian head of state. A key sticking point right through the debate was the method of appointing the President. As early as 1997, opinion polls showed a clear majority of Australians favoured direct participation in this process. A poll taken in November 1997 showed support for popular election of President running at 78%, while support for parliamentary appointment at just 13% (Newspoll 1997). This issue dominated the 1998 Constitutional Convention, devastatingly described by Botsman as an occasion for ‘lawyers, politicians and academic show-ponies’ (2000: 8), which was held to construct a model to be put to the people in a referendum. At the Convention, republicans split over the matter. ‘Minimalist’ republicans such as Turnbull and the ARM advanced a proposal in which the nominated Presidential candidate would be ratified by a two-thirds majority of the Commonwealth parliament. In a Schumpeterian tradition, Australian citizens would have no direct participation in determining just who their President would be. Instead, their participation would involve the election of parliamentary representatives who would make the choice on their behalf.
However others, variously described as ‘real’ or ‘radical’ republicans, insisted that this system of parliamentary appointment was fundamentally undemocratic. They saw the republican debate as a step towards reactivating Australian democratic participation by allowing all Australian voters the opportunity to vote for their President. A vocal advocate of this position was former Independent MP, Phil Cleary who colourfully described the minimalist model as a ‘phoney republic’, a grab for power by the warlords who run the major political parties. ‘The last thing the party elites can allow is the election of a President who might give expression to the dissenting thoughts of the people’, he argued (1999a: 32).

There is little doubt Cleary’s support for popular participation was an accurate reflection of the public mood. In January 1999, 69% of those polled stated they would be more likely to support a republic with a directly elected President, while 15% said they would be less likely to do so (Age Poll 1999). A month prior to the referendum, support for direct election remained high. In October 1999, Newspoll found that 50% of those polled preferred direct election, while just 14% preferred the parliamentary model they were asked to approve just one month later (Newspoll 1999). Interestingly, the same poll revealed the strength of republican sentiment in Australia with 95% of respondents supporting the concept of an Australian as head of state. Speaking somewhat less polemically, Tredinnick described public support for direct election of President as a sign of the deep wish to take part in designing a new system of rule, an occasion to make the nation new. Reviving the spirit of civic republicanism, Tredinnick conceded that:

To contemplate a fundamentally new model of governance would be hard, it would take time, it would call for reflection, imagination and courage notably missing from our political life. But it might just be the making of us. (1998: 15)

Although Turnbull and the ARM were obviously aware of this strength of support for direct election, they felt this would recede over time as Australians came to understand the drawbacks and inconsistencies of directly electing the head of state. The poll results quoted earlier indicate this was a gravely mistaken view to adopt. As The Australian newspaper acknowledged, Australians have a ‘natural and well-
founded distrust of politicians, leading many to oppose the very idea of allowing politicians to appoint the President' (The Australian 1999a).

Throughout much of 1998 and 1999, the attack on the direct election model revolved around its impracticality under existing Australian constitutional conditions. Under this argument, it was repeatedly stated that however appealing it might seem, a system of direct election 'would not work' in Australia. This argument provides a fascinating example of the perceived gap between the educated elite, and the ill-informed parochials. At its simplest, it can be explained in this way. Under the Australian Constitution, the Senate can create an impasse by blocking supply and depriving a government the means to govern. As long as the Senate retains this power, an independent umpire is needed to resolve any such deadlock between the government and the Senate. This was demonstrated in 1975 when the Governor-General, Sir John Kerr acted to end such a constitutional crisis by dismissing the government of Prime Minister, Gough Whitlam. This is the most significant reserve power of the Australian Governor-General. However, this system would clearly not be acceptable if Australia had an elected President as he or she would have the power to sack a duly elected Australian government, making them a very powerful political figure. In order to prevent this, the reserve powers of an elected President would have to be limited to disallow a President the power of dismissal. However, if that were the case how would a 1975 type crisis be resolved? One obvious answer is to remove the Senate's power to block government supply Bills. But, this would require passage of a referendum to alter the constitution, a prospect with virtually zero chance of success in Australia.

