



Australian of the Year Patrick McGorry's lecture at the 2010 National Republican Lecture

REPUBLIC! AUSTRALIA'S TEST OF MATURITY

"I accept with the greatest alacrity the high honour you have done me in calling me to the chair of this majestic meeting. I feel more honoured than I ever did in my life, with one single exception....." Daniel O'Connell 1843

The exception in my case I think is obvious.

Tonight I am going to talk about why it is time for Australia to pass the test of maturity and finally emerge from its prolonged adolescence into the full flower of independent adulthood as the Republic of Australia.

I intend to talk firstly about the origins and meaning of national maturity, secondly why national maturity provides an antidote to current political disenchantment, and finally how national maturity must be based on integration of our disparate cultural legacies.

I have begun with a quote from the Liberator, Daniel O'Connell MP, the great pacifist leader of the 19th century whose name is honoured in Sydney and Melbourne nearly as much as in his native Ireland. He was the forerunner of Gandhi and of the peaceful mass movement for freedom. He succeeded in delivering Catholic Emancipation in 1829, but not in the repeal of the act of Union. This would take the best part of 100 years to realise.

Another great 19th century Irish independence leader, Charles Stewart Parnell, once said "No man has the right to fix the boundary to the march of a nation. No man has the right to say to his country, 'Thus far shalt thou go and no further'." Yet both sides of Australian politics are seeking to set the boundary to Australia's progress. It is as unacceptable for Australia in 2010 as it was in Ireland in 1885

I am a life-long republican, an Irish-Australian and I am a psychiatrist who has spent the last 25 years focussed on the struggle of young people as they make the tortuous and increasingly protracted transition to adulthood. I am not a historian or a constitutional lawyer so my lecture will be personal and intuitive. I can see parallels

for our nation as it stares into the middle distance towards the horizon of national maturity. Just like any adolescent or emerging adult we know we will get there; but the question is when? Tonight I say let us seek our “tryst with destiny”¹ as did India in 1947 on the eve of independence from colonial rule. Australia’s adolescence has lasted more than 100 years since Federation. This is one world record we shouldn’t be proud of.

By way of personal background, I was born in Ireland to an Irish Catholic father with strong “West-Brit” tendencies. His father had served in the old RIC, his brother had fought for the British Army in WW1, and he himself had worked in England as a doctor and had served in the British Navy as a Surgeon-Lieutenant in WW11. My mother was born in Australia to an Irish Protestant mother and English father (who had fought in the Boer war and with the AIF at Gallipoli and Palestine) but had grown up in Dublin in the early years of the Irish Free State immediately post independence. My family moved to Wales when I was 2 in the mid 1950s, and later to Australia, when I was 15, in 1968. Despite this relatively anglophilic family atmosphere, my earliest sympathies were totally republican and nationalist, and I read Irish history with a passion from middle childhood. My first political party membership was of Plaid Cymru, the Welsh Nationalist Party in the 1960s. From my first days in Australia I vividly recall finding it aversive to gaze upon the Union Jack on the Australian Flag. It was only a growing love of Australia during the inspiring and heady days of the Whitlam government which overcame my reluctance to accept the Queen as Head of State when I became an Australian citizen in Randwick Town Hall in May 1975.

Australia, like America, has had very profound influences early in its settled history shaping its national psyche. Dr. Tony Moore, in his wonderful recent book “Death or Liberty”, has reminded us of Australia’s magnificent history of republican martyrs and heroes who were brought here in chains. He reconnects us with this unique essence of the Australian nation and argues that its failure to appeal to the heart and not the head has seriously weakened the Australian Republican Movement. We have heard too much in recent years from constitutional lawyers on the republic and not enough from the heart and soul of Australia. From the martyrs of the Scottish Enlightenment, the United Irishmen, the English Tolpuddle Martyrs, the Canadian Patriots, the Chartists, the Young Irelanders, the Fenians, and the spirit of Eureka. Australia has enormous wellsprings of egalitarian and republican spirit, but it has been suppressed and half-forgotten. We must disperse this amnesia. The Governorship of Lachlan Macquarie, arguably the Father of Australia, whose bicentennial we celebrate this year, and who gave us the gift of the “fair go”, is another precious, again newly rediscovered, influence:

“It has been My Invariable Opinion...that, Once a Convict has become Free Man, either by Servitude, Free Pardon, or Emancipation, he should in All

¹ Tryst with Destiny: The title of a famous speech made by Jawaharlal Nehru, on the eve of Indian independence in 1947.

