Foreword

For those of us with a commitment to a republican Australia, this monograph presents a fresh approach. In developing its framework for constitutional reform, it draws on a range of ideas – not only republican, but Indigenous, feminist, and religious thinking as well.

As an Indigenous Australian I am very committed to reform within Australian political institutions. In my former role as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner I facilitated a reform agenda that ultimately led to the formation of the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples. The abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) in 2004 left Indigenous Australians without an institutional mechanism to represent our interests at a national and international levels. This event also gave cause to some considerable soul searching within the Indigenous polity. It was clear that Indigenous Australians wanted an institutional mechanism that would represent our interests. There was also much debate about how this might be developed and much to be learnt from the apparent flaws both in earlier attempts to achieve this vision – including the ATSIC model and a contemporary, government selected and appointed, Indigenous advisory body.

Our approach to the development of the three-chamber model for the National Congress for Australia’s First Peoples was in the first instance framed by Article 18 of the United Nations Declaration which mandates that Indigenous peoples should have a determining role in the development of political structures to represent their interests. There were a number of principles that informed the design of the National Congress. There were, for example, the problems that can arise with low participation in voluntary elections and the need to ensure a capable representative structure with Indigenous accountabilities. Such accountabilities include gender equality, open and transparent two-way communications between the people and the Congress, adoption of an ethics monitoring mechanism and adoption of guiding principles. In developing this model we aimed to take advantage of existing Indigenous structures without comprizing their political integrity. I believe that it is a unique model and I am very pleased that it has in some way influenced Power’s thinking on the challenging but important issues explored in this book.

Of course, few people will agree with everything Power has to say. I, for one, remain more optimistic than he is about the prospects of attaining a republic in our lifetimes. Nevertheless, he alerts us to the need for the great deal of hard work and further dialogue before we can gain a genuinely republican nation.
In the process of doing this hard work, we should be able to advance on other fronts as well. For example, I can now see new ways in which the cause of reconciliation could be furthered as we progress to the republic: for example, if only our governments followed Power’s advice on fiducial governance and adopted explicit policies and practices aimed at enhancing public trust in them! Should they commit to doing this, it would be far from fanciful to hope that our first Australian President will be an Indigenous Australian!

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