Without proceeding further into the intricacies of the argument, as Paul Kelly suggested the vast majority of Australian elected politicians, political scientists and constitutional lawyers rejected direct election in 1999 as it would require a fundamental change to the Westminster system of government. Under Westminster conventions, the executive power is located within the legislature, rather than in a separate, powerful branch of government. Falling in behind this orthodox position, Kelly called direct election 'a recipe for political mayhem' (1998).
Of course, it is difficult to deny that this style of argument is completely beyond the understanding of the most majority of Australians. It requires a detailed knowledge of aspects of the Australian Constitution and Westminster conventions, and an appreciation of the subtleties of Australian parliamentary practice. The proportion of the population with a genuine understanding of it would form a tiny elite. For this elite to then explain it to a population, a significant number of whom are blissfully unaware Australia even has a constitution (Civics Expert Group 1994: 143), presents a truly bizarre prospect. Yet this is precisely what Malcolm Turnbull, Kelly and other minimalist republicans tried to do throughout much of 1998 and 1999. Needless to say, they achieved little success in this endeavour.

Interestingly in October 1999, The Australian finally conceded that direct election did enjoy widespread support within the Australian community, and that the attempts to ‘educate’ the public on the impracticality of direct election had failed. Moreover, it now desisted from further lecturing about the impossibility of popular participation in the election of the President, and suggested direct election may in fact be possible. However an extensive national debate would be necessary on the matter of direct election to investigate alternative models and their ramifications for the Australian political system. After having consistently argued in favour of the minimalist model throughout the referendum campaign, in a staggering turn-around, and just one month prior to the referendum, The Australian began to explore the ‘many models of directly elected presidency’ (1999a: 20).

Similarly, two days after the failed referendum Turnbull called for ‘a proper debate about a directly elected President’. In a reversion to the spirit of his 1994 comments, Turnbull acknowledged that ‘Australians have felt that they have been excluded from this process’ and he proceeded to set out a program by which Australia could conduct a serious analysis of direct election (Turnbull 1999a). Yet, despite this apparent concession, Turnbull maintains the most significant means of differentiating Yes and No voters in the 1999 referendum was knowledge. At the conclusion of his account of his role in the 1990s republican debate Turnbull argues that, ‘There is nothing elitist in pointing out most Australians know virtually nothing about their Constitution’ (1999c: 249).
This analysis demonstrates the continuing tensions that exist between elite individuals and groups, and the mass population in contemporary Australia, and also demonstrates the rather erratic attitudes displayed towards civic participation by its citizens. It can be argued that the level of complexity of Australian constitutional arrangements makes it virtually impossible to have a genuine national discussion on the future of governance in this country. The level of knowledge required to participate in the debate outlined in the previous paragraphs is far beyond the grasp of most Australians. While this may add weight to the argument of those demanding greater civics education in Australia, it also provides a good example of the de-politicisation of Australian politics. The debate was conducted among elite groups in a manner and language few could relate to. The complexity of the arguments sought to augment the impression that consideration of Australia’s constitutional arrangements requires highly developed skills best left to specialists.