Respects be Considered on a footing with every other Man in the Colony, according to his Rank in Life and Character. In Short, that no Retrospect Should in any Case be had to his having been a Convict."

Lachlan Macquarie to Lord Bathurst, 28 June 1813

America was suffused with high ideals flowing from flight from religious persecution and the Enlightenment, and fired in the forge of armed revolution. Australia's early years were a crucible in which freedom and a second chance beckoned beyond brutal repression. Both countries now struggle to match reality to the myth and many would argue have seriously lost their way. This week as a disillusioned nation struggles to recreate its national government, perhaps we need to look more deeply into our history and values to rediscover the Australia's secret and her mature future.

My own life course and my work with young people has allowed me glimpses into what is required to make a successful transition to maturity and independent adulthood. There are a number of threats to this process. If someone's early years have been blighted by a chaotic environment, or by systematic abuse and neglect, this may undermine a sense of self-esteem and confidence. If one has a dominating and overbearing parent who inhibits the child's emerging sense of self and independence than that is clearly a problem. If the child idealises the parent and fails to establish a sense of separate identity then that also can be a barrier to independence. This is known as identity foreclosure. If the child feels unprotected and isolated a long way from home, then there will be a natural tendency to adhere tenaciously to old parental ties or search for surrogates. If there is illness, external threat or disaster, then this can derail a healthy process of maturation and cause regression or stagnation. All of these influences can have effects either to promote or undermine the development of a strong and independent sense of self. Many have previously speculated on how these influences have affected Australia's development as a nation up until the mid 20th century. Some indeed may be valid reasons for a cautious approach. However sixty five years after the the end of the Second World War and the involution of the British Empire, we are way beyond reasonable caution.

Hence I am more interested in how Australia, having achieved a good measure of self-government in the 19th century and, in contrast to Latin America, federated successfully, could become stalled as it has in its march to nationhood. It has been a clear case of identity foreclosure. There were early signs of separation anxiety during the 1926 Imperial Conference, which gave us the (second) Balfour Declaration of 1926, defining the evolving rights of the Dominions. Australia by all reports was the most immature of the children, and was most reluctant to accept these increasing measures of independence. Not surprisingly, South Africa, the Irish Free State and Canada were much more keen.



As an aside, the term Commonwealth of Australia should have set us on the right track. However this term was selected in 1901, but it is a form of proto-republic (the term “res publica” means something like common wealth) having been used when England itself was briefly a republic under Cromwell. Interestingly, during the 1990s, the British MP Tony Benn sought to end the monarchy by peaceful means and re-establish a Commonwealth of Britain via a series of failed private member’s bills in the House of Commons. Well the Commonwealth of Australia is still pretty “proto” if not “retro”.

Returning to the subject of adolescence, it is interesting to note that during the period since the 1960s, in which Australia could have conceivably matured, overcome cultural cringe and become a genuine republic, we have seen a slow down in the rate and quality of maturation of recent cohorts of adolescents. While children start on the road to adulthood earlier these days in a precocious way as “tweens”, the road itself has been stretched out and the trek is a much longer one. It is easy to lose one’s way, to lose heart, to turn back and regroup. Some fall by the wayside, many are damaged or disabled, or just take time out, but most make it in the end if belatedly. Oddly enough, just like Australia herself, even though in all practical aspects they seem adult, recent research clearly reveals that young people in the early 21st century describe themselves subjectively as not fully mature or independent. So Australia is like the 27 year old who just won’t leave home! A Gen

Y nation! The key tasks of this long transitional period of emerging adulthood are to develop a sense of identity as an individual person, to physically separate from the family of origin and live independently, to obtain meaningful employment and support oneself financially, to develop a strong peer network of friends and evolve an adult to adult relationship with one's parents. Threats to this these days include rising family discord and chaos, rampant materialism and the widespread availability of alcohol and drugs. What is Australia's excuse?

