

Mark Thirlwell

Sovereign remedies for the modern monarchist

For all the opinion polls claiming that a majority of Australians are republicans at heart, the phenomenal media attention lavished on the marriage of Mary Elizabeth Donaldson and Frederik André Henrik Christian suggests that many of us are still suckers for a good dose of royal pomp and ceremony. The problem, it appears, is not so much the idea of monarchy itself – a surprisingly large number of people seem to love the prospect of a good royal wedding – but rather the recent shoddy performance of the House of Windsor. Other royal families apparently still retain some of their mystique.

The growing globalisation of the labour market combined with the willingness of Australians to embrace the Danish royal family offers a potentially attractive solution to the debate over the Republic, one that combines the show business appeal of royalty with the democratic aspirations of Australians. The solution? Outsource the monarchy.

Importantly, this is not even a particularly radical proposal. Australia *already* outsources its monarchy – to Britain. We just need to revise the model a bit.

As any economist could tell you, one big problem with our present setup is the absence of competition. Despite a substantial fall in customer satisfaction ratings, Australians have not been offered any alternatives to the current, under-performing brand. What is needed therefore is an open and transparent bidding process, in which competitive bids from other prospective monarchs and their families could be received and evaluated. Selection criteria could be established after public consultation and would include factors such as cost-effectiveness, the absence of any particularly nasty hereditary diseases, the ability to look good in a tiara and - crucially - the availability of eligible royals willing to take an Australian consort. A short-list of preferred candidates would then be drawn up and the final choice, perhaps including an option of 'none of the above' for die-hard republicans, opened up to public voting, injecting the crucial element of democracy. The process could even be televised, with the associated revenues used to cover the costs. Winners would serve a fixed term – say three years – after which they would again be expected to compete in a new tender round.

The attractions of the model are obvious. The public's demonstrated desire for royal spectacle would be met, and in a cost-effective manner. More importantly, Australians would have a clear say in just who their ruling family was, along with the ability to replace them if they failed to perform adequately. And the benefits would not all be one way. An injection of Australian vitality into the fading aristocratic bloodlines of the old world would be another positive outcome.

Some might object that the plan is unrealistic, since no self-respecting putative monarch would submit to a selection process. Past performance of at least some royals suggests that this won't be a major constraint, and there are several royal families currently lacking a country who might be particularly interested. But even if it proved difficult to find willing candidates, the beauty of this model is that it could easily be adapted to make the actual participation of royalty largely irrelevant. Australians could instead adopt a 'virtual monarchy' model. Rather than soliciting for bids from interested monarchs, candidates could be nominated by the public. The selection criteria and voting process would then be as before, with the only difference being that the winning candidate would continue on with life largely unaware of their new dual role as (temporary) Australian monarch.

Obviously, a completely virtual monarchy would have some disadvantages in terms of a shortage of royal visits and an absence of references to Australia in public pronouncements. But Australian newspapers and television could still happily report on 'our' royal family. Moreover, there would be the added advantage that all costs would be borne by overseas taxpayers, giving us the attractive possibility of royalty on the cheap.

Globalisation of the labour market is likely to produce some profound changes in the Australian workforce in coming years. There seems to be no reason why royals, along with the rest of us, should not have to adapt.

Mark Thirlwell is program director, international economy at the Lowy Institute for International Policy.