

President Rudd's holiday reading



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Malcolm Turnbull and Kevin Rudd do agree on one thing: Australia should become a republic, but not now.

Neither has any intention of pushing the case until at least the next term of government, and only then if the Queen is no longer on the throne.

Rudd would be pleased, however, to learn that Australia's preferred first president is none other than: himself.

Late last month, with an eye to today's Queen's Birthday holiday, the polling firm UMR Research conducted a study of attitudes towards a republic, involving 1000 online surveys.

It found enthusiasm for a republic to be lukewarm at best. A bare majority of 51 per cent supported becoming a republic and 34 per cent opposed it.

Even the prospect of holding a referendum during the next term of Parliament failed to excite respondents. Just over half, 53 per cent, supported this proposal, 34 per cent opposed it and 13 per cent were unsure.

And if the referendum went ahead, opinion was evenly divided over whether it would pass or fail.

The most unambiguous finding was that if Australia were to become a republic, it would have to be one with a directly elected president, and Rudd would be that president.

In a finding that will send a shiver up the spines of minimalists and constitutionalists everywhere, UMR found 81 per cent wanted a directly elected president rather than one

appointed by Parliament. It was the push for a direct-election model versus that for a president appointed by Parliament that split republicans at the 1999 referendum and helped scupper the entire push. The common perception, however, that some celebrity dill or sports star would be president under a direct-elect model is dispelled by the survey.

The poll found that if the president were directly elected, 24 per cent would opt for Rudd.

This was miles ahead of the Governor-General, Quentin Bryce, and the former prime minister John Howard, who tied for second place on 9 per cent.

Next in line, tied on 5 per cent, were Julia Gillard, Peter Costello and Peter Cosgrove. Next was Paul Keating, Bob Brown and Jeff Kennett, all on 3 per cent, followed by a bunch on 2 per cent:

Australians do not trust politicians to appoint a president.

Joe Hockey and Dick Smith – and Malcolm Turnbull, a figure more associated with the republic than any other in contemporary politics.

These results are never going to be replicated in reality because, first, governments will always be wary about countenancing a directly elected republican model because of the potential to mandate a rival authority.

And second, by the time the country gets around to embracing the concept, people and opinions of them will have changed.

What the poll does tell us, however, is that Australians do not trust politicians to appoint a president, but that they would elect a politician as president if

given the chance. "The idea or fear that Australians will elect a sportsperson or celebrity is not supported," UMR says. "The 12 per cent who wanted a president appointed by a parliament opted for former judges, governors-general or state governors."

The poll also tells us that if a popularity contest were held today, Rudd is still streets ahead of other public figures. There were 41 names mentioned by at least 1 per cent of respondents when asked to nominate who they would like as first president. After Rudd, no one else broke into double figures.

Recognition is a prominent factor, giving Rudd an obvious advantage. Turnbull, therefore, would have to be unhappy at his 2 per cent rating, given he commands almost as much air time as Rudd these days and it was he who drove the republican push in 1999.

Costello, on the other hand, is largely out of the public eye and therefore would be chuffed with his beating Turnbull.

Which brings us to the next few weeks.

Winter would not be winter without a bout of speculation over what the former treasurer will or won't do. It is about to start again because he must decide by June 30 if he is going to recontest his seat of Higgins at the next election. Most expect him to run again.

Turnbull may not be the people's choice for president, nor for prime minister for that matter, but the Coalition is chugging along fine under him at the moment. Costello's colleagues believe he will renominate and then stay on the back bench and continue to pose a silent menace to Turnbull.

"The reality is if we're moving up in the polls, he won't do anything," said a senior Liberal of Costello. "If we're pushing ahead, he'll wait until after the election. It will be a two-term strategy." Ultimately: "It's just shifting sands. Anyone who professes to know is just full of crap."