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**The Middle-class Dimension to  
Australia's Republican Past:  
A Personal Historiographical Journey**

*From a lecture delivered to the Society on  
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**Abstract:**

In 2004, Glenn Davies submitted his PhD history thesis “Cut the Painter?: the middle class dimension to Australia’s republican past” at UNE. This lecture will review his published record on Queensland’s colonial republican past with the RHSQ and other republican journals over the past 15 years. It will be a review, update and challenge to his previous publications. The conclusion to Davies’ PhD challenges the commonly held radical nationalist interpretation of Australia’s republican past including his own previous publications. He contends the history of republicanism in Australia has been ‘misunderstood’ by being commonly characterised as a working-class, radical movement. Indeed, it has been conventionally assumed, if not argued, that Australian republicanism has its roots in the working class. Davies argues the real commitment (and momentum, as far as there has been any) of republicanism in this country has been among the middle class. This was proved to some extent by the results of the 1999 referendum. It is particularly obvious for the 1850s but even in the 1890s republican ideals were more substantial within middle-class intellectual thinking as compared to working-class thinking. Republicanism in Australia, contrary to common opinion, has been a ‘middle class’ movement. This article explores the role of the middle class political elite and republican organisers in Charters Towers in the early 1890s and within the larger Australian republican tradition.

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## Introduction

While there's no denying that the republican issue has been off the mainstream national agenda in recent years, there's equally no doubt it's been on people's minds. The visit to these shores in early 2005 by His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales, the future King Charles III of Australia, his first visit in some 11 years, together with the announcement of his forthcoming marriage, renewed interest in the campaign for an Australian Head of State. Ably assisted by the coincidental visit of the majestic Princess Mary of Denmark, these two developments prompted Australians to reconsider the fundamental question of who should be our next Head of State: a member of the British royal family who drops by every now and then for a whirlwind trip, or a fellow Australian chosen from amongst us. And the verdict is pretty clear. In contrast to earlier visits by the Prince and his family, not to mention the rapturous response received by "Our Mary", Prince Charles was greeted on his whistle stop tour around the country with general indifference, a few who were curious and a diminished number of true believers. The apparent diminishing relevance of these Royal visits demonstrate a contemporary relevance to exploring Australia's republican tradition and excavating Australia's significant republican past.

### Personal historiographical journey

My journey had its genesis in late 1987 when I was searching for a topic for an honours thesis in the Department of History and Politics at James Cook University of North Queensland. My subsequent 1988 thesis was an analysis of the historical and political antecedents of the Charters Towers-based Australasian Republican Association between 1890 and 1891.<sup>1</sup> The Australian republican tradition has always been an intellectual one and never a mass movement. Indeed, there has not been a continuous republican movement throughout Australian history. Instead there has been a number of republican episodes, or moments, linked by the political idea of an Australian republic. The result of this series of disparate and separate republican moments is a series of disparate and separate rationales and arguments for an Australian republic. However, it was the historically dominant view of radical nationalist Australian historians from the 1950s to the 1970s that established the perception that the Australian republican tradition had a stable continuity of meaning even though they hardly ever mentioned a republican tradition. It was within the radical nationalist historical tradition that I wrote the history of this nineteenth-century Australian republican episode. At this time there was very little work done in the area of Australian republican history and the majority of my secondary sources used the radical nationalist approach based within

concepts of working-class solidarity. Upon reflection, it seems to me now that this honours thesis was largely narrative and needed a more substantial analytical approach. Since then I have uncovered substantially more source material on the Charters Towers republican episode.

It was while I was in the Great Republic in 1991, undertaking graduate study in the Department of Political Science at Illinois State University, that I began exploring the wider dimensions of republican thought. This was at the same time as the formation of the Australian Republican Movement. Upon my return to Australia in 1992 I focused on writing newspaper and academic journal articles on the nineteenth-century Charters Towers republican movement, the focus of my honours thesis.<sup>2</sup> In 1993, with the election of the Keating federal government, a flood of publications and studies and an avalanche of newspaper articles began to appear on the republican issue. Then, in 1994, I decided to pull all this work together as a PhD thesis in the departments of Politics and History, University of New England. The initial hypothesis was simply to question whether the Australian republican movement of the 1990s had a deep foundation in Australian history.

