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## After the Evolution

Communities in Control Conference  
Melbourne, 31 May, 2016

Presentation by

**Peter FitzSimons AM**  
**Author, columnist, sportsperson; Chair, Australian**  
**Republican Movement.**

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Okay. Thank you all for that welcome. I hope I can do justice to that very, very kind introduction. I want to begin by thanking you for the welcome that you've given me. I say I am, you are, we are Australian. This is a great gathering and as I say, I want to be able to do justice to the occasion.

I don't think I know any of you personally. I still feel curiously like I'm among my own, I think probably for the fact that I'm married to Lisa (Wilkinson). I'm told by many of my mates it makes me the president of the Australian Men Punching Well Above Their Weight Club. And I'm delighted to see so many of my fellow members here today.

If, after that introduction, a few of you would be looking at me thinking well, he looks like a former footballer, no doubt about that. There's no way on earth he looks like an author. And if you are thinking that you're not the first to have so thought.

The first time I came to Melbourne with intent was 1989 to bolster the Victorian rugby union side against the touring All Blacks and on the Friday night I was invited to a black tie soiree, one of the most humiliating moments of my life.

It was the opening of the Rembrandt Exhibition at the Victorian Art Gallery. Only invited because my sister-in-law was the curator who brought it from Holland. And before attending she'd given me strict instruction how to wear the black tie properly, how to hold the champagne glass by the stem and we don't guzzle and throw it down our throat, we sip and we converse and we move on.

And I was desperately trying to fit in with the glitterati of the Victorian arts world. Couldn't help but notice the executive director general of the Victorian Art Gallery kept sneaking glances at me, what kind of a Neanderthal is this who has wondered into the Victorian Art Gallery by mistake?

I managed to work into the conversation, "Actually I have just finished my first book." And he immediately brightened up, congratulated me and encouraged me to read another one.

So, I want to warm my way into this by saying I am a great believer in the power of community.

And I grew up in a very strong community an hour north of Peats Ridge. Both mum and dad returned, both served in the Second World War. They returned, they carved out 60 acres at Peats Ridge an hour north of Sydney. They grew oranges, lemons, tomatoes and children.

And I was the seventh of those children and the longest of those children. I set a record in Sydney when I was born for the longest child. Mum said I was so long I was born on the 27<sup>th</sup>,

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the 28<sup>th</sup> and the 29<sup>th</sup> of June, 1961. And I grew up in this really powerful, strong community of Peats Ridge.

And the most exciting moment in my young life was in 1969 when mum and dad, on the same day, took us to the Royal Easter Show and the Moscow Circus on the same day. Got back at one o'clock in the morning too excited to get to sleep. Instead of counting sheep I started to count the people that lived at Peats Ridge. And seven in our house, with mum and dad made nine, the Harriman's, the Hobdays, the Halliday's up the road. Kept counting until I got to about 390 and dropped to sleep.

The point being that as an eight year old boy I knew every family in my community, all of their names, all of the people and I belonged. I was part of that community.

These days the only way that Lisa knows the names of our neighbours is because we see the name on the bottom of the affidavit because our dog barks too loud. And I'm joking, we've actually got good neighbours.

But if there is one thing that I think that Australia most needs in 21<sup>st</sup> century it is that re-establishment of a sense of community, a sense of belonging. I am a Bob Dylan nut and my favourite Bob Dylan line is 'down here next to me in this lonely crowd' and I think much of Australia is in a lonely crowd where they don't have that sense of belonging.

So anything that could happen in this conference that promotes community is fabulous.

I am, of course, here for the republican community and we are growing. We've quintupled our numbers in the last year. I hope at the end of today we'll sign up all of you without exception. You'll expect me to tell rugby union stories, I want to in the name of the republic, tell a quick story of what I think about Aussie Rules, in fact.

I was a great critic of Aussie Rules when it first came to Sydney. I have since come to the conclusion that it is the quintessential Australian game embodying our greatest values.

