***Episode 1 – Transcript***

BC Hey Stephanie! How are you?

SS Hiya Bryce ... fancy meeting you out here in the bush. Getting in some morning exercise?

BC You know me ... healthy body, healthy mind. Have you seen my friend, Gang-Gang anywhere?

SS Gang-Gang?

BC Yeah, Gang-Gang the cockatoo ...

SS Oh yes! I've seen heaps of those around ... after all we are in Canberra and they are the faunal emblem of the ACT ..

BC The faunal what?

SS Faunal emblem ... every state and territory in Australia has an animal emblem ... NSW has the platypus, Victoria has the leadbeater possum ... here in the Australian Capital Territory, it's the gang-gang cockatoo.

BC Huh? Really? I didn't know that ... well this particular cockatoo is hard to miss. He's kind of always flustered and a little bit out of sorts. There's usually something ruffling his feathers.. ahh look - here he comes now. Gang-Gang! Over here!

GG So much fuss! So much bother!

BC Hey Gang-Gang .. I'd like you to meet a friend of mine ... this is Stephanie ... she works at the Museum of Australian Democracy - a really cool museum located inside Old Parliament House ... you know Old Parliament House ... I've seen you in the gum trees outside it ...

SS Hi Gang-Gang ... nice to meet you

GG Yes, yes -- nice to meet you .. though I've been keeping well away from Parliament House these past few months ... both the Old one and the New one ... so much fuss and bother up there ... it's been ruffling my feathers ..

BC You don't say ..

GG Well I just don't understand ... I see politicians and marches and parades and protestors up there on Capitol Hill - people coming day and night - back and forth - all talking incessantly about this referendum thingy

SS Ahh yes, the referendum ...

GG It's got them all in a bother .. and when they're in a bother, I'm in a bother - but I just don't understand what all the fuss is about.

BC Well as luck would have it .. Stephanie is something of an expert in referendums ... in fact, among all my friends, I've never met anyone who knows more about our system of government than Stephanie does ... would you like her to explain it?

GG Will it take long? I only ask, as I've got to meet the other cockatoos over at Black Mountain ... word on the trees is that there's a pyracantha tree there with more deliciously plump berries on it than you can poke a feather at ...

SS Nope - won't take long. I promise. Find yourself a comfy branch my friend and you'll be an instant expert in referendums faster than you can say 'shake your tail feather' ... and just think of how impressed your friends at Black Mountain are going to be?

BC Ooh - this sounds fun ... where do we start?

SS Well, the best place to start is with the Constitution

GG The Consti-what?

SS The Constitution ... it's like the rule book by which Australia is governed. You know when you play a board game, or a game in the park or in the playground, there are a bunch of rules to follow? Same sort of concept. Except the Constitution is like the rule book for how our country is run. Which makes it a really, really important document. The government - which is made up of the politicians that adults vote for in elections to send to Canberra to sit in Parliament House and run the country - relies on the Constitution as the official rule book.

GG So, it's a book?

SS Well, yes. It's technically a document - and a really long one at that. But yes, you can get it in book format. I'll get Bryce to stick a link to it in the podcast episode notes.

BC Consider it done!

GG So - who wrote this rule book?

SS Great question! The Australian Constitution was drafted way back in the 1890s! Representatives from the six States came together to discuss what should be in the Constitution at these big events called Constitutional Conventions. The final draft of the Constitution was approved by a vote of the people who were eligible to take part in referendums.

GG And what's in this Constitution? What does it say?

SS Ah yes, let me explain... The constitution outlines how we are governed. It talks about Australian Parliament and government being responsible for national decision-making and law-making. As well as a Parliament, including the King (represented by the Governor-General), the Senate and the House of Representatives. There is information about the High Court and what powers the six States have.

GG So wait ... back it up a bit ... the rule book that we rely on to run the country was written all the way back in 1899?

SS Yep ... but this is what is so cool about it ... it took such a long time to write, and had so many clever people contributing to it - that it has stood the test of time and mostly remained relevant for over 120 years ...

BC Umm .. what do you mean mostly?

SS Well ... I mean, that because Australia has changed a lot as a country from what it was 120 years ago when the Constitution was written - there have been times in the past 120 years when the Constitution has had to be updated - so that it is better suited to the modern Australia of today.