While disadvantage can blight lives during this transitional stage, we often see the offspring of the very privileged and affluent struggle with these tasks. This provides a clue to Australia's maturational arrest. We have not had to fight for our sense of identity in our own right. Historians have often pointed out that, the major wellsprings to this aspect of our national identity are either battles fought on behalf of our parent (Britain) or ones fought side by side with a surrogate parent or much older sibling (the USA) who had come to our rescue in time of huge threat. As with the children of the rich we have had less motivation to fight for ourselves. That is an old argument, which compares us unfavourably with Ireland, India and the US, as well as a host of successful and not so successful post-colonial nations. I would say however that the early post-colonial period can be very harsh since the colonial experience is like being a ward of the state. The state, just like the colonialist, is all too often a bad parent. We are well aware of the sad fate of so many children during state care and beyond, that is the graduates of orphanages and statutory care.

The second modern force eroding our initiative and independence is the affluence and materialism that has taken hold in recent decades in Australia and the developed world. The comfort zone that we now inhabit has sapped much purpose, meaning and values from life in general. This makes it hard for us to find direction in life as individuals and collectively as a nation. The thirst for maturity and authenticity that has been created by this sad trend was on view in recent days as the public gave its verdict on what has been on offer during the election campaign. It is from this depleted soil that springs the prevailing orthodoxy that the republic, while supported in principle, is not a priority. Like so many other national priorities, the republic has no real champions. Other, grubby materialistic and hedonistic issues are more pressing, progress is deferred and thus denied, and we are repeatedly told and meekly accept that we cannot focus on multiple agendas. Meaning and symbols are not important. Our buried and potential identity is a peripheral issue. I sense from last week's election result that this is a serious misreading of the peoples' deeper needs and desires. We now see these aspirations being projected onto a small band of independent MPs. It is a big ask. Leaders will not promote the issue of the republic, nor other issues of principle for fear of offending the focus groups, so where will the momentum come from. This is where we need to return to the example of the Liberator, Daniel O'Connell MP, and adapt it for the 21st century.

How can the republic become a mainstream issue? Let's consider all the various strands of our multicultural Australian society and see how they can be woven

together to securely embrace maturity. Let's start with Indigenous Australians. Larissa Behrendt points out in her 2005 National Republican Lecture: "The Australian Dream: Indigenous Peoples in an Australian Republic" that the republic must capture the hearts and minds of Australians and encapsulate the very values that make us uniquely Australian. She includes among these the "fair go" and, drawing on Mark McKenna's work, sees reconciliation as essential to the creation of the republic. Paul Keating, arguably our greatest Australian republican, in his iconic Redfern Park speech of 10th December 1992, some 15 years before the national apology of 2008, stated:

"They have shaped our identity. They are there in the Australian legend. We should never forget - they helped build this nation. And if we have a sense of justice, as well as common sense, we will forge a new partnership."

He also went on to say that:

"The message should be that there is nothing to fear or to lose in the recognition of historical truth, or the extension of social justice, or the deepening of Australian social democracy to include indigenous Australians."

This latter message resonates with the integration of the egalitarian tradition of the fair go of Macquarie and the related anti-authoritarian legacy bequeathed from the convicts and especially the cohorts of political prisoners and dissenters. Even those states without a convict history took in the dissenters, the dispossessed of Ireland and the poor of Britain.

In the wake of Kevin Rudd's apology of 2008, the key unresolved issue is revealed as the original British claim to the sovereignty of Australia. While the apology may have facilitated some resolution of the many atrocities and humiliations committed during the course of colonisation, it is hard to see how the unextinguished claims of the Aboriginal peoples to sovereignty of this country can be responded to while the Union Jack still has pride of place on our flag and the Queen of England is head of state. Only a republic can transcend this problem.