In 1996, Mark McKenna published *The Captive Republic* based upon his 1994 University of New South Wales PhD thesis.<sup>3</sup> McKenna proposed in *The Captive Republic* that the underlying theme to the history of Australian republican thought has been the belief in the inevitability of the creation of a republic. The publication of McKenna's *The Captive Republic* required a re-evaluation of my hypothesis and approach and a search for an alternative to the previous broad hypothesis. Over the next six years I focused more on the reasons for the failure of the Australian republican project than the history of Australian republicanism (an area that in the past ten years has become reasonably well documented). My publications on Australian republican history until then had similarly fallen into the narrative historical approach used by McKenna: that is, analysing a particular republican moment, almost a potted history, within the grander, now orthodox Australian republican narrative.<sup>4</sup>

In an effort to expand beyond the traditional narrative approach I explored the world of nineteenth-century republican journalism<sup>5</sup> and the intricacies of republican theory.<sup>6</sup> As well, by this time the analysis of Australian republican history had become a personal one through practical political involvement. This was partly an effort to explore and understand my own personal political heritage.<sup>7</sup> There was a lot of activity in Queensland in late 1999 in relation to the centenary of the Dawson Queensland Labor Government. In the early 1890s Andrew Dawson was intimately involved in the Charters Towers republican movement, in 1893

was elected as the local member of parliament, in 1899 became Premier of the world's first Labour government, and in 1901 was elected as a Senator to the first national parliament. In early 1999 I worked with Professor Ross Fitzgerald from Griffith University on a history of the 1899 Dawson Labor Government titled *Seven Days to Remember*.<sup>8</sup> By 2002 my personal experience in labour politics had provided a grounding in the art of political activity and an appreciation for the political motivations of individuals. With this appreciation it now seemed that the success or failure of the Australian republican project lay less with the attitudes of individuals and more with where and how these attitudes were developed. It was from here that I began to explore the source of republican historiography.

In 2003 I began to see the linkages made by the Charters Towers republican movement in the 1890s between its middle-class leadership and its working-class supporters and their emerging political movements. It seemed to me that this had not occurred elsewhere. The more I explored other republican associations and unions, it appeared that it was middle-class thinking that was driving republican thinking in the Australian colonies rather than working-class ideology as had been previously accepted.

### **Middle class republicanism**

Those who accept the existence of class structure find it difficult to define the middle class and debate its existence. The idea of the middle class has been used so far to help explain the phenomenon of political radicalism as an oppositional force. Just as E.P. Thompson argued that in the early decades of the nineteenth century the English working class defined itself in opposition to employees, so it could be said that from the last decades of the nineteenth century the middle class has partly defined itself against the organised labour movement. Rickard has written: "middle-class is status-orientated, while working-class is occupation-orientated."<sup>9</sup> The white-collar workers of the middle class did not view themselves as manual workers and rejected membership of the working class. The social distinction between manual and non-manual workers is of enormous importance in the class context.<sup>10</sup> There are many values attributed as middle class, but middle-class consciousness exists only in so far as there is a rejection of working-class values of political struggle.<sup>11</sup> Writing in an English context, Young has argued that,

gentility was the culture of the middle class, and can even be said to define it ... the middle class has to work to earn its living, though the kinds of work are diverse and common only in not being manual ... the politics of the middle class have never been unified, being individualist and self-interested, more ready to compromise than to resist. The absence of political struggle

sends the definition of the middle class outside some of the standard ideas of class formation.<sup>12</sup>

As a result members of the middle class would define “middle class” outside the concept of the existence of a class structure.