They talk about Aussie Rules and as far as I can see there are no rules to speak of and whatever they are seems to be ignored by everybody. I love the fact that in every other sport in the world there is endless spooling back and forth, did he put his foot in? Did he put his foot out? I love the fact that even in an Aussie rules grand final you see the bloke tearing along the boundary line, foot in, foot out, ball in the right hand, ball in the left hand, close enough is good enough mate, just keep going.

There are 36 football codes in the world. Thirty-five of them have an offside rule. There is only one football code in the world, no offside rule, you're an Australian mate, go where you damn well please.

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But the best of it, the absolute best of it, is the scoring system. The two big poles in the middle, the two little poles outside. And if you go for goal and you get it, you bloody beauty, six points. And if you miss, oh well you had a go, take a point. The only sport in the world where you get a point just for having a go.

And so what we most want with the Australian Republican Movement, with our fellow Australians, with people like you who are involved in your community, is to help us. Help us to have a go to change this system and the system that we are under which has served us well to a certain point but it is time to change.

And when I'm talking about this I have to hold myself back a little bit. The first time I did an interview on it my wife Lisa was beside me, we were driving back from the snow, I did 20 minutes on Radio National, put the phone down and I thought that went pretty well.

She said, "If I can just give you one bit of advice if you're going to be the chair of the Australian Republican Movement."

I said, "Yes darling, what's that?"

She said, "Don't be a loud dickhead."

And I'm aware that inside me it sometimes boils over and comes out too strongly so I do try to hold myself back. But if you can just indulge me for a moment, let me say this, and I mean it.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is ridiculous, it is embarrassing to think that we in Australia can do no better than to find our Head of State from one family of English aristocrats living in a palace in London.

We are better than that. We are a stronger people, we're a more self-confident people and we can do better. How can we do better? How can we change the system? That is for us to democratically decide as a people.

I described in the National Press Conference speech that I did last year ... I said the Australian Republican Movement are like a toy plane convention at St Mary's Cathedral.

That is, we are a very broad church with lots of models that will fly. And we want all of those models in the movement.

Whatever your ideas are we want you to join the movement, we want you to be a part of it.

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Personally I am passionate for the minimalist model. As you know the current system, the way that it works, the Prime Minister of the day chooses the Governor General and then he writes a letter to the Queen of England and says, “Is it okay with you what I have decided?”

Which is to say that 115 years after Federation, well now into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the democratically elected leader of the Australian people, put there by democracy, is reduced to writing a letter to an unelected English lady and saying, “Is it alright with your unelected Englishness what I, as the democratically elected leader of the Australian people, have decided to do?”

Please. We are better than that.

A better system for me, everything stays the same. We keep the Governor General as the Governor General, we keep calling ourselves the Commonwealth of Australia, we remain a part of the commonwealth of nations, we simply make one change.

We save for the price of a postage stamp, instead of addressing the same letter to the Queen of England you send it down the hall to the parliament of the people and we are done. Everything stays the same we simply cut the umbilical cord to be our own people.

Now against this very, very simple notion that we can be our own people and call our own shots and be seen in the world as an independent sovereign nation. Against that people put up all kinds of reasons, okay. There are the nervous Nellies and the Neddy naysayers.

And those nervous Nellies and those Neddy naysayers have been with us throughout Australian history. At every point when we were doing some realm of separation from the UK, the nervous Nellies and the Neddy naysayers came forward and said, “We can’t, we won’t, we shouldn’t. It’s not broke we shouldn’t change the system.” Every time they’ve been ignored, we’ve done it anyway and we’ve proved that we can do it.

Throughout the 1890s, before we were about to federate, they were there everywhere. It was done anyway, we brought all the colonies together in the country, it’s worked fabulously well since.

The first time it was put forward that Australia should have a flag of its own there was an outcry, “No, let’s stay with the Union Jack.” We did it anyway, it’s gone well since.

And I might say on the subject of the flag, the Australian Republican Movement has no position whatsoever on the flag. That is a totally separate issue.

I however, do have a view on the flag. I love the line put forward by Jerry Seinfeld when he came to Australia in the year 2000 and he said, “I love your flag, Great Britain at night.”