An underlying premise of the argument against direct Presidential election is that the Westminster system of government must be preserved. It is suggested that direct election presents a threat to that system by establishing another strong source of political power with the potential to challenge the mandate of the parliament and executive government under a Prime Minister. This is the orthodox ‘insider’ view taken by the vast majority of serving Australian parliamentarians. Yet, a counter position is that those in favour of direct election in 1999, whether they understood the constitutional niceties or not, quite deliberately wanted to establish an alternative source of political power in Australian politics. In other words, they wished to elect a President who could challenge the authority of the Prime Minister in ways the parliament is so palpably unable to do. Viewed in this light, direct election is an attempt to fundamentally alter the Australian system of government. Rather than a populist driven revolt framed by civic ignorance, calls for direct election are a plea for greater participation, a plea unsurprisingly ridiculed and rejected by most current elected parliamentarians. A popularly elected President, with a strong independent mandate, presents a major threat to the power of executive government as it is presently conceived in Australia. In reflecting this suggestion, Ted Mack argues that Australians are aware of this and that, ‘People who believe in democracy want a republic where the people are sovereign and have the right and responsibility to directly elect their leaders’ (1998: 15).
This attempt to de-politicise politics and remove it from the realm of the politically unskilled, led to an antipolitical backlash. Of course, argument remains as to whether this is based on continued ignorance and apathy, or if it can be interpreted as a healthy sign for Australian democracy. This has profound implications for the conduct of political education. The first possibility implies that the Australian population is fundamentally uninformed about its system of government and constitutional arrangements, and there is an urgent need to address this problem. The nation is trapped in a web of ignorance that makes constitutional reform impossible. The only way forward is to bring the people up to a level of civic understanding that makes constitutional change in Australia more achievable. This is the orthodox argument in favour of greater political education subjected to intense scrutiny in Chapter Five.

However, the second view casts serious doubt over this position. Here the primary problem is not that citizens do not possess an intricate knowledge of how their government and constitutional arrangements operate, but rather have an ill-defined understanding of prevailing political culture revealed as profound distrust and suspicion of contemporary politics. As Condren suggests, ‘Our institutions are predicated in high levels of distrust and to voice a distrust of politicians may be as much (or as little) an expression of mature civic awareness as it might be a sign of mindless cynicism. Conversely, high levels of trust may express apathy, or the uncritical party allegiance that makes life easy for party politicians’ (Condren 1999: 29 italics added). Reflecting this view in relation to the republic debate, Phil Cleary notes,

... the leaders of the major parties have underestimated the wisdom of the people and the prevailing mood... despite the polls consistently showing that some 70% of Australians want to elect their own President, the leaders of the major parties chose to interpret this as a product of ignorance and confusion'. (1999b: 15)

The Australian republic debate had very little to do with whether Australia wishes to rid itself of the monarchy. Polls taken at the time of the referendum clearly indicated support for the monarchy had fallen to very low levels. Given this, the
rejection of the proposed model in the 1999 referendum by 55% of Australian voters, and its failure to attract majority support in any Australian state, indicates a rejection of the model that was offered and the way in which the process was conducted. More broadly, it represents a fundamental dissatisfaction with prevailing political culture. The outcome of the republican referendum indicate that Australians are far from ready to adopt a passive role in which citizenship is regarded as largely a spectator sport.

8.4 An educated citizenry?

As the 1999 republic referendum campaign proceeded, it was argued that the level of ignorance and lack of understanding of Australia’s constitutional arrangements within the Australian population indicated the need for an extensive public education campaign and a fresh emphasis of civic education at school level. In some cases, these calls were largely partisan in nature. The Australian Republican Movement (ARM) suggested the republican issue confused many Australians. It was argued that the public would be able to see through the misinformation and distortions advanced by those opposed to the republican model if the public had a clearer understanding of how the Australian system of government worked (Barns 1999; Burns 1999). In a post-referendum analysis, Turnbull revealed how little progress had been made in relation to raising civic awareness among Australians since his 1993 Republic Advisory Committee Report. Turnbull noted that at its core, the difficulty in achieving an Australian republic, is the ‘singular failure over many decades to any have any type of civic education in schools. I mean kids today are leaving high school without any real understanding of how our system of government works’ (1999b).

While the direct relationship between level of support for the republic and educational attainment tends to support this argument (Morgan Research Centre 1999), it is too simplistic to assume more education would lead to greater sympathy with the minimalist republican cause. Indeed, it regards education as little more than a means of gaining access to the elite sections of Australian society by presenting an argument that can be paraphrased as, ‘If you had access to the
‘correct’ information, you would come to understand the republican issue the way we do’. Education and republicanism are not directly correlated in this way. It could equally be argued that a comprehensive education program in the evolution and operation of the Australian system of government could lead to a strong conviction that it was not in need of any significant reform. Alternatively, greater awareness and appreciation of the theory and practice of Australian political institutions could lead to demands for far greater reform than was on offer in 1999. Both these outcomes would lead to a No vote in that referendum, hardly the result the ARM desired.

