All Commonwealth, state and territory judges in Australia are subject to mandatory retirement ages. While the 1977 referendum, which introduced judicial retirement ages for the Australian federal judiciary, commanded broad public support, this article argues that the aims of judicial retirement ages are no longer valid in a modern society. Judicial retirement ages may be causing undue expense to the public purse and depriving the judiciary of skilled adjudicators. They are also contrary to contemporary notions of age equality. Therefore, demographic change warrants a reconsideration of s 72 of the Constitution and other statutes setting judicial retirement ages. This article sets out three alternatives to the current system of judicial retirement ages. It concludes that the best option is to remove age-based limitations on judicial tenure.

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I Introduction

Justice Graham Bell of the Family Court of Australia retired on 20 February 2015, at the age of 78. Appointed in 1976, Justice Bell took office before the 1977 constitutional referendum that introduced judicial retirement ages for the Australian federal judiciary. Justice Bell was the last judge to whom the 1977 referendum did not apply; thus, all Australian federal judges are now appointed subject to a retirement age. Upon retiring, Justice Bell was quoted as saying:

These days 70 is equal to 60 or 55. … Judges should be able to go on till 80 provided they pass a medical inspection. After all, the pension makes judges pretty expensive creatures in retirement. They are sent out to pasture too early.1

Justice Bell’s comments reflect broader public concerns with the forced retirement of judges in Australia.2 Judicial retirement ages may be causing undue expense to the public purse and depriving the judiciary of skilled adjudicators. They are also contrary to contemporary notions of age equality. However, there has been minimal academic discussion of age limits and retirement ages for the judiciary,3 and whether they are necessary or warranted. More particularly, there has been very limited critical consideration of this topic in the Australian context.

This article considers the rationale and purpose of judicial retirement ages in Australia. It evaluates whether these aims are still valid in a modern society, and whether demographic change warrants a reconsideration of s 72 of the Constitution and other statutes setting judicial retirement ages. Finally, it considers how the judiciary might operate without retirement ages, and whether this would require other reforms to be feasible.

II Judicial Retirement Ages in Australia

A Federal Judiciary

Tenure and retirement of federal judges is provided for in s 72 of the Constitution, which says:

The appointment of a Justice of the High Court shall be for a term expiring upon his attaining the age of seventy years, and a person shall not be appointed as a Justice of the High Court if he has attained that age.

The appointment of a Justice of a court created by the Parliament shall be for a term expiring upon his attaining the age that is, at the time of his appointment, the maximum age for Justices of that court and a person shall not be appointed as a Justice of such a court if he has attained the age that is for the time being the maximum age for Justices of that court.

Subject to this section, the maximum age for Justices of any court created by the Parliament is seventy years.

The Parliament may make a law fixing an age that is less than seventy years as the maximum age for Justices of a court created by the Parliament and may at any time repeal or amend such a law, but any such repeal or amendment does not affect the term of office of a Justice under an appointment made before the repeal or amendment. …

Nothing in the provisions added to this section by the Constitution Alteration (Retirement of Judges) 1977 affects the continuance of a person in office as a Justice of a court under an appointment made before the commencement of those provisions.

Section 72 was amended to include provision for judicial retirement following the Constitution Alteration (Retirement of Judges) 1977 (Cth). Prior to this point, federal judges were appointed for life, until they chose to retire or were removed from office. The decision in The Waterside Workers’ Federation of Australia v J W Alexander Ltd (‘Alexander’s Case’) led to the original wording of s 72 being interpreted as requiring that ‘the tenure of all Federal Judges …

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4 Though this has never occurred in the federal context: see below Part III(A)(3).
5 (1918) 25 CLR 434.
be for life, subject to the power of removal. Any contrary argument was ‘completely untenable’. Thus, according to the High Court, federal judicial tenure could only be amended via a referendum in accordance with s 128 of the Constitution.

