

Make most of republic vote

An extra referendum question could clean up a Senate that has lost its way

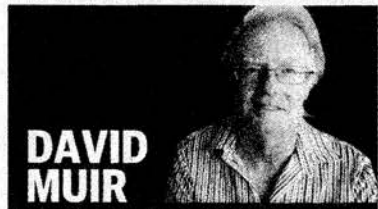
LEAVING aside the personalities and political leanings of current members of our 76-seat Senate, there is no doubt there is a need to reform our nation's upper house.

Last week's *The Sunday Mail* editorial identified numerous shortcomings of the Senate, notably the ability for minor and micro-parties to secure a foothold on low primary votes; the ability for a small number of cross-bench Senators to frustrate government plans and mandates; and the quality of Senate candidates nominated by minor, micro, and even major parties.

Our federal parliamentary system is supposedly based on the principle that governments are formed in the lower house, the House of Representatives.

We were taught at school that the Senate was a "house of review" for legislation, and "the states' house". Senators supposedly balanced the need to scrutinise and, if necessary, amend Bills, their role being to protect the interests of their state of origin.

But the modern-day Senate, as the *The Sunday Mail* editorial detailed,



has grown dysfunctional and has become a forum not for protecting state interests but for prosecuting narrow political causes.

In some cases it is also not so much a house of review but a place to retire and reward party hacks with a safe seat and a six-year term or two.

If it ever had a role as a "states' house" evidence of it has been very rare.

When was the last time all 12 Senators from any state protected their state's interests by voting unanimously on a measure regardless of their political labels?

We have a chance to change the Senate and we should take it.

When we vote at a referendum on whether or not Australia becomes a republic, we should take the opportunity to also make constitutional

changes that reform the Senate.

The Real Republic Australia wants an Australian as our elected head of state, but also proposes other real reforms to deliver real benefits.

For starters, we should have a question asking voters if they want to break the constitutional nexus between the size of the upper and lower houses.

Our Constitution says the House of Representatives needs to have "as nearly as practicable" twice the number of seats as the Senate.

Over the years that nexus has meant Senate numbers have grown from the original six to today's 12 Senators for each state and two each for the Northern Territory and Australian Capital Territory.

But does each state really need 12 Senators especially when most people can't name them all?

Put simply: if you can't name them, do you need them?

The USA manages just fine with two senators for each of its 50 states – 100 in total for a population more than 10 times Australia's.

Going back to the original six Senators for each Australian state and

keeping two each for the territories is surely more than enough. The 1967 referendum overwhelmingly approved the extension of Commonwealth powers to legislate for indigenous Australians.

But at that same referendum another question seeking to break the nexus between the upper and lower houses failed.

At that time there were 10 Senators per state.

It is likely that the same question may give a different result now that Senate numbers have grown even further and the role of Senators has evolved (some say deteriorated) from their original mission to look after state interests.

In addition to Senate numbers why not a referendum question asking if we want four-year, fixed, and synchronised terms for both houses of parliament?

That would put an end to prime ministers gaming the system when picking election dates, and cut the number of costly elections.

Importantly, it would mean Senators being elected for the same term as lower house MPs, thereby insulat-

ing any government's mandate from the whims of Senators elected some years earlier, as happens now with six-year Senate terms.

But there is at least one real positive in how our Senate operates.

So while we're at it, let's have a referendum question to extend the casual vacancy system to the House of Representatives to avoid a repeat of the current five costly and disruptive by-elections due on July 28.

These are some of the proposals the Real Republic Australia would like to see put before voters along with a question on an Australian republic with a directly elected head of state.

Recognition of indigenous Australians and constitutional recognition of local government are others.

They are proposals that offer voters a chance to secure real benefits from changing the way our federal government and parliament work.

Bring on a republic referendum and let us take the opportunity to make other real reforms.

David Muir is chairman of the Real Republic Australia