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In 1930 the Prime Minister, James Scullin, came up with not a revolutionary idea but an evolutionary idea. And it was a very simple idea. And the idea was instead of having minor British aristocrats and generals as the Governor General of Australia, why don't we have one of our own? Why don't we have an Australian? There was an outcry. He picked the Chief Justice of the High Court, Isaac Isaacs, a Jewish man, at a time when anti-Semitism was rampant throughout the world.

One hundred and fifty thousand Australians signed a petition to King George to say we can't, we won't, we shouldn't, we can't have this guy. The problem was not that he was Jewish, the problem was he was Australian. It was done anyway and it worked fabulously and has worked fabulously ever since with one of our own as Governor General.

In the 1960s the idea was put forward, instead of having an image of the Queen of England on every stamp that we put on every letter, let's have symbols of our own. Let's have quintessentially Australian symbols.

The same process was gone through in New Zealand, a great friend of mine the All Black winger Eric Rush tells the story of growing up in provincial New Zealand. Everywhere he went he saw an image of the Queen of England on the stamp, posted them all himself, put them on the letters.

When the All Blacks were presented to the Queen in 1992 at Buckingham Palace Eric said, "I was not sure whether to shake her hand or to lick her on the back of the head."

The older ones will remember the outcry against the stamp. We did it anyway and we've proven that it's the right thing to do. There were people who said, "We can't change from God Save the Queen, we must continue that as our song."

The outcry, the shaking of the fists at the heaven. It was done anyway. It's been proven that it's better to have our own anthem, be our own people.

The big one for me, the privy council. Up until 1975 if you, as an Australian, were not happy with the Australian judicial system then that's alright, they're only Australians, let's go to the English law lords of the privy council.

Gough. Gough was the one that said, "No, let's trust the Australian legal mechanism." There was an absolute outcry. It's been done anyway and we've proven for the last 40 years we can do it ourselves.

So this snip that I recommend, it's just the last one, it's just the last part of the process. And there will be people who will again say if the big one is, the reasons that are put up against it.

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I'll say with Gough, I've had the privilege of interviewing all of our Prime Ministers since Gough. I was a great admirer of Gough on many fronts.

I often tell the story I got to know him when I was writing the biography of our erstwhile opposition leader, Kim Beazley. I knew so little about my subject when I began that after my first meeting with Kim in Canberra I flew back to Sydney and, what I thought was triumph, sent an email to my editor in chief saying I've just agreed to write Kim Beazley's biography, I might be needing some time off. He sent me back an email saying well done, I'm sure you'll do yourself and the *Herald* proud, I think you should know, however, that Beazley is spelt with a Z.

So began the two most dreadful years of my life, staring at the cracks in the ceiling night after night thinking God help me, whatever made me think I could write a political biography. And I always went back to a story the Herald had sent me on in '93 to accompany the late, great Gough on a five day sojourn into Perth.

I've never forgotten that trip for going through the Ansett Air Terminal at Sydney Airport, such as it then was. Mr Whitlam leading the way, me with the carry-on luggage behind, both his and mine.

And as we go through the metal detectors, Mr Whitlam must've still had his house keys or his car keys in his pocket because sure enough there was a sudden 'err err', like that. Little guys came in to hover all over him with those metal wand detectors and Mr Whitlam, without breaking his stride, turned to them and said, "I think you'll find it's my aura."

I also choose to cite another Australian Prime Minister and my interaction with another Australian Prime Minister and put that story at the service of us becoming a republic because in the course of my journalist life and writing life, I have had cause to reflect upon Australian politics and it is fabulous.

We are a fabulous Australian people with a wonderful sense of our politics. And the thing that I love most about our politics is our sense of egalitarianism.

It is a point of honour in this country that we don't have a first lady or a first man. We don't have an Air Force One or an Air Force Two. We don't fly our senior politicians 80 kilometres in helicopters between Melbourne and Geelong, or at least not very often.

We like our leaders to remain of the people and we punish them should ever they get uppity on us.

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And the best example I can offer, and this is exactly what happened in '91 after six months of faxes and phone calls, I was finally able to achieve an interview with the Prime Minister of the day, Bob Hawke.

