

Business and the republic

Like most of Australia's major industries, the future prosperity for the financial services sector clearly lies in Asia.

Australians constantly talk of the economic opportunity presented by the three billion people that will be in the Asian middle class by 2030.

This transformation is occurring on our doorstep and Australia is geographically located in the right place at the right time in history.

Perhaps we can put "downunder" to bed!

However this perspective often has a transactional, even narrow focus on how Australia can best export livestock, minerals, education and perhaps one day, managed funds and insurance to Asia.

We seldom publicly discuss the symbolic and identity implications of living in the Asian Century.

This is a mistake. Identity, belonging and symbolism are important in Asia.

The rebirth of the Australian Republican Movement provides an opportunity for the business community to consider engaging in the important debate on Australia's identity.

Of course, Australian republicanism is a good proxy for Australian identity which is visibly linked to Britain through our head of state, money and flag.

In August, the Australian Republican Movement was rebooted under the leadership of author and journalist Peter FitzSimons as Chairman and Tim Mayfield as National Director.

The latest iteration of the republic debate offers a chance for leaders in business to think about our image and identity in the Asian Century as well as the economic opportunity.

The economic and cultural ties between Australia and much of Asia are already strong.

In 2014, our government negotiated long awaited free trade agreements with three of our four top trading partners - China, Japan and South Korea.

In this context we cannot argue that the vestiges of colonialism have held Australia back from becoming a republic.

It is more a question of the durability of the symbols of "Australianness" we have retained in the Asian century.

Legally, Australia is sovereign and independent. We do not suffer from any meddling from Buckingham Palace or Westminster. Technically, the latter cannot do so following the passage of the Australia Acts in 1986.

Yet we chose to maintain our constitutional monarchy and the British symbols that come with it.

But New Zealand and Fiji are now likely to remove the Union Jack from their flag in upcoming plebiscites.

If Australia is to remain the last of the former British Empire countries to maintain the symbolism of the colonial era, it will become noticeable in global summits where trade matters are discussed.

There is a good example in the financial services industry. The Asia Region Funds Passport is a signature initiative of this region to create a mini free trade agreement for managed funds initially between Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, Japan, The Philippines and Thailand.

This is designed to build a regional trading structure which diminishes the influence of the European Union's "UCITS" regime.

The central idea is that the Asian region and not Europe should benefit from the Asian region getting richer and older and we must stop exporting our tax revenue, growth and jobs to the European Union.

If we are asking our neighbours to build Asian region architecture, do we want to remind them that we imagine ourselves as part of Europe or Britain? Clearly we do not.

This is the same logic that Colonial First State, the wealth division of the Commonwealth Bank, uses in Asia: The "Colonial" disappears and the "First State" stays. It makes sense.

Accordingly, a stronger sense of Australian identity in Asia will only increase the durability of our economic standing. The republic debate is therefore worthy of business' involvement.

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