Other advocates of enhanced political education were less motivated by undisguised partisanship. David Malouf (1999) appealed for greater attention to civics education, and a series of academics (for instance, McKenna 1999; Williams 1999) endorsed this by drawing attention to the need to educate young Australians in their nation’s constitutional arrangements. Williams based his call primarily on the outcome of a deliberative poll held in Canberra on October 23-24 1999, two weeks prior to the referendum. A deliberative poll can be seen as reinforcing the importance of conversation amongst citizens as the ‘soul of democracy’ (Kim, Wyatt and Katz 1999). The poll seemed to provide strong evidence that when voters were given the opportunity to carefully examine the issues, ask questions of experts and discuss matters in groups, they switched their support towards the minimalist republican model on offer in the 1999 referendum. Three hundred and fifty Australian voters selected at random were flown to Canberra for the poll. Each participant was asked his or her views regarding an Australian republic both several weeks before, and again after the event to determine any shift in opinion. Support for the minimalist republican model rose from 53% to 73% following the deliberative poll. The original 50% support for direct election of a President dropped to just 19%. Gordon (1999) called the poll ‘a remarkable exercise in participatory democracy’, and enthused that when exposed to ‘the facts’, Australians could make the ‘safe, sensible and simple step’ to a republic. However, he did re-establish contact with reality by acknowledging that it took two full days of intensive education and analysis from a group of interested and motivated participants to reach his desired outcome.
Yet concerns may be raised as to how good an example of deliberative democracy the pre-referendum poll actually was. As Gordon's comment indicates, a strong element of the exercise was to 'educate' direct electionists of the impracticability of their proposal. In Section 8.5, some positive comments are made in relation to the role of discursive or deliberative methods of enhancing democratic citizenship. However, as Merleman (1998) suggests, this impact is likely to be lessened in situations in which opportunities for deliberation are prescriptive, rather than truly discursive. The republican deliberative poll was clearly designed to 'prepare' citizens for the referendum rather than allow open-ended and freely flowing discussion. As the Chairmen of the discussion sessions, Ian Sinclair and Barry Jones were both avowed supporters of the minimalist republican model, and kept a tight rein on proceedings, which again casts doubt on the degree of discursiveness permitted.

When one ventures beyond the civic appeal of having a citizenry well versed in its civic institutions and practices, a range of problematic issues arise from calls for greater civics education that arose from the republican debate. Making a decision on whether Australia should become a republic is not something that can be taught. This was illustrated by much of the somewhat absurd debate that arose during the referendum campaign. In conducting a television republican debate for broadcast in the United Kingdom on the eve of the referendum, host Jon Snow (SBS 1999) was clearly bemused by the sight of a group of Australians unable to reach agreement as to whether the Governor-General, or the Queen is Australia's head of state. Despite his appeals for a clear answer to what appeared a fundamental matter, he was forced to abandon the quest, none the wiser. This was hardly surprising, as no one seemed too sure. Indeed, a Commonwealth government brochure widely distributed prior to the referendum that boldly declared, 'Make sure you know the facts before you have your say', was completely unable to provide a definitive answer on this matter. It concludes:

Some people see the Queen as the head of state because formal powers are conferred on her by the Constitution . . . Others see the Governor-General as now head of state because he exercises those powers. (Williams and Ellison 1999: 3)
Such confusion was cleverly, even cynically exploited by both the ‘No’ and ‘Yes’ cases during the referendum campaign. Each side sought to present the public with the ‘facts’. Each side was able to provide its own array of academics, constitutional lawyers, past and present politicians and former High Court judges and Governors-General to bolster its arguments. In many instances, they were in direct contradiction of each other on very fundamental points. In such circumstances, how could the ‘average’ Australian voter hope to make a rational judgement as to which view was correct? In what sense could one become more ‘educated’ on the matters at hand by studying such material?

