Australia is a constitutional monarchy and our head of state is the Queen. Some have argued Australia should become a republic with a president as the head of state. This lesson explores constitutional monarchy and the two major republican models established in the 1990s leading up to the 1999 referendum. These models will be examined through a round-table debate which culminates in a class referendum.

**Outcomes**

Students will:

- experience round table debate
- understand the role of a head of state
- explore constitutional monarchy and republican governments in general
- examine parliamentary and popular republican government
- explore referenda as a mechanism for constitutional change.

**Focus questions**

- What is a constitutional monarchy?
- What is a republic?
- What is a head of state?
- What is the role of the Governor-General?
- What is a president?
- What is a referendum?
- What is the prime minister's role?

**Concept words**

Sovereign • Monarch • Head of state • Governor-General • President • Constitution
Convention • Executive government • Legislative • Separation of powers • Veto
Reserve powers • Commander-in-chief • Royal assent • Referenda • Donkey vote

**USEFUL TOOLS**

ABC Definitions
Sovereign: King or Queen of a country. One person having supreme rank, authority or power, being above all others in importance, character or excellence. The physical embodiment of a monarchy.

Republic: a state in which the supreme power rests in the body of citizens entitled to vote and is exercised by representatives chosen directly or indirectly by them. Often this state is headed by an individual president whose title is almost never inherited.

Documents and resources
PEO Quick Answers
Getting started

1. To initiate discussion, ask the students what is the highest position of political authority in Australia? (*create a list on the board and identify the Queen, Governor-General and Prime Minister*)

2. Ask who is our head of state? (*distinguish between political power and constitutional authority. The prime minister has, in practice, greater political power, but the Queen is our head of state and her representative, the Governor-General, carries out her duties in Australia according to the Australian Constitution and conventions, including giving bills final approval.*)

3. Ask students to identify Australia’s current head of state and Governor-General. (*Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and Her Excellency Ms Quentin Bryce AC*)

4. Given these facts, what then is Australia’s system of government known as? (*a constitutional monarchy*)

5. Ask students what they understand by the term republic and define this term on the board.

Main activity

Getting started

1. Tell the students that they will participate in a constitutional convention to debate whether Australia should become a republic.

2. Ask the students to identify a number of questions concerning the role of President. (*powers, appointment, term etc.*)

3. Brainstorm answers to these questions and list on the board. (*President chosen by general election, by the Parliament, by the Prime Minister or some other way; reserve powers, explicit powers, veto power, fixed or unfixed terms etc.*)

4. From these ideas, identify the two major models identified at the last constitutional convention and list on the board. They were as follows:
   - Parliamentary republicanism (*people nominate; parliament appoints*)—a committee compiles a list, via community consultation, of candidates narrowed to one by the Prime Minister to be voted by a joint sitting of the Parliament. A two-third majority is required for approval. The President would be the new head of state and all ties to the British monarch cut. The President would have the same powers as the current Governor-General.
   - Popular republicanism (*parliament nominates; the people elect*)—the people elect a President from several nominated by state and federal parliaments. This person has codified reserve powers, that is, clearly stated powers to resolve conflicts between the houses (*e.g. trigger general elections in the event of a hung Parliament, dismiss the Prime Minister under specific circumstances etc.*)

5. Identify 3 to 5 students to advocate for parliamentary republicanism, popular republicanism and constitutional monarchy—the status quo—at the constitutional convention. (*around half the class should comprise these groups*)

6. Ask each group to choose a speaker to represent their position and the remaining half of the class to attend the convention as voting citizens.

7. Give groups time to prepare their speeches and citizens time to research each model and to devise appropriate questions.

Constitutional convention

1. Form a semi-circle of chairs/tables in the front half of the class for the advocates and rows for the citizens facing them.

2. Ask each group to speak and to take questions from the citizens.

Referendum

1. Tell the class a referendum to decide the model will occur and all participants will vote either yes or no as private citizens. (*independent of any particular group*)

2. Conduct a preferential vote of the three models to determine an option to pose for the referendum. (*hand out paper slips and ask citizens to mark a 1, 2 & 3 beside each model*)

3. Ask two students to count and another two to scrutinise the tally.

4. List the votes on the board and circle the option with the least votes. Eliminate this option and redistribute the second preferences to the other two. Which got the majority? (*if the status quo there will be no referendum; but if it is one of the republican models, record its name on the board*)

5. Conduct the referendum with a secret ballot marked with the question and a yes and no box. Count the votes with two scrutineers. Will a new model be adopted? (*a 2/3 majority is needed for a referendum to pass*)
Debrief

1. Did one of the republican options pass into law? If so why, if not, why not?
2. If so, which republican model was favoured? Why?
3. Did any advocates vote for an option other than the one they spoke for? Why?
4. Which option was most preferred after the first round of preferential voting? Did this win? If not why?

Parliamentary context

- What are reserve powers? If Australia were to become a republic, should the president have explicit powers or just reserve powers? *(a popular republican model)*
- Does Australia need a single individual with the power to resolve conflict between houses of parliament and states or is the High Court sufficient?
- Queen of Australia: since the Royal Title and Styles Act of 1973, the Queen’s full title has been, ‘Elizabeth the Second, by the Grace of God Queen of Australia and Her other Realms and Territories, Head of the Commonwealth,’

Extension activities

- Although the Governor-General normally takes advice from the Prime Minister and does not play a political role, identify why the Governor-General of the day intervened in the dismissal of the Whitlam government in 1975. What wider implications for republicanism does this provide?
- Why do you think a figurehead or ultimate leader is seen as necessary for a state? Could a system of government be devised without a single leader at the top?