Justice Kirby argues that the interpretation of s 72 in *Alexander’s Case* became inconvenient and impracticable in Justice McTiernan’s time on the High Court. When Justice McTiernan stepped in as Acting Chief Justice to swear in new members of the Senate, Justice Kirby noted that

The Members of Parliament, who rarely saw the justices of the High Court in those itinerant days, were uniformly shocked at McTiernan’s great age and apparent feebleness. It was the sight of the octogenarian which encouraged the bipartisan support for the amendment of the constitution providing for the compulsory retirement of federal judges. … Henceforth there would be no more life appointments.

Thus, recommendations were put forward by the Senate Standing Committee on Constitutional and Legal Affairs in 1976, and the Hobart meeting of the Australian Constitutional Convention, to introduce retirement ages for federal judges. These recommendations were passed by Parliament as the *Constitution Alteration (Retirement of Judges) 1977 (Cth)*, and received national endorsement in the 1977 referendum.

When presented to Parliament by Mr Ellicott (the then Attorney-General), the alteration was justified on the basis that following *Alexander’s Case*:

It has, in consequence, been generally accepted that justices of the High Court, and other Federal judges including magistrates, cannot be required to retire on reaching a specified age. This is an unsatisfactory situation. There is an almost universal practice that the holders of public offices retire on attaining a maxi-

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6 Ibid 442 (Griffith CJ).
7 Ibid 457 (Barton J). Cf ibid 474 (Higgins J).
8 Ibid 486–7 (Powers J).
mum retirement age. The reasons for this practice are well known and they do not need to be spelt out here.12

There was minimal discussion in Parliament regarding why such a retirement age should be introduced, and what purpose would be achieved. Indeed, this was seen as self-evident: there could be ‘no rational opposition’ to retirement ages for federal judges.13 There was also minimal discussion regarding why 70 was an appropriate age for retirement.14 The justifications for introducing a retirement age for federal judges are analysed in more detail below in Part III.

According to Williams and Hume, the 1977 proposals for referenda were ‘developed in a spirit of agreement, had bipartisan support and were of modest import’.15 Opposition to the retirement age proposal was ‘muted; and there was no official ‘No’ case published.16 However, Sir Robert Menzies ‘argued that the new rule would deprive Australia of many fine legal minds’, and Professor Pat Lane argued that the proposal was of ‘little benefit’ and would increase the power of government via higher numbers of judicial appointments.17 These concerns did not change the tide of public support for federal judicial retirement ages, and the referendum passed with a resounding majority.

Section 72 now makes a distinction between the retirement ages of High Court judges and other federal judges. According to Mr Ellicott, this ‘recognises the special position of the High Court as the Federal Supreme Court’.18 Thus, judges of the High Court must retire at age 70, though this may be

14 Opeskin, ‘Models of Judicial Tenure’, above n 3, 14. In the 1976 report of the Senate Standing Committee, a retiring age of 70 was recommended for the High Court on the basis that it was the age most commonly adopted for state and territory judges: Senate Standing Committee on Constitutional and Legal Affairs, above n 10, 15.
16 Ibid 158.
varied for other federal courts. As it happens, the age of 70 is now applied uniformly to federal judges.19

The changes to s 72, and any subsequent changes to retirement ages, operated prospectively to safeguard judicial independence.20 Judicial independence requires ‘the absence of certain connections’ between the judiciary and other arms of government21 to secure impartiality in the conduct of the judicial role.22 Former Chief Justice of Tasmania, Sir Guy Green, defines judicial independence as the capacity of courts to perform their constitutional functions free from ‘actual or apparent interference’, and to the extent possible, ‘actual or apparent dependence’ on the executive.23 According to Lane, guaranteed judicial tenure is essential for securing judicial independence.24 Thus, changes to judicial tenure under s 72 risked impairing the appearance and reality of judicial independence if they applied to sitting judges.