The Australian historiographical tradition has focused on working-class struggle as the defining dynamic of Australian history. The result has been the denial or ignoring of the middle class in Australia. In the 1950s and 1960s academic studies in Australian history multiplied. Connell observed how “the banner of class analysis ... has been most prominently carried by historians of the labour movement.”<sup>13</sup> Turner wrote in 1965, “Labour history is a history of a new kind: it introduces the concept of the masses rather than the elites as the moving force in the historical process.”<sup>14</sup> Connell described this as “history written by the left, for the left ... mostly about the left.”<sup>15</sup> Rickard discussed in 1981 how the Australian middle class has never been the focus of attention for Australian historians. He argued the majority of the literature on class in Australia had been concerned with the working class.<sup>16</sup> Over twenty years later Judith Brett also supported this view:

Australian historians have on the whole been uneasy with the middle class. When the middle class does appear in Australian historians’ narratives, it has more often been one of the many factors frustrating Labor’s political goals than as an agent in its right.<sup>17</sup>

Between 1890 and 1910 two class traditions emerged in Australian political discourse and achieved a relative stability. The presence of a working class and middle class in Australia has been obscured by the primacy historians have given the bush ethos and the working-class tradition.

Irving and Scalmer describe how successive generations of Australian “labour intellectuals” from the 1880s have developed the tradition of intellectual work. The term “labour intellectual” suggests a tension between mind and body, thinking and manual work. Importantly, they argue, a difficulty arose for the working class with respect to “labour intellectuals”, especially those trained by the bourgeoisie. The concern was whether they were serving their own, perhaps middle-class interests, instead of the workers. It was this desire to impart knowledge that set apart “labour intellectuals” from the workers.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Scalmer documents that it was through the “labour intellectuals” the labour movement “produced knowledge and manipulated symbols.”<sup>19</sup> The middle-class intellectuals within the republican movement also appeared to side with the working class. Peter Spearritt wrote in 1974, “the influence of middle class reformers on parliamentary Labor ideology, policy and practice in

Australia, has not drawn much attention from the historians and political scientists who have studied that party.”<sup>20</sup>

In the 1880s, a distinctively Australian nationalism had emerged. It was egalitarian, Euro-centric, anti-authoritarian, xenophobic and anti-Asian. It took little account of Australia’s geography and was in many ways based on myths about the bush that had little connection with the lives of most Australians who, even in the 1890s, lived in the cities along the east coast. The 1880s and 1890s was a time when many Australians questioned the traditional class structure and their system of government. Many of the members of the trade union movement that emerged in the 1880s accepted industrial unionism as the sole avenue for the expression of working-class politics. However, the 1880s saw struggles for union representation within emerging industrial organizations. As the 1880s ended and the 1890s began many trade unionists realised that other avenues for working-class political expression would have to be explored. One such political expression was working-class republicanism based within anti-monarchical sentiments. This is the oppositional radical republican approach that encompassed the Australian Labor Party during its foundation in the 1890s. The problem with working-class republicanism was the difficulty with organisation. Although there appeared support for republican ideals amongst working-class people, there was a suspicion of the motives of the middle-class republican leaders. An understanding of republican ideals required an intellectual sophistication. In most cases working-class republicans were more interested in nationalist arguments grounded in oppositional politics and anti-monarchical rhetoric. As we see below, the Charters Towers working-class republican episode establishes the exception to the republican rule. Elsewhere in the Australian colonies republicans were not successful at organising working-class republican associations.

The working-class mobilisation of the 1880s and 1890s was instrumental in establishing a mass circulation market for the republican journalists. Their greatest achievement was the *Sydney Bulletin*.<sup>21</sup> These republican intellectuals appeared to reach their working-class constituents through debates and lectures in trades halls, republican newspapers and journals, pamphlets and meetings. The “public meeting” of the type common in the mid-century still took place in the 1890s. Indeed, after the 1975 dismissal crisis, the “public meeting” again became common for the republican movement. The transmission belt for these republican ideals was made mainly by non-working-class intellectuals.