All he could spare me was 10 minutes at half time of a soccer game between Australia and Brazil and sure enough, at half time, into the corporate box comes the Prime Minister of Australia. He sits down, just the two of us and I put the tape recorder on the table and I said, "Sir, tell me about your greatest sporting moment." And he set the scene.

There he was on the third fairway of the Royal Canberra Golf Course and at the moment that he struck the ball, it's the sweetest sound he's ever heard as it sails away towards the green. A little bit to the left but he's made allowance for the wind. Lands on the green a little bit to the right but the spin that he so cleverly put upon it means it's trickling towards the cup for a hole in one. The only one in his whole life, the only time a sitting President or Prime Minister ever got a hole in one.

And he's just getting to the climactic moment of this hole in one when suddenly a waitress appears. Nice, middle aged woman, thingummybob in the hair to keep the hair back, Spotless Catering with a maroon apron with the squiggly white writing. Who, without so much as a by-your-leave or [clears throat] "Excuse me Mr Hawke," simply says, "How will you have your coffee, Mr Hawke?"

Bob Hawke, no eye contact whatsoever imperiously flicks his left hand, his way of saying I am the Prime Minister, I'm getting to the climactic moment of a fabulous story that will run page one, tomorrow's *Sydney Morning Herald*, don't interrupt me now, come back in a minute. That's not what he said but that is what that meant.

And she, to her eternal Australian credit, doesn't hesitate half a second, says, "How will you have your coffee, Mr Hawke?"

And I cannot do justice to his reply but it was like his left eyebrow was a fat caterpillar slumbering in the sun, suddenly bitten by a bee because it shoots up his forehead, he fixes her with this laser beam stare and he starts in on her, ruff, ruff, ruff, ruff, ruff, ruff, ruff. Barks at her for about 10 seconds.

She flounces off and returns one minute later with a beautiful cup of creamy coffee and two Tim Tam biscuits for me and nothing for the Prime Minister.

As I sat there, sipping my coffee and eating both of my Tim Tams, while he had diddly squat, I thought what a terrific country this is to be in. You wouldn't see it in any other country in the world.

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Can you imagine the President of the United States, the Queen of England, the President of Russia, the Emperor of Japan, any of the Asian leaders, any of the South American leaders ever being treated in such a cavalier fashion as that? It just wouldn't happen.

It happens in this country every day and it's in our blood. It's in our blood that nobody is better than we are and yet we persist with a system, we persist with a system whereby when you compare your photos of your Christmas Day and your birthday parties, of all of your 20 people in your family and the 25 aunts and uncles and cousins and you put that photo up against the photo of the Queen of England, the Duke and the 25 on the Buckingham Palace balcony.

Under the current system every single one of the members of that family, on that balcony, is more qualified to be the Australian Head of State than one of your family. Doesn't that just get you? Doesn't it just make you want to rise up and say, "Enough already with this nonsense."

Because those who support the current system understand that under the current system the third most qualified person to be the Australian Head of State is two years old, okay. That's the way the system works.

And we have a choice in this country right now, as we go into this next campaign. We are either a proud, freestanding, multicultural people. Not with a history of 200 years, not with a history of 240 years, our people have been here for 60,000 years. Or we're a lost tribe of white fellas only, marooned on an island in the South Pacific, still believing in the magic powers of the palace and the place once we came. Again, I say we are better than that.

And there will be, I reckon if this room breaks down into the way the Australian electorate is on the subject of the republic, it'll be about this, half of you will be for us, a quarter of you will be agin us and a quarter of you don't care, you just want to keep watching the Kardashians.

The challenge for the republican movement is to go from our current surge, we've gone from 40% to 51%. We need to get it to about 60% before we get to the political class to be with us and particularly behind us.

A lot of people point to Malcolm Turnbull who, when my wife interviewed him on his first days as Prime Minister she said, "What about the republic?" He said, "This shouldn't be a politician's movement, it's got to be a people's movement." And he's right. And we need to get that up to 60% so we actually need your energy.

Never, ever, I mean I'm talking to the converted here, but the power of community organisations to change the world is extraordinary. There was a brilliant piece written in the Sun Herald last Sunday about the Victorian CWA. Matter of fact I wrote it.