To manage this risk, the changes to s 72 only affected new judicial appointments. Mr Ellicott therefore argued that there could be no suggestion that retirement ages were ‘being manipulated’ or that the changes were ‘directed against any existing judges’.25 Thus, it was contended that amending s 72 would not affect the appearance or reality of judicial independence. This argument appears to have been accepted in later case law. According to Gleeson CJ in *Forge v Australian Securities and Investments Commission* (‘*Forge’), the 1977 amendment ‘illustrates the room for legitimate choice that exists in connection with arrangements affecting judicial independence’.26 While life tenure was perceived to be necessary for federal judicial independence at federation, the introduction of retirement ages for federal judges when life tenure became ‘inconvenient’ did not mean that the High Court became less independent.27 Thus, while ‘[t]enure is an important aspect of the arrangements that support the individual and personal aspects of judicial independence … it is only one of a number of aspects all of which have to be considered in combination’.28 Mandatory retirement ages are therefore not incompatible with judicial independence, but reflect a legislative choice regarding how judicial independence might be secured. So long as judicial retirement ages operate as a general rule, and one that cannot be amended arbitrarily by the executive, the appearance and reality of judicial independence is unlikely to be affected.29

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25 Commonwealth, *Parliamentary Debates*, House of Representatives, 16 February 1977, 148. In contrast, Opeskin argues that ‘[a] significant motivation for the change appears to have been the desire to terminate the office of specific judges’, though he does not provide evidence for this assertion: Opeskin, ‘Models of Judicial Tenure’, above n 3, 640. Of course, the repeated references to the reform not affecting individual judges in the House of Representatives debates may indicate that Opeskin’s impression is correct.

26 (2006) 228 CLR 45, 66 [37].

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid. See also Ananian-Welsh and Williams, ‘Judicial Independence from the Executive’, above n 24.

29 Though see the discussion of judicial independence below.
B Australian States and Territories

Section 72 does not generally apply to state or territory courts. As noted by McHugh J in *Kable v Director of Public Prosecutions (NSW)* (‘*Kable*’), ‘the Constitution does not protect the appointment, remuneration and tenure of the judges of state courts invested with federal jurisdiction although it protects the judges of federal courts in respect of those matters’. There is therefore no requirement in the Constitution that state and territory judges have life tenure or hold office during good behaviour. Indeed, in *Spratt v Hermes*, Windeyer J described judges holding office during good behaviour as a form of ‘exceptional tenure’ generally not enjoyed by judges of subordinate courts. Further, in *Re Governor, Goulburn Correctional Centre; Ex parte Eastman*, Gleson CJ, McHugh and Callinan JJ thought it would have been ‘startling’ in 1915 to suggest that territory judges should have life tenure.

Thus, the Parliaments of the states and territories have far more discretion and latitude regarding the tenure of judges and magistrates. Where s 72 does not apply, ‘whether and to what extent the security of tenure of judges or magistrates should be established or enhanced … is a matter for the legislature to determine’. State and territory courts do not need to follow s 72 as a

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30 See *Re Governor, Goulburn Correctional Centre; Ex parte Eastman* (1999) 200 CLR 322; *Forge* (2006) 228 CLR 45, 66 [38] (Gleson CJ), 141 [255] (Heydon J). Cf *Re Governor, Goulburn Correctional Centre; Ex parte Eastman* (1999) 200 CLR 322, 340 (emphasis added) (citations omitted), where Gaudron J said:

> If it is not necessary for a [territory court] to conform to the requirements of s 72 of the Constitution, a question could arise as to whether, in accordance with the principles recognised in *Kable v Director of Public Prosecutions (NSW)*, there is not some implicit requirement in Ch III with respect to the nature of the matters that may be dealt with by it and perhaps, also, with respect to the manner in which it is constituted before federal jurisdiction can be vested in it.


32 (1965) 114 CLR 226, 271.