Of course, it may be hoped that a more thorough knowledge of the Australian Constitution and political arrangements may enhance Australian citizens’ capacity to make some sense of the arguments and counter arguments being presented. While it is generally correct to suggest that citizens who have a broad understanding of the contents of their nation’s Constitution will be in a far better position to evaluate the relative merits of each case, the complexity of the issues in dispute in the 1999 republican debate were such that even an adult citizen with a good basic knowledge of the Constitution would be likely to be quickly overwhelmed. Again the assumption is that if we can somehow get the nation’s citizens ‘up to speed’ on their civic affairs, the debate can be conducted in a less confused manner. However, put bluntly, is this a realistic expectation? Australia’s Constitutional arrangements are complex, and to reasonably expect the bulk of Australian citizens to have the knowledge base required to participate in such a debate in a meaningful way seems somewhat ludicrous.

The idea that the Australian public can somehow be educated in their system of government and Constitution, and hence be better prepared to participate in debates such as whether Australia should become a republic raises a host of profound educational questions. The most significant of these is, just what constitutes an ‘educated citizen’? This issue was considered in Chapter Five where doubts were raised about the nature of civic knowledge. As Anderson’s asks, is it good enough to know just a little about the political system, or is it necessary ‘to study the whole thing (1995: 7). For instance, is it envisaged that Australian citizens simply become aware that we have a document called the Constitution, or that they will develop a
detailed knowledge of its contents so they will feel confident to offer an opinion on a newspaper analysis written by say, Greg Craven or Richard McGarvie? If that suggestion sounds a little far fetched, then just what is being proposed? The easy and predictable response to this question is to suggest that the answer lies at some point between these two possibilities. Yet, this does little to resolve Anderson's query. Just how much knowledge is sufficient? A partial knowledge may lead to even greater confusion with citizens making an effort to participate in debates but really lacking the skills and understanding to do so, while the production of a nation of constitutional experts is simply unrealistic. In commenting on the school subject, 'British Constitution', the well-known defender of politics Bernard Crick (Crick and Heater 1977) argues that it is rarely an advantage for a student to have taken the subject. Indeed the contrary is often the case as the students' minds become filled with 'irrelevant and picturesque detail about parliamentary procedure and constitutional institutions.' To Crick, this lacks the 'inquisitive turbulence' that is the essence of true political education.

8.5 Schools, educators and the republic

The 1999 Australian republican debate provides a useful model of how educators might augment the process of civic engagement and democratic citizenship. It also highlights the constricted understanding some of those outside the educational arena have of how education might assist in effecting constitutional change.

As I have demonstrated earlier in this Chapter, it is too simplistic to equate more education with greater support for the republic in the way some members of the Australian Republican Movement (ARM) assume. In addition, it is difficult to determine whether it is the education process itself which is seen to boost republican sentiment, or the presumption that teachers will act as 'republican agents'. The first of these views argues that greater knowledge and awareness of the Constitution will, if purposely taught, lead to a greater willingness to support changes to it. Hirst hints of this when he notes in reference to the Discovering Democracy units that 'if the Australian electorate had done our unit' it might have helped the debate (Interview 2000). The outcome of the deliberative poll undertaken
prior to the 1999 referendum outlined earlier is often cited as evidence of this causal link. However, this is a difficult argument to sustain as both supporters of, and opponents to constitutional change in Australia can readily offer abundant endorsements from well-credentialed sources. This was certainly apparent in the 1999 republican debate as the No and Yes campaigns sought to bolster their respective cases by presenting the views of former High Court judges, Governors-General and constitutional lawyers.

Clearly, politically informed education is no guarantee of enhanced republicanism in Australia. Moreover, a claim that a more informed electorate would be more capable of detecting distortions and misinformation in just one side of the argument is a blatantly partisan argument and should be treated as such. As an intensely political matter, both sides of the Australian republican debate indulged in gross exaggeration, misrepresentation and aggrandisement in presenting their respective cases. A teacher of politics seeking to promote critical thinking would be keen to subject both campaigns to careful scrutiny.