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And when the Victorian CWA, God bless your cotton socks, when you come out in support of gay marriage, it is game over. You know, seriously, if you've got the Victorian CWA with you, you know.

Again, we 'll get half of you with us and a few of you agin us but there'll be a few people who'll say, "No, no, no, let's wait until the Queen dies." Let's have it so that the blood pressure, rising or falling of a woman living in England, is actually far more important than the sovereignty of 25 million of our fellow Australians.

Among those who take that view is our Prime Minister. And, I mean, the thing I just want to put to you on this, there is a choice on that. We can either do it as grown-ups or we can do it as littlies and slip out the back.

I mean, let's just say we wait until the Queen dies. Imagine the scene, the helicopters are in the air over Westminster Abbey. The world is watching as they farewell a great English queen. And she is. And they're, "What? What? Zoom in there Larry. What's happening out the back? Who's slipping out the back of Westminster Abbey? It's Australia." With the Akubra, with the Driza-Bone, the rollie out the corner of the mouth, slipping out the back, throws it on the steps, butts it out and who's coming up the other way? King Charles. He's been waiting for this moment for 75 years. And Australia takes one look at him and says, "You, you bastard. We've had your mum for seven decades, we're not going to cop you for five minutes."

I put it to you seriously, does he deserve that humiliation? Is that even fair to him? It's not. It's seriously not fair to him. If we're going to do this as grown-ups, let's get on with it, let's put our reasons out there and let's do it.

Or, as I say, to do it as grown-ups, we get on with this, you go home to your communities, you spread the word, you say there's a great Australian movement that's moving, we can be a part of a great historical process and we do it as grown-ups.

We get such a massive people behind us, signing up for the republican movement and then the best part, we invite the Queen of England to come to Australia.

And instead of bowing or scraping or curtsying or rolling on our back and hoping she'll tickle our tummy, instead of that we rise up as one, we give her a thunderous standing ovation and we say sincerely from the heart, "Thank you your Majesty for the sterling service you have rendered our nation. We will be forever grateful." She hands over the keys, we kick the tires, we start the engine, we take it for a burn around the block. We'll say, "We'll buy it." And then we give her a lift to the airport. And we're done. And what a fabulous moment it would be to be a part of.

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And that moment will come in four or five years if we get behind it. And when it does, when Australia becomes a republic, when that wonderful day happens and that even better night, how proud people will be to be republicans.

But those who've been a member of the republican movement can be something more. They can be pleased because they've actually had something to do with it.

As I say, against it, the reasons that are put out against it, one of my favourites is, "No, no, no, we'll be kicked out of the Commonwealth Games." I'm not joking, that is constantly put out there. I make the point and I make it gently, trying not to be a loud dickhead, that there are 54 nations who are a part of the commonwealth nations.

On the Queen's watch, 33 of them have become republics. They still turn up at the Commonwealth Games, they're still welcome. The CHOGM meeting, the commonwealth heads of government that was held last year in October was held in Malta. What is Malta? It's a republic. It's been a republic, a successful republic, for 40 years. So that's one reason.

The other one, the really big one is, if it ain't broke, don't fix it. Please. When half the people define themselves as republicans say, "I don't want that system. The system is broke." And we're not talking about Joe's bulldozers to wipe out the whole system and build it up a fresh. We're talking about, in the minimalist model, it's a simple tweak, it's a simple cutting of the umbilical cord. I could go on, it won't surprise you.

But a couple of other things I'll just say quickly. One is people ask about the indigenous recognition. I mean, there are other issues. One is we are all for indigenous recognition. We think that that should go next year.

I mean, gay marriage, I'm very passionate about the virtues of gay marriage. I think that will probably go ahead of us. But if we all get behind us, look to Ireland. When they normalised gay marriage or same sex marriage, what a celebration it was. That was the people of Ireland who had gone door to door, house to house and they changed the country and nobody can doubt that it's a better country for it.

The thing that I have realised after many years of telling stories in many forums is when I find myself starting to ramble I tend to do what the Americans did in Vietnam, I like to declare victory and leave.

I won't do that on this occasion, I'll just throw the floor open to any questions you might have. Thank you.

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