Once again the Irish experience seems relevant to me in trying to understand the Aboriginal perspective. Last year I spent a period of sabbatical leave in Ireland, the first time I had actually lived there for an extended time as an adult. While I probably felt things very much from the standpoint of the exile or "plastic Paddy" as we are sometimes derided, I read Irish history in depth again, but with a different insight and during the crash of the Celtic tiger. It is a long colonial history of genocide, ethnic cleansing and cultural vandalism similar in style to what beset the Aboriginal people of Australia and other new world countries. The effects were similar for a long time during the colonial period and even after independence in 1921, it has taken 90 years to begin to overcome these. There are still residual stains in the national psyche of Ireland, marking a subtle lack of self-belief under stress and to an Irish-Australian an unexpected respect for authority disconcerting

to an exile, who idealises the egalitarianism and fighting spirit which have been gifts of the Irish to the new world. The healing and cleansing of these colonial stains centrally involves reconciliation of all strands of Irish life. In the Republic of Ireland, for example, there is a belated recognition of those Irishmen, Catholic and Protestant, like my relatives, who fought, not with the venerated IRA heroes who liberated Ireland during the War of Independence from 1918-21, but for the British Army in WW1 in much larger numbers. I learned that even republican independence from the long hated colonist did not rapidly or fully resolve the hurt and the humiliation for the long dispossessed, but that time and reconciliation were needed for this to approach completion. How challenging and central will this process be for Aboriginal people in the new Australian republic? The republic will be necessary, I think essential, but not sufficient, for reconciliation with the indigenous people of this land.

Turning to those migrants and refugees of the post war period with no connection to England or Britain, it is likely that they will feel much more at ease within a multicultural Australian republic. I have carefully read Huy Truong's 2004 National Republican Lecture which supports this point of view, emphasising how a republic would overcome the insecurity of the guest mentality that many still feel. This insecurity feeds and is fanned by the hysteria of recent years flowing from the asylum seeker debacle and the related tide of primitive nationalism which culminated in the Cronulla riots where the current Australian flag was misused and tarnished. An Australian republic and I believe a new flag will clearly build confidence of non-Anglo migrants as stakeholders in the future of Australia.

For those descendants of what was one the Irish Catholic underclass of the 19th and early 20th century, subsequently the counter-establishment and ultimately now a seamless element of the establishment and mainstream society itself, perhaps it no longer matters to most of them. However the connection with the past, while largely amnesic, still matters in symbol, tone and spirit, and these ancestors would rest more comfortably within an Australian republic. In the present day, the power of this unconscious bond is felt by Irish and Australians alike when they visit each others' countries for the first time. For a long time the Irish-Australian contribution to Australian republicanism has been furtively denied for fear of frightening the old sectarian horses. Those horses are long dead in this country and it is safe to tap into this valid vein of republican support.

Finally, for what is still by far the majority of Australians, those of British birth or descent, what is their position? Some perhaps, especially more recent arrivals, retain understandable affection for the link with Britain and are comfortable with the Union Jack on the Australian flag. For others the passage of time, some dilution effects and the failure of national maturity has spawned a surly dissonance reflected in antipathy to English sporting teams and the perjorative term "Pommy bastard". The Anglo-Australians are at greatest risk of contributing to maturational arrest. But I would argue that their mature option is to throw in their lot with the Indigenous, and those of Irish, other European and non-European background.

Indeed what is so heartening is how many Australians of Anglo origin do in fact support the republic. They should have a central place in a new Australian republic.

The solution. I wonder if the leaders have truly learned something from the reaction of the public to the recent election campaign. We need an awakening of spirit, an acceptance of historical truths, and a rediscovery of original Australian values. The youth of Australia have not only helped in the diagnosis of the malaise of delayed maturation but in their endeavour to deal with this challenge, they may have also shown us the solution. If Daniel O’Connell were alive today (and under 25) he would be CEO of Getup! These young people have helped to ignite our political and social world. We need the 21st century equivalent of Gandhi’s Indian Independence Movement or the Polish Solidarity Movement to galvanise and mobilise the Australian people. The Australian Republican Movement could re-energise itself, assume this mantle and embrace the techniques and strategies of Getup and the politics of the street and the town hall. We need to surge forward to an Australian “tryst with destiny” as reflected in this quote from Milan Kundera:

“The best progressive ideas are those that include a strong dose of provocation to make its supporters feel proud of being original, but at the same time attract so many adherents that the risk of being an isolated exception is immediately averted by the noisy approval of a triumphant crowd.”

Kundera 1978: *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*.

Let’s provoke and inspire Australians to finally face up to the test of maturity, our own tryst with destiny, and become adherents to the seriously progressive idea and reality of Australia as a truly independent republic with its own unique and complex identity.