

***FIGHTING FOR THE REPUBLIC,***

by Malcolm Turnbull, Hardie Grant Books, 2000, ix, +262.

Reviewer: David Flint\*

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Malcolm Turnbull had everything going for him. During the better part of a decade, with up to \$150 million of taxpayers' money, his Australian Republican Movement produced not one, but two republican models. And by the 1999 referendum he has the full support of the ALP, who promise to campaign as if it were a federal election. There are revealing glimpses in this memoir of Turnbull's instructions on how Kim Beazley should present the case! He also has the support of a good part of the Liberal Party organisation, and most sitting politicians. (A whopping 93% in Tasmania.) The establishment is not only on side, but is uncharacteristically outspoken. The Vice Chancellor of Melbourne University warns a No vote will result in acute international embarrassment! Three distinguished jurists, Sir Zelman Cowan, Sir Anthony Mason and Sir Gerard Brennan, certify the model as safe, even though two of them had previously expressed serious reservations. The overwhelming majority of Australia's political journalists, editors and the press throw themselves enthusiastically into the campaign. And Turnbull has vast resources — in the Convention elections he outspends Australians for Constitutional Monarchy 5:1.

And yet, he loses. By a landslide. All States and the Northern Territory vote No. Seventy two percent of all electorates, rising to ninety three percent in Queensland and Western Australia. Why?

The Yes campaign is at best mediocre. There are too many contradictory messages from the ARM and its satellite organisations.

And as Turnbull fears, the No case, through the careful husbanding of its funding, gets a 'better bang for its buck'.

The ARM makes the mistake of thinking they are fighting an election. Campaign Director, Greg Barns — 'aggressive, blunt and often very abrasive' — decides to target individuals. He launches 'a very personal attack on Flint'. All a complete waste of time, nobody is standing for election. The personalisation of the campaign is exposed in these memoirs. It is clear that Turnbull does not think much of those who dare oppose him.

Thus John Howard is Nick Minchin's 'ventriloquist', Ted Mack delivers 'a contemptible tirade', Sophie Panopoulos is 'most offensive', Phil Clearly 'irrational', Peter Reith 'shameless'. Kerry Jones is 'cynical', 'shrill', 'personal', 'provocative' and 'outrageous as usual'. David Flint speaks with an 'affected pseudo British accent'. He predicts Flint's book, *The Cane Toad Republic*, will be remaindered. Flint is not a 'constitutional lawyer at all'. (This from a writer who claims every single constitutional text refers to the Queen as head of state — presumably in invisible ink.)

Opposition from within is equally *verboten*. Steve Vizard is 'troublesome'. Mark Day is almost expelled for asking whether Turnbull is past his use-by date.

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Yet other errors are made. In the Electoral Commission pamphlet for all voters, many of the Yes case pages are totally blank. Opposite each is a page full of more reasons to vote No!

But all this is all peripheral, for there are two fundamental reasons for the defeat. First the model. It is unacceptable. Not only is it a politician's republic, but it is one in which it will be far easier for the Prime Minister to sack the President than his cook. The people smell a rat. The lesson from this is that politicians should reflect very carefully before they divert any more of the people's hard-earned money from, say, health, or education, or roads, to this folly. Not only because the onus is on the Turnbolls of this world to demonstrate — in the words of one of the Founders of our nation — that there is strong evidence that the adoption of the precise model they propose, and not some vague idea, is 'desirable, irresistible and inevitable'.

The other fundamental reason is that this issue just does not register with the Australian people. Forget about single issue opinion polls. Just think of the issues Australians really care about — the Olympics, the flag (and don't the republicans hate that), East Timor and what happened to the Rugby League.

Months before the referendum, Turnbull confesses this, but only to his diary. He writes: 'we have Buckley's chance of winning.' Why? 'The problem is nobody is interested..'

This confession makes more fatuous Turnbull's claim when he grudgingly concedes defeat, that history will remember John Howard for only one thing — that he was the Prime Minister who broke the heart of the nation. (Turnbull's advisers should have warned him not to say this — but they had their own delusions. Greg Barns and others wanted him to claim the defeat as 'a victory for the republic'. Some victory!)

That this is a non-issue was obvious in the campaign itself. The *Daily Telegraph*, Sydney's largest circulating newspaper, promoted a major debate on the republic before the referendum. The promotions appeared regularly on its daily page 'Queen v Country'. As paid advertisements they would have cost a small fortune. With outstanding speakers, in Parramatta Park, the geographic heart of the city, the very centre of the *Telegraph's* readership, at lunchtime on a Friday, it was sure to attract such a crowd as would rival an AFL grand final! How many attended? Tens of Thousands? Thousands? Perhaps hundreds? No. About seventy. Seventy, including the speakers and the *Telegraph's* staff.

Mr Turnbull was right in July 1999, and he is still right today. Nobody is interested. ▲