Similarly, the suggestion that Australian teachers will be inherently attracted to constitutional change, and be willing to promote such views via the curriculum requires careful examination. Placed in the best light, it prompts suggestions of naivety and misunderstanding as to what teachers do, at its worst it is demeaning and patronising. It also highlights the disputed role of the teacher as reproducer of society, as opposed to transformer of society. The promotion of Australian civics and citizenship education is based on a not unreasonable assumption that in general, Australian teachers will endorse and advance notions of 'good citizenship' or 'democracy'. Yet as the work of Gilbert, Carr and Singh (1995) suggests, the ranks of Australian teachers harbour its fair share of the cynical, disillusioned and those alienated from the Australian political process. Gilbert et al conducted interviews with 27 teachers to ascertain their understanding of citizenship, and attitudes towards democracy and government. Views ranged from the resigned ('It's very inefficient but we really don't have any alternative that's acceptable to me'), to the cynical ('I think that big business and big media have gained control of democracy'). In relation to the role of government, the study found few unambiguously positive statements. Much more typical was the view that
governments, 'don't stand for principles, they stand for re-election'. June, a subject in work of Gilbert et al stated:

Oh, I'm a cynic from way back. It never ceases to amaze me that these people . . . tend to lose their grip on reality once they've been in parliament for a few years . . . it's my impression they certainly don't want any sort of citizen involvement at all. I don't think we are encouraged to be active citizens by our government. I haven't seen any in my lifetime. (1995: 47)

Briony, another subject, added weight to this by noting that, 'I think it's a big rip off. I think government really just rigs things the way they want it to go. I think it's a big con and not enough people can see through it'. Gilbert et al concluded that, these responses are interesting coming from a professional group which, some might argue, should be responsible for inculcating allegiance to the ideals of democratic government (1995: 47). However Australian teachers are not in any sense sworn to defend the Australian Constitution, the Westminster system of government or Australian political culture or practice in general. Indeed, as I have established in earlier chapters, what these concepts imply are fiercely contested matters, a contest that extends to the views of teachers themselves.

On the other hand, Australian teachers are not under any obligation to work towards broad social, economic or in this case constitutional change. This was forcefully brought home to one ARM member following the 1999 republican referendum. In addressing a conference of Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) teachers of Political Studies, ARM representative Frank McGuire was clearly taken aback by the realisation that he was not preaching to the converted (Victorian Association of Social Studies Teachers 1999). McGuire was forced to defend a model that many teachers clearly saw as flawed. He found his task somewhat perplexing, as he obviously was not dealing with a group of uninformed Australians who had little understanding of some of the more intricate aspects of the debate. In these circumstances, McGuire was unable to employ an argument that a more educated electorate would be more supportive of the ARM model. Indeed, it was apparent McGuire felt that the possession of such awareness would place teachers in the ideal position to see through the distortions of the No case, and thus inevitably
support the ARM model. This argument places teachers of politics within an enlightened elite, capable of recognising and rejecting the conspiratorial nature and ignorance of the No campaign. Furthermore, it assumes that teachers would want to take the progressive view of the matter by supporting a change to Australia's constitutional arrangements. It is an argument that assumes teachers are agents of change. But just why would it be assumed greater education and awareness would lead to greater support for republicanism in general, or a particular model of republicanism?

Any correlation between republican sentiment and Australian politics teachers remains in the realm of speculation. However, as a group well acquainted with the skills of critical analysis and thinking, it is hardly surprising some teachers of politics would be prepared to examine the issues of the republican debate in a more even handed manner. Indeed, as a group well practised in the art of assuming a disinterested position on many contentious matters, and well attuned to accusations of bias in the presentation of often partisan material, to assume teachers will have a strongly held view on the republican question is very dubious. However, even if we accept for the moment the arguable notion that Australian politics teachers do have an attraction to an Australian republic, it is dangerous to then conclude that they will accept any specific model of the republic. In fact, it can be argued that in the course of professional practise, teachers of politics are likely to closely interrogate all proposed republican models more closely than more unthinking members of the broader community, which may lead to a deeper understanding of the nature of republicanism in general, and the strengths and weaknesses of specific models in particular.