The Charters Towers republican editor, F C B Vosper was one of a number of late nineteenth-century radical journalists who used their professed republican backgrounds as a means to connect with the labour movement

so as to promote their own political ideals and careers. The reality was they did not have a union background and were using their journalist positions as a public platform to develop credibility with their working-class constituents. Vosper's lower middle-class background is indicative of republican journalism being used as a political tool to persuade working-class people to accept their middle-class political ideals.<sup>22</sup> The lower middle class or *petit bourgeoisie* were small owners and employees. It is important to note the *petit bourgeoisie* "is not consistently separated from working-class action or patterns of behaviour."<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the late nineteenth century small proprietors "differed radically from white-collar employees".<sup>24</sup> In 1980 Connell and Irving argued that "*bourgeois* political leadership was effected by capturing the leadership of the radical mass movements of the working-men."<sup>25</sup> The pre-First World War, factory-owning, industrial middle class was one element of the old middle-class. However another was the traditional intellectual leadership of society.

During the twentieth century republican advocacy remained with the middle-class, although it took on a decidedly left-wing hue from the mid-1970s. Republicanism again became a focus of Sydney rallies as it had been in the 1880s. Among these post-Whitlam-dismissal republicans there were both radical republicans and liberal republicans. However, the middle-class Sydney-based Australian Republican Movement, like the middle-class republicans of the previous century, did not see the mobilisation of working people as necessary, or even desirable in the advocacy of an Australian republic. They assumed that the working people were already republican and only needed to be awakened to the fact.

In November 1999 Australians were asked through referendum whether the nation should end its links with the British monarchy and become a republic. The republican and monarchist sides put before the Australian people their philosophical, sentimental and practical arguments. In these recent discussions and debates about republicanism the tendency was to avoid any analysis of Australia's complex political inheritance. In 1991 Walsh stated "the truth is, we Australians are not very good at examining abstract ideas or discussing them in public. Indeed, we are deeply suspicious of the world of ideas in general ... we are not willing to explore political ideas."<sup>26</sup> The public debate surrounding the 1998 Constitutional Convention and the results of the November 1999 republic referendum demonstrated that many Australians were unsure of the meaning of the term "republic" and the implications of the republican models presented. As a result the republican argument was to be unsuccessful at the 1999 referendum. These middle class republicans were the last in a line of republican groups that had relied upon the intellectualisation of the term

“republic”. This was never in itself enough to persuade a critical mass of Australians to embrace a republican Australia.

### Republican model

The contention of my PhD thesis *Cut the Painter?: the middle class dimension to Australia's republican past* is that republicanism is a middle-class, or bourgeois idea. Republicanism supports an intellectual approach to constitutional issues that does not spring from the main priorities of manual labour or production of output. Indeed, republican arguments are grounded within middle-class concepts of individualism rather than the kind of collectivist ideology that has been typical of working-class belief. Australian republicans have tended to be intellectuals – thinkers rather than activists. It was the *petit bourgeois* intellectual character of republicanism that hindered its popular working-class adoption.

In Queensland, republicanism had more force in the 1890s than it did in other colonies. That is, ultimate separation from Britain was more widely taken for granted in Queensland than in the southern colonies. But republicanism never became a popular mass movement in nineteenth-century colonial Australia. The only exception was the 1890-1891 Charters Towers republican movement. The Australasian Republican Association and its journal the *Australian Republican* were the exception that proves the rule. Within this northern republican moment is evidence of republicanism becoming a popular, albeit short-lived, movement. Although short-lived, the Australasian Republican Association filled a vacuum during 1890 and 1891 at a time when working men in Queensland were involved in industrial struggles. As a result, the overt radical republican intellectual ideas within the columns of the *Australian Republican* gained an ascendancy within the political world of working-class Queenslanders. The brief but productive relationship between middle-class writers and the working class in northern Queensland can be presented as a stark contrast with experience elsewhere and elsewhere in Australia. Perhaps it is within the Charters Towers republican episode that models can be seen for an Australian republican future.

