A post-colonial movement

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On its website, the renewed Australian Republican Movement incorporates the following commitment: "We, as Australians, affirm our allegiance to Australia and its people, whose democratic rights and liberties we respect. We propose, as a great national project involving all our citizens, that Australia become a republic with one amongst us chosen as our head of state."

Journalist and opinion-columnist Peter Foster recently visited the new President of the renewed Republican Movement. In the 21st century, he sees us as a proud people, emboldened by the victory over a new enemy - the coronavirus. This time, he hopes that we can have a gentle discussion and simple voting on an initial vote on whether we should be a republic at all and then, if 60 to 70 per cent agree that we should, maybe the prime minister could choose a governor-general and invite either the people or the politicians to vote for a new parliament.

Peter believes that, unlike last time, the decision making does not need to be complicated. He believes it is a new day and a new time - that the stars of the Southern Cross are aligned in agreement and hope.

Some of us other republican supporters will resist when the English Army, which comes to the Lincolns cricket match in Sydney, will not be able to stop us over and over again. "God save our gracious Queen, long may our gracious Queen rule over us!" Few of us would suggest that we don't like the royal family, rather than that it really is not ours. Can we imagine how we would feel if we were immigrants to this country from Greece or Italy or Sweden and we had to have as our head of state the British Queen? Seems absurd. And yet, in the 18th century, the more we rejected people dumped this land by the British. All of us landed here for various reasons and took this land from its indigenous people without negotiation or permission. We still have a very long way to go to resolve any of that injustice, but the original settlers, from whom comes our present heart of state, weren't even remotely interested in doing so.

In campaigning for the republic, Peter Foster believed a national, whole-family to register their support and to join the Australian Republican Movement, sign up at www.australianrepublicm.org.

The River Jordan, let it flow

The Jordan River, which flows through Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan and Palestine, is like so much of the Middle East; it is troubled and in crisis.

GIORGIO BRUNO

JUST 60 years ago, the River Jordan was a healthy, fast-flowing river. But today, along much of its length it is little more than a sewage canal. Some 95 per cent of the river's sweet water has been diverted, replaced by the domestic sewage of over 600,000 people. Agricultural runoff and the diversion of saline springs have resulted in the loss of an estimated 50 per cent of its biodiversity.

The decline of the river has been due in large measure to the conflicts between people in the countries it passes through. It has increasingly been treated as a backwater, dumping ground, while border fences and military patrols have kept the extent of its degradation out of sight and consequently out of mind. Palestinians, for example, are largely denied access to the portion of the river valley in the West Bank and have no access to the river's water.

The decline is now being turned around, however, as a decade of advocacy initiated by EcoPeace Middle East - an organisation that brings together Jordanian, Palestinian and Israelis to work together to protect the region's natural resources and its shared heritage - begins to bear fruit. EcoPeace uses communities' mutual dependence on shared water resources to persuade them and their national governments to cooperate to improve poor sanitation, prevent disease and foster an atmosphere of problem solving and peace building.

Through municipal leadership and national government buy-in, wastewater treatment plants are now coming on line and some fresh water is again being released into the river. Palestinian, Israeli and Jordanian mayors also see the potential of tourism from a healthy Jordan River to lift their people out of poverty and to combat radicalisation. Unemployment in communities can be as high as 50 per cent, and unemployed young people, with little hope for the future, become easy prey for extremist groups, including recruiters for ISIS in neighboring Syria and Iraq.

The Jordan River runs through the heart of spiritual traditions. In attempts to combat the growing threat of extremism, EcoPeace has recently begun to reach out to the more moderate religious groups in the region and "use" the river to advance the creation of larger stakeholder circles in support of rehabilitation efforts.

The Jordan River Valley is home to some of the most momentous events in the history of humanity's relationship with God. Some of the founding stories of Judaism, Christianity and Islam are set along its banks, and the valley contains sites sacred to all three religions. Therefore, the rehabilitation of the Jordan River is a perfect matter around which to rally for faith communities as well.

For Christians, the Jordan is a symbol of purity and life. Christ's baptism in the river marks his revelation as the Son of God and the beginning of his ministry on earth. The Jordan River recalls images of Jesus standing in holy water, his head bowed while John pours the waters of baptism over him. "As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:16-17). Baptism is a ritual of cleansing and renewal - this is why the overriding symbol of the Jordan is purity and why the current polluted, diverted state of the Jordan is in such controversy.

For the Jewish people, the Jordan River is a symbol of liberation. Crossing the Jordan marks the Jews' entry into a land of freedom and plenty after the bitter years of slavery and wandering. Earlier mention in the Hebrew Bible describes the Jordan Valley as "well-sprinkled everywhere . . . even as the garden of the Lord." (Genesis 13:10). Joshua 3:15 describes the Jordan as "overflowing[i]g its banks all the times of harvest". When Joshua led the Israelites across this river it was entry into the Promised Land. The river marks a divine threshold.

The Jordan River flows through the cultural heartlands of the Islamic world too. The Jordan Valley is part of this land that "we have blessed for the nations" (Quran, 21:73). The Jordan River is central to stories of the Islamic prophets: Yusa (Yussef) and John (Yshu'a) and Jesus (Isa). Moreover, many of the closest competitors to the prophet Mohammed are buried along the Jordan's eastern bank. The Jordan Valley played a crucial role in the expansion of Islam under Caliph Umar and one of the most disastrous battles against the Byzantine forces took place in the northern Jordan Valley.

All the faiths believe the disaster inflicted on the Jordan River demonstrates our disregard for the natural world and our spiritual traditions, and our failed responsibility as custodians of God's Earth - perhaps this situation is an excellent reason to band together and make amends.

The rehabilitation of the Jordan River thus offers hope, not only for the shared environment and to break the cycle of poverty, but also to strengthen regional stability, integration and chances for a broader peace.