In early 1999, I was asked to undertake the role of education consultant in the production of a videotape entitled Should Australian Be a Republic? (VEA 1999b). The film is designed to explore aspects of the Australian republic debate. In addition, I prepared the Support Notes and Student Activities accompanying the product. The target audience was middle to senior secondary students in Australian schools. Throughout a series of planning meetings, the director and I discussed the format of the film. I argued that too many video productions made for school use adopt a particularly unimaginative format in which a series of 'talking heads'
provide data, or points of view about the matter under consideration. In such cases, the film merely replicates printed text as a form of information transfer. As an outcome of planning, it was determined that the film would be formed around a discussion between a group of students, and a leader. The students were in Years 11 and 12, and the leader, a slightly older university student. None of these participants, including the discussion leader, were considered experts in the Australian Constitution or in arguments either for, or against the proposal to replace the constitutional monarchy with a republic as the basis of Australian government.

The students’ discussion was interposed with a series of ‘vox pop’ styled street interviews in which young people were asked to consider the same issues the student panel discussed. This technique was employed in order to highlight the vast range of opinion within the community on issues relating to the republican debate as well as provide a point of comparison between the sometimes flippant and indifferent attitudes expressed by street interviewees, and the more measured contributions made by the student panel. In the editing process, attention gravitated towards the wildly ill-informed and often quite amusing responses received. For instance, when asked to define a republic, one interviewee suggested, ‘A republic is when the government has not got a prime minister’. In another question, interviewees were asked, ‘Who is Australia’s Head of State?’. One respondent suggested the then Victorian State Premier, Jeff Kennett, while another said, ‘I have no idea. That’s of no importance to me’.

It was tempting to concentrate on such views as they highlight the lack of civic knowledge considered to be a problem in the Australian republican debate. However, to do so would not have been an accurate representation of the responses obtained. In addition, it smacks of elitism. For instance, the first response cited, while an inaccurate view of the proposed Australian republic, is quite accurate in relation to other well-known republics such as the United States. Indeed, many comments revealed a good understanding of basic issues and many interviewees were confident in discussing and analysing matters put to them. When asked to outline of the role of the Australian Constitution, one interviewee offered that it is a ‘formal document describing the rules of how the country is to be governed’ (VEA 1999b).
The film, which was produced in March 1999, approximately nine months before Australia’s republican referendum was intended to be used as an educational tool to assist in stimulating debate in the period leading up to the poll being conducted. Rather than arguing in favour of a republic, or endorsing a particular model of republic, the film aimed to show that Australians could be active participants in the debate. It tests Craven’s contention that participation that is not based on knowledge is ignorance (Discovering Democracy 1998d: 20), by showing that younger Australians can conduct a meaningful dialogue without extensive knowledge if given the opportunity and treated in such a way that their views will be listened to and valued.

Should Australia be a Republic? followed a predetermined format involving consideration of several major themes of the republican debate, however it was not formally scripted. Students had prior opportunity to consider their responses, but were free to offer their own opinions rather than adhering to a set role. For each major segment, the leader opened the discussion by posing a question or contention, and the participants made contributions to the ensuing conversation. The film aimed to model a form of deliberative democratic participation in which citizens share information about current affairs, talk politics, form opinions and take part in political processes. They create a public by means of this discussion, and perform the daily labour of strong or deep democracy (Parker 1996: 199). They help to deepen democracy. This concept is endorsed by the study by Kim, Wyatt and Katz, which concludes that political conversation is central to participatory democracy (1999: 362). At times, this conversation became a rather chaotic process and extensive editing was required to cut a one and one half-hour discussion to fit the requirement for a half-hour film. Yet it was an attempt to move away from the perception of the film as a medium of communicating expert knowledge to a passive audience with nothing to say on the matters raised. The Support Notes and Student Activities encourage teaches to conduct similar discussion within their own classes.

The film sought to model Wark’s style of public conversation that seeks to recognise the potential to make things otherwise, one that questions and shapes
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