BC Oh right ... so, in the same way you have to update road rules from say, when they were written for horse and carts to now where we have electric vehicles - the Constitution needs a little modernising every now and then?

SS Exactly Bryce. The Australian people have the power to actively participate and make changes to the Constitution by voting. This happens after much discussion when people feel an important change is needed.

GG Hasn't been changed all that much eh? So how many times are we talking?

SS Well, remember how I told you that the Australian Constitution was drafted back in the 1890s? And then enacted - which is a fancy way of saying it became our official rule book in 1901 when the States all federated, meaning they joined together to be one country instead of separate colonies. Well since then, the Constitution has been altered eight times.

BC So wait, what? The words in the Constitution have only been altered eight times in the last 122 years?

SS Yep. Of the 44 referendum questions put to the people of Australia, eight proposed changes have been approved by a vote of the people

GG Ok - slow down there Steph. There's that word again ... referendum ... what in the wide world of feathers is a referendum?

SS So, the politicians in Canberra can't just make changes to the Consitution themselves. A proposed change must be approved by Federal Parliament and then the Government needs to ask the Australian people a question with a YES or NO answer. All Australian citizens over the age of 18 get to vote on the question - either choosing to agree with the proposed change and voting YES, or choosing to disagree with the proposed change and voting NO. This is called a referendum. It's basically a vote - a chance for everyone in the country vote YES or NO to a proposed Constitutional amendment.

BC So, what you're saying is a referendum is needed to make a change to the Constitution?

SS Yep, that's right Bryce.

GG Ok, so what kinda proposed changes have been made to the Constitution in the past?

SS Well, suggested amendments have included things like giving new powers to the Parliament, how referendums are conducted, and certain kinds of rights and freedoms

GG I'm going to need you to be more specific ...

SS Well - in 1946, there was a referendum on social security - which is to say the role the Federal Government would play in providing money to people who may find themselves out of work; and famously in 1967, there was a referendum on whether to include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia's official population count. And the most recent changes to the Constitution were in May 1977, when three of the four questions put to voters that day were successful.

BC That 1967 referendum is often referred to as an important step towards giving Indigenous Australians the same rights as non-Indigenous Australians.

GG Ahh ... I see ... and tell me Steph, when was the last referendum?

SS Gosh Gang-Gang - it has been a while! Let's see ... the last referendum was all the way back in 1999, over 20 years ago.

GG And what was it about?

SS The 1999 referendum was about whether to establish Australia as a republic.

BC Say what?

SS A republic. You know how there's a King in England? King Charles?

BC Yep

SS King Charles is our Head of State, but here in Australia the Governor-General, who represents the King is an important part of our parliamentary processes signing Bills into law. People wanted a referendum to consider whether we break those ties with Britain and become a republic, selecting our own Head of State.

GG And did the Australian people vote YES in that referendum? Did it pass?

SS Well, lots of people voted YES, but not enough of them in enough states and territories for it to pass.

GG Okay - my head is hurting a bit. This is a lot for a bird-brain to take in. I want to know more about what it takes for a referendum to succeed - but first I want to go and stuff my face with pyracantha berries. Do you mind if we pick this up next episode?

SS Of course .. never let it be said I stood between a cockatoo and his berries. See you back here next episode and I'll explain what it takes to pass a referendum - and why.

BC Oh - and Gang-Gang - if you or any Squiz Kid is interested in learning more about the Constitution or past referendums - there are a heap of links in the episode notes. Plus you can always visit the Museum of Australian Democracy website - which is a rich source of information on all of this stuff ...there's a link to that in the episode notes too. Plus - make sure you check out the excellent classroom activity sheets we've created to go with this podcast and help explain some of the big ideas .... See you back here soon Gang-Gang!

GG I'll be back in four shakes of a tail feather ... or until there are no berries left on the tree. Whichever comes first ...

 Hey teachers and parents, when you've finished listening, don't forget to head over to the Squiz Kids website where we've created some fantastic classroom resources so that you and your kids can learn more about the Australian Constitution and Referendums. We've even created a board game that takes you, step-by-step, through the process of running a referendum. Will your country vote Yes, or will you be consigned to the long list of No votes? You'll find out when you play...Referendum. The Board Game! Good luck!