### Endnotes

- 1 G.A. Davies, “The *Australian Republican*: a Charters Towers Radical Journal, 1890-1891”, (BA Hons., James Cook University of North Queensland, 1988).
- 2 See for example “‘Atheistical and Blasphemous Notoriety Seekers?': The Australasian Republican Association, Charters Towers, 1890-1891”, *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland*, Vol. XIV, No.3, August 1990, pp.99-112; The role of F.C.B. Vosper was explored in “A Time of Perceived Rebellion: A Comparison of the Charters Towers and Rockhampton Showcase Trials of 1891”, *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol.38, No.1, 1992, pp.27-40; and “The Western Republicans:



- the Queensland Elections of 1893”, Royal Historical Society of Queensland Annual Conference, 6 August 1994, published in *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland*, Vol.XV, No.9, November 1994, pp.440-454. Newspaper articles included: “Republican Newspaper folded after 18 months”, *Northern Miner*, 3 December 1993; “Wildest Scenes when Republicans Won Vote”, *Northern Miner*, 29 June 1993; “Push for a Republic was started many years ago”, *Northern Miner*, 4 June 1993; “ ‘Fighting Charlie’: the Towers’ Republican MP”, *Northern Miner*, 2 June 1992; “100 years ago Republicanism the Talk at Dunsford’s bookshop”, *Northern Miner*, 17 December 1991; and “A Time of Perceived Rebellion”, *Northern Miner*, 28 June 1991.
- 3 M. McKenna, *The Captive Republic: A History of Republicanism in Australia 1788-1996* (Melbourne, 1996). McKenna’s other publications include: “Brave New World of You’s and Me’s”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 September 1993, p.15; “A History of the Inevitable Republic”, in M.A. Stephens and Clive Turner (eds.), *Republic or Monarchy? Legal and Constitutional Issues* (St. Lucia, 1994), pp.50-71; “Tracking the Republic”, in D. Headon, J. Warden and B. Gammage (eds.), *Crown or Country. The Traditions of Australian Republicanism*, (St. Leonards, 1994), pp.3-36; “The Traditions of Australian Republicanism”, Research Paper 31, *Department of the Parliamentary Library*, 1995-96; “The Traditions of Australian Republicanism”, in *The Constitution Papers. Parliamentary Research Service Subject Collection No.7* (Canberra, 1996), pp.79-106; “The First Century. Republicanism in Australia 1788-1901”, A. Shiell and P. Spearritt (eds.), *Australia and the Monarchy* (Clayton, 1993), pp.10-12; “Republicanism”, in H. Irving (ed.), *The Centenary Companion to Australian Federation* (Cambridge, 1999), pp.417-418.
  - 4 See my potted history of republicanism in Chapter 3: “A Brief History of Australian republicanism”, in G. Winterton (ed.), *We, the People: Australian Republican Government* (St. Leonards, 1994), pp.49-62.
  - 5 See “Looking Backward: Republican Journalism in the 1880s and 1890s, with an emphasis on North Queensland”, *Australian Studies in Journalism*, No.5, 1996, pp.141-157; and “Education and Journalism in Nineteenth Century Charters Towers”, Beyond the Brisbane Line Conference, Queensland Studies Centre, 26-27 November 1994, published in *Queensland Review. A Journal of Queensland Studies*, Vol.3, No.1, April 1996, pp.10-14. I also delivered guest lectures: ‘Republican Journalism in the 1890s’, Department of Journalism, University of Queensland 1995 and 2000.
  - 6 See Chapter 14: “Civic Republicanism and Citizenship: a Republic with Republicanism”, in D. Cryle, G. Griffin and D. Stehlik (eds.), *Futures for Central Queensland* (Rockhampton, 1996), pp.79-81; and “Citizenship and the Australian Republic”, Teaching Civics section, Curriculum Corporation’s Civics at <http://curriculum.edu.au/democracy> (February 1998)
  - 7 My involvement with the Australian Republican Movement included public speeches: ‘Queensland Republicanism – Past’, Queensland People’s Convention, Brisbane City Hall, 9 June 1997; and historical vignettes: “Lilley’s Great Hope”, *Armlet*, Summer 1995/1996, p.6; “Fighting Charlie McDonald”, *Armlet*, Autumn 1996, p.7; “Thomas Givens”, *Armlet*, Winter 1996, p.6; “Brisbane’s First”, *Armlet*, Spring 1996, p.6; “The Divine Republican”, *Armlet*, Summer 1996/1997, p.6; “The 1893 Queensland elections”, *Armlet*, Winter 1997, p.6; “Republicanism on Trial”, *Armlet*, Autumn 1998, pp.6-7; “Bread or Blood?”, *Armlet*, Summer 1997/1998, pp.6-7; “A Century Ago. Part One”, *Armlet*, Winter 1998, p.6; “A Century Ago. Part Two”, *Armlet*, Winter 1998, pp.6-7; and “The Charters Towers Republicans and Volapuk”, *Royal Historical Society*

