

THE PEOPLE'S PROTEST

by K. Jones, ACM Publishing, Sydney, 2000, 218pp

Reviewer: John Warhurst*

This is a very uneven book. For a republican it is interesting and irritating at the same time. On the one hand it is a passionate and informative insider's account of one side of the major political struggle over the republic issue, while on the other it is petty, spiteful and partisan. For the former reason it takes a valuable place among a very limited number of first hand campaign accounts, including some by her republican opponents. And despite the latter criticism I would recommend that republicans read it. Those defeated in politics are stupid if they do not learn from those who have beaten them.

Do not go to this book for an even-handed discussion of the difficulties in achieving constitutional change in Australia by referendum. There is not even a hint of that. This is a story, in leading monarchist David Flint's words on the back cover, of victory against 'overwhelming odds'.

The People's Protest is a very personal story. It is subtitled: 'being a true and accurate account of The Republic Debate, 1992–1999 and the 1999 Republic Referendum as observed by Kerry Jones.' Jones was Executive Director, Australians for Constitutional Monarchy and Chairman, Government No Case Campaign Committee. She gives a most informative insight into the ACM and NO campaigns. She takes particular care to record the contributions of an extremely wide range of office-holders and volunteers on her side of the battle. I commend her for that, though a commercial publisher would probably have wanted some of this detail cut out. There are advantages in your own organisation publishing your book. Among the disadvantages are that there are a number of glaring typographical errors.

I was particularly impressed by Jones's preparation for her campaigns. She is a shrewd operator with thoughtful ideas about strategy. She was underestimated, to their cost, by many republicans.

She heaps lavish praise on her colleagues and allies, while loading scorn on her opponents. Bill Hayden is 'one of the greatest Australians I have ever met'. Neville Bonner is 'a great Australian and a great leader'. Ted Mack is 'a fine and honourable man'. Bronwyn Bishop is 'brilliant'. Her defence of John Howard is extravagant.

At the same time she hardly ever has anything good to say about her opposition. Perhaps to be expected is the virulence of her denigration of her chief Australian Republican Movement and YES campaign opponents, Malcolm Turnbull and Greg

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Barns. The conservative republicans, Andrew Robb and Greg Craven, suffer the same fate. But she reserves her greatest spite for those Liberal Party leaders, such as Jeff Kennett and Malcolm Fraser, who dared to advocate the republican cause. She links Kennett's republicanism to his later election defeat in a ridiculous manner, made even more so by the fact that since this book was written the main state leaders opposed to the republic, Richard Court (Western Australia) and Rob Borbidge (Queensland), have retired from politics after equally ignominious defeats.

In her eyes this is a battle against good and evil, between 'the ordinary Aussie mum, putting her family first' and arrogant, multi-millionaire republicans. I am not sure whether this is self-delusion or clever politics. It may be both. She gives no indication of realising her own extremely privileged position. Only briefly, when she discusses meeting YES campaigners on polling day, does she see that her opponents were ordinary people fighting for their cause, just as she was. She complains (p. 110) that 'the ARM could only ever see events from their own point of view'. Yet, remarkably, that describes her own approach in this book. She observes: 'I doubt if ever before in Australian history members of all major political parties as well as those not aligned to politics before, all laughed and smiled together as they prepared to man booths and hand out vote NO cards' (p. 192). I could not help thinking that that perfectly described my own experience within the YES Coalition and the Australian Republican Movement in the Australian Capital Territory.

There are examples of paranoia throughout this book, especially in relation to the ARM and the ABC. Jones clearly felt extremely sensitive towards press criticism of the NO case. In part this is explained by her location in Sydney, where the YES case did receive support from the metropolitan press and *The Australian*. But it is far from the whole story. In a number of states, including South Australia and Western Australia, the YES case did not have press support, and, Australia-wide, other media, especially influential talk-back radio, was extremely detrimental to the YES case. Still this book reminds me that an objective study of the role of the media in the referendum campaign would still be extremely informative. ▲