

CITIZENS' INITIATED REFERENDA



PRIME MINISTER & CABINET
CITIZENS' INITIATED REFERENDA
AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS ISSUE SHEET

There is a widespread feeling in the community that politicians do not genuinely listen to their concerns and ideas. This has led to an unacceptable level of disenchantment with the political process. Instead of being proud of a political system that is one of the most stable and least restrictive in the world, many Australians are angry at the powerlessness of ordinary citizens. Citizens' initiated referenda (CIR) is one way of giving people at the grass-roots access to real political power.



Choosing the future

The needs addressed by CIR

At present, if a citizen wants to get action on a particular political issue there are four avenues open to him or her:

- Join a political party. This may be an unattractive option; the person may not wish to become involved in politics, and may even disagree with much of what a party stands for, but simply wants a particular issue addressed; or
- Approach the local Member of Parliament. Unfortunately most political parties vote in blocs along the party line. This means that if the person's local Member belongs to a party opposed to the proposed change, the person knows that he or she will only get lip service; or

- Organise a petition to Parliament. While these sound good in theory, in reality once they are received in the Parliament there is no rule or convention that they need to be considered in any way by the Government; or

- Become a member of an active lobby group.
- It is evident that each of the above options has their drawbacks, and together they do not afford citizens adequate mechanisms by which to effect change.

A model of CIR that can work

The Democrats policy argues that, in the face of the shortcomings outlined above, CIR has a valid role to play in giving citizens an avenue to address issues they feel are not being addressed by the Government of the day. The Democrats acknowledge that CIR could potentially be an obstacle to effective govern-

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ment if the system permits too many fringe issues to be the subject of referenda. Therefore we propose a strict system that will only allow proposals with widespread community support to get to referendum stage. That system is as follows:

- If 2% of the population petitions for a referendum on an issue, a referendum must be held either at the same time as the next general election if it is within 12 months time; in other cases as soon as is practicable;
- Once passed at a referendum, the resolution will not pass into law until approved by the Federal Parliament. This provides an important check and balance on referenda backed by powerful sectional interests, and will add the detail that cannot be considered by referenda. The Parliament would obviously be very reluctant to oppose any resolution backed by a wide cross-section of the Australian community;

- If 0.5% of the population petition over an issue, a parliamentary committee will be obliged to examine and report on the matter as to whether a referendum should be held;

- An independent Referendum Commission will be established to be responsible for:

This system would go some way to reviving the faith of ordinary Australians in our political process. The Democrats' proposed model is balanced and workable. It provides an avenue by which citizens can participate directly in the legislative process without ignoring the proper role of Parliament.



Photo: www.cnic.or.jp/

- receiving public submissions on the wording of referenda, and putting the referenda questions in finalised form;
- preparation of the official 'yes' and 'no' cases for distribution.



Other issue sheets are available online or can be requested via e-mail or telephone:

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