- of Queensland Bulletin*, No.608, November, 1997 pp.10-11.
- 8 *Seven Days to Remember* was launched at Queensland Parliament House, Brisbane on 1 December 1999 and published by University of Queensland Press, St Lucia. Professor Fitzgerald was kind enough to dedicate the book to Professor Geoffrey Bolton and myself. For my own Dawson publications see “Early Political Career of Andy Dawson in Charters Towers”, distributed at Dawson Government Centenary Commemoration, during Queensland ALP Community Cabinet, Charters Towers, 5 December 1999; and “Senator Andrew Dawson” in A. Millar (ed.), *The Biographical Dictionary of the Australian Senate. Vol 1: 1901-29* (Carlton South, 2000), pp.81-84.
  - 9 J. Rickard, “The Middle Class: What is to be done”, *Historical Studies*, Vol.19, No.76, 1981, p.453.
  - 10 J. Rickard, *Class and Politics. New South Wales, Victoria and the Early Commonwealth, 1890-1910* (Canberra, 1976), pp.299-300.
  - 11 *Ibid.*, p.307.
  - 12 L. Young, *Middle-Class Culture in the Nineteenth Century. America, Australia and Britain* (Basingstoke, 2003), p.5.
  - 13 R.W. Connell, *Ruling Class Ruling Culture. Studies of conflict, power and hegemony in Australian life* (Cambridge, 1977), p.10.
  - 14 I.A.H. Turner, *Industrial Labour and Politics* (Canberra, 1965), p.xviii quoted in *Ibid.*, p.10.
  - 15 Connell, *op.cit.*, p.10.
  - 16 Rickard, “The Middle Class: What is to be done”, p.450.
  - 17 J. Brett, *Australian Liberals and the Moral Middle Class. From Alfred Deakin to John Howard* (Cambridge, 2003), p.7.
  - 18 T. Irving and S. Scalmer, “Labour Intellectuals in Australia: Modes, Traditions, Generations, Transformations”, *International Review of Social History*, Vol.50, Part 1, April 2005, p.16.
  - 19 S. Scalmer, “Labour Intellectuals Today”, *Dialogue 24. Academy of the Social Sciences*, No.1, 2005, p.50.
  - 20 P. Spearritt, “Sydney’s ‘Slums’: Middle Class Reformers and the Labor Response”, *Labour History*, Vol.26, May 1974, p.65.
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  - 22 For background on Vosper’s middle-class background see G.A. Davies, “‘Atheistical and Blasphemous Notoriety Seekers’: The Australasian Republican Association, Charters Towers, 1890-1891”, *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland*, Vol.XIV, No.3, August 1990, pp.99-112; The role of F.C.B. Vosper was explored in G.A. Davies, “A Time of Perceived Rebellion: A Comparison of the Charters Towers and Rockhampton Showcase Trials of 1891”, *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol.38, No.1, 1992, pp.27-40.”
  - 23 P.N. Sterns, “The Middle Class: Toward a Precise Definition”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol.21, No.3, July 1979, p.386.
  - 24 *Ibid.*
  - 25 Connell & Irving, *Class Structure in Australian History*, p.122.
  - 26 R. Walsh, “Time to Drag Government into the 21st Century”, *Bulletin*, 18 June 1991, p.43.