'template' or 'the Australian standard for judicial independence';\textsuperscript{35} there is no 'single ideal model' of independence, meaning there is 'room for legislative choice in this area'.\textsuperscript{36}

Further, for the most part, state and territory provisions regarding judicial tenure are not entrenched, and can therefore be amended as the legislature sees fit.\textsuperscript{37} Exceptionally, in New South Wales an attempt has been made to entrench provisions relating to judicial tenure. The \textit{Constitution Act 1902} (NSW) s 7B(1), amended by the \textit{Constitution (Entrenchment) Amendment Act 1992} (NSW), provides that Bills that expressly or impliedly repeal or amend constitutional provisions relating to judicial tenure must be approved by a majority of the electorate before being presented to the Governor for assent.\textsuperscript{38} However, this section will likely have limited consequences for judicial retirement ages. Section 55 (which is purportedly entrenched) merely provides that:

\begin{enumerate}
\item This Part does not prevent the fixing or a change of age at which all judicial officers, or all judicial officers of a court, are required to retire by legislation.
\item However, such a change does not apply to a judicial officer holding office when the change takes effect, unless the judicial officer consents.
\end{enumerate}

Thus, the \textit{Constitution Act 1902} (NSW) still provides significant discretion for Parliament to amend judicial tenure: a retirement age is not specified, though provision is made for the legislature to fix or change a retirement age for judges, and there is explicit provision made for term appointments in s 53 of the Act. Thus, entrenchment will not significantly constrain the legislature in this case.

Given state and territory provisions regarding judicial tenure are mostly not entrenched, in \textit{Capital TV \& Appliances Pty Ltd v Falconer}, Windeyer J

\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Forge} (2006) 228 CLR 45, 66 [36] (Gleeson CJ).


\textsuperscript{38} For further discussion of manner and form provisions in the Australian states, see Gerard Carney, 'An Overview of Manner and Form in Australia' (1989) 5 \textit{Queensland University of Technology Law Journal} 69.
observed that the Commonwealth Parliament could provide for territory judges to hold appointments during good behaviour … for life subject to removal in any manner it chooses to prescribe, or it can make them for a term of years, or it can adopt the common law by which offices under the Crown are held at the pleasure of the Crown.39

Similarly, in McCawley v The King, the Privy Council held that the Queensland Parliament was ‘fully entitled to vary the tenure of the judicial office’,40 and judges could be appointed for a fixed term if desired.41 This provides obvious scope for state and territory Parliaments to interfere with judicial tenure, and thus judicial independence.42

Within this constitutional framework, all Australian states and territories make some provision for mandatory retirement of judges and magistrates. However, there is no consensus regarding the age of retirement, which can vary within and between jurisdictions from ages 65 to 72. Thus, the Australian Law Reform Commission (‘ALRC’) has noted the ‘jurisdictional inconsistency’ relating to compulsory retirement provisions for judicial and quasi-judicial officers in Australia.43 Most states and territories also make some provision for the post-retirement employment of judges and magistrates. This may be allowed until a specified age, or for a specific period. The noticeable exceptions are the Northern Territory and Queensland (and perhaps South Australia), where those aged over 70 cannot be appointed as temporary magistrates. The different legislative provisions are presented in Table 1.

42 Ananian-Welsh and Williams, ‘Judicial Independence from the Executive’, above n 24, 605–6. The decision in Kable may arguably place some limits on state legislatures’ ability to interfere with judicial tenure: at 608–10.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State or Territory</th>
<th>Retirement age</th>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Post-retirement employment</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACT</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judges: 70</td>
<td>Supreme Court Act 1933 (ACT) s 4(3)</td>
<td>Acting judges for up to 12 months</td>
<td>Supreme Court Act 1933 (ACT) s 4B</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magistrates: 65</td>
<td>Magistrates Court Act 1930 (ACT) s 7D</td>
<td>'S'pecial magistrates’ until age 70</td>
<td>Magistrates Court Act 1930 (ACT) s 8A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSW</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judicial officers: 72 (unless granted retiring leave)</td>
<td>Judicial Officers Act 1986 (NSW) s 44(1)</td>
<td>Acting judges until age 77</td>
<td>Supreme Court Act 1970 (NSW) ss 37(4)–(4A)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-judicial members of the Industrial Relations Commission: 65</td>
<td>Judicial Officers Act 1986 (NSW) s 44(2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magistrates: 72</td>
<td>Judicial Officers Act 1986 (NSW) s 44(3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>NT</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judges: 70</td>
<td>Supreme Court Act 1979 (NT) s 38</td>
<td>Cannot appoint those aged 70 or over as acting stipendiary magistrates or 'Relieving Magistrates’</td>
<td>Magistrates Act 1977 (NT) ss 9(2A), 9A(1A)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magistrates: 70</td>
<td>Magistrates Act 1977 (NT) s 7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Qld</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judges: 70</td>
<td>Constitution of Queensland 2001 (Qld) s 60(2); District Court of Queensland Act 1967 (Qld) s 14; Supreme Court of Queensland Act 1991 (Qld) s 21</td>
<td>Acting judges until age 78</td>
<td>District Court of Queensland Act 1967 (Qld) s 17(5); Supreme Court of Queensland Act 1991 (Qld) s 6(6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magistrates: 70</td>
<td>Magistrates Act 1991 (Qld) s 42(d)</td>
<td>Acting magistrates until age 70</td>
<td>Magistrates Act 1991 (Qld) s 6(3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State</td>
<td>Judges</td>
<td>Supreme Court Act</td>
<td>District Court Act</td>
<td>Acting judges</td>
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<tr>
<td>SA</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>1935 (SA) s 13A(1); District Court Act 1991 (SA) s 16(1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tas</td>
<td>Supreme Court judges: 72</td>
<td>Supreme Court Act 1887 (Tas) s 6A(1)</td>
<td>Supreme Court Act 1887 (Tas) ss 3(5), 6A(1)</td>
<td>Supreme Court Act 1887 (Tas) ss 3(5), 6A(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Magistrates: 72</td>
<td>Magistrates Court Act 1987 (Tas) s 9(4)(a)</td>
<td>Magistrates Court Act 1987 (Tas) s 9(4)(a)</td>
<td>Magistrates Court Act 1987 (Tas) s 9(4)(a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vic</td>
<td>Supreme Court judges: 70 or 72</td>
<td>Constitution Act 1975 (Vic) s 77</td>
<td>Constitution Act 1975 (Vic) ss 81(2)(a), 81A(1)(b)</td>
<td>Reserve judges until age 78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>County Court judges: 70 or 72</td>
<td>County Court Act 1958 (Vic) s 14(1)</td>
<td>County Court Act 1958 (Vic) s 14(1)</td>
<td>County Court Act 1958 (Vic) s 14(1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Associate judges: 70</td>
<td>Supreme Court Act 1986 (Vic) s 104</td>
<td>Supreme Court Act 1986 (Vic) s 104</td>
<td>Supreme Court Act 1986 (Vic) s 104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Magistrates: 70</td>
<td>Magistrates’ Court Act 1989 (Vic) s 12(a)</td>
<td>Magistrates’ Court Act 1989 (Vic) s 12(a)</td>
<td>Magistrates’ Court Act 1989 (Vic) s 12(a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WA</td>
<td>Judges: 70</td>
<td>District Court of Western Australia Act 1969 (WA) s 16; Judges’ Retirement Act 1937 (WA) s 3(1)</td>
<td>District Court of Western Australia Act 1969 (WA) s 18A(1)</td>
<td>District Court of Western Australia Act 1969 (WA) s 18A(1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Australian states and territories generally appear to be seeking to have it both ways, making use of both mandatory retirement ages and provisions allowing judges and magistrates to be reappointed after retirement.\(^44\) This appears to undermine any argument in favour of judicial retirement ages based on judges’ declining capacity in old age. Of course, the reappointment of judges after retirement is likely to be highly selective, and individuals with declining capacity would be unlikely to be reappointed. Thus, a system of mandatory retirement with selective reappointment may be one means of managing judicial incapacity in old age. However, the selectivity of this process flags serious concerns related to judicial independence. If the executive is choosing to reappoint certain judges (and not others), this may impair the appearance or reality of individual and institutional independence. It is foreseeable that pressure could be applied to judges in the lead-up to retirement, with the promise of a term appointment in exchange for a favourable decision (or, conversely, declining to make a term appointment following an unfavourable decision).\(^45\) Given these very real risks to judicial independence (or, at the very least, risks to the appearance of judicial independence), the re-employment of judges after retirement is not the best way to extend judicial service; instead, as noted by Kirby J in Forge, ‘the course consistent with manifest independence and impartiality of the judiciary of the State is to extend (or remove) the age of mandatory retirement’, rather than to rely on acting appointments.\(^46\) Further, using term appointments to manage judicial incapacity puts the executive in the position of assessing judicial capacity each time a term appointment is made or not made. Vesting this role in the executive could seriously impair the reality or appearance of judicial independence,\(^47\) a concern that is reflected in the complicated provisions relating to judicial removal at federal, state and territory level.\(^48\)

Despite these concerns, acting appointments have become ‘a steady and significant component’ of the judiciary in New South Wales,\(^49\) and represent

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\(^{44}\) In contrast, acting appointments in the federal courts appear to be precluded by s 72 of the Constitution: see Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee, Parliament of Australia, *Australia’s Judicial System and the Role of Judges* (2009) 37 [4.30].

\(^{45}\) See *Forge* (2006) 228 CLR 45, 94 [124], 118 [181], 132–3 [223] (Kirby J).

\(^{46}\) Ibid 132 [221].

\(^{47}\) Ibid 118 [181] (Kirby J).

\(^{48}\) See, eg, *Constitution Act 1902* (NSW) s 53; *Judicial Officers Act 1986* (NSW) s 41.

'an important and relatively stable institutional supplementation of the judicial personnel of the Supreme Court' and District Court.50 This practice shows no signs of abating: in 2013, in the Supreme Court of New South Wales, nine acting judges sat for a cumulative total of 801 days.51 All of these acting judges were former judges of the Supreme Court of New South Wales or the Federal Court.52

The appointment of acting judges under s 37 of the Supreme Court Act 1970 (NSW) was challenged in Forge. In that case, Gleeson CJ held that acting judges had tenure ‘that [was] secure against interference by the Executive or other appointing authority in a discretionary or arbitrary manner’.53 Acting judges were subject to many of the same protections and institutional safeguards as permanent judges.54 Further, ‘[m]inimum standards of judicial independence are not developed in a vacuum. They take account of considerations of history, and of the exigencies of government’, and there were ‘sound practical reasons’ for appointing acting judges.55 Further, given the growth in the number of retired judges serving as acting judges,56 ‘it is difficult to imagine what doubts might reasonably have been entertained about [their] independence or impartiality, except such as could arise from the renewability of [their] temporary appointment’.57 While it was ‘possible to imagine extreme cases’ where acting appointments might mean the Supreme Court ‘no longer answered the description of a court or satisfied the minimum requirements of independence and impartiality’, the validity of the section could not be determined by reference to a hypothetical abuse of the power of appointment.58 Further, it was just as possible that governments

50 Ibid.
51 Supreme Court of New South Wales, ‘2013 Annual Review’ (Report, 2013) 16.
52 Ibid.
55 Ibid 68 [42] (Gleeson CJ).
56 Ibid 65 [34].
57 Ibid 68 [44]. Cf at 79 [71] (Gummow, Hayne and Crennan JJ) (emphasis in original): ‘It is the possibility of permanent appointment, and the possibility of reappointment as an acting judge, which marks the two cases of appointment as a judge and appointment to act as a judge as radically different’.
58 Ibid 69 [46] (Gleeson CJ). See also at 87 [97], 88 [101] (Gummow, Hayne and Crennan JJ). This may be compared with the dissent of Kirby J at 94 [124]–[125] (emphasis altered):
could abuse their power to appoint permanent judges.\textsuperscript{59} The ‘desirability’ of acting judges was not justiciable.\textsuperscript{60} Therefore, the use of acting appointments in New South Wales under s 37 of the \textit{Supreme Court Act 1970} (NSW) was upheld. Acting appointments in the New South Wales District Court were also upheld in \textit{Downey v Acting District Court Judge Boulton [No 5]}.\textsuperscript{61} Thus, the re-employment of retired judges in an acting capacity in state or territory courts has been upheld as consistent with constitutional principles, despite the clear risks to judicial independence.

\textbf{III CRITICISM OF JUDICIAL RETIREMENT AGES}

Judicial retirement ages have come under sustained criticism for a number of years. These criticisms may be broken down into two parts: first, that the arguments in favour of judicial retirement ages no longer reflect contemporary conditions; and, secondly, that retirement ages are unnecessary in practice. These arguments are explored in more detail in the Parts that follow.

\textbf{A Critiques of Arguments in Favour of Retirement Ages}

It is questionable whether the arguments in favour of judicial retirement ages, as put forward by the Senate Standing Committee on Constitutional and Legal Affairs in 1976, and the parliamentary debates on the \textit{Constitution Alteration (Retirement of Judges) 1977} (Cth), continue to reflect contemporary conditions (indeed, if they ever did). The arguments put forward in favour of judicial retirement ages reflected five key concerns.

1 \textit{Contemporising Courts}

First, there was a desire to increase turnover of judges to achieve ‘vigorously and dynamic courts’, via ‘new and younger judges’ with ‘new ideas and fresh

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid 61 [20] (Gleeson CJ).
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{61} (2010) 78 NSWLR 499.
social attitudes'. In the parliamentary debates, it was argued that retirement ages would allow 'the appointment of younger judges', helping to 'contemporise the courts'. Thus, it was 'a good, progressive move'. Ageing judges might lose touch with the community:

an age limit should be determined so that the community can have confidence that current-day sets of values, which often conflict and which are varied, are within the general realm of experience of the currently sitting judges. In some cases a judge may retain full capacity of mind, full general mental knowledge and vigour but be out of touch with much of what is occurring in the community if he be very elderly.

These arguments adopt a disengagement theory of ageing, where older judges gradually and inevitably withdraw from public life as a result of the ageing process, and lose touch with contemporary attitudes and values. Disengagement theory has been extensively critiqued and ultimately rejected in the literature. Contemporary thinkers aligned with a positive gerontology favour a more positive view of ageing, based on social engagement and continuity across the life course. Researchers in ageing now recognise that 'success, productivity, and engagement are, in fact, features of a "normal"


63 Commonwealth, Parliamentary Debates, House of Representatives, 17 February 1977, 211 (Michael Hodgman).

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid 220 (James Neil).

aging experience’. Further, individuals are likely to respond to the ageing process via a dynamic and adaptive form of continuity; that is, they will generally rely on the roles, skills, relationships, and techniques they have used earlier in life to deal with changes associated with ageing. While continuity can become ‘maladaptive’ in some circumstances, particularly if these relationships and techniques no longer reflect changed social conditions, there is no evidence that individuals (and judges more specifically) simply withdraw from public life and fall out of touch with community values as they age.

If we reject disengagement theory, these arguments cannot be relied upon to support mandatory retirement ages. However, there is still a risk that judges might cling to outdated values and assumptions as they age, which might also lead to maladaptive decision-making. Judging is not a mechanistic task (particularly at the appellate level), and arguably draws on judges’ values, attitudes and individual policy preferences, or at least judges’ interpretations of community values. Thus, promoting judicial turnover might lead to new ideas in judicial decision-making and new ways of interpreting existing precedents. That said, it is also important to acknowledge that judges can change as individuals, and can integrate new ideas into their decision-making. Further, it is debatable whether (and how) we want judges to be ‘in touch’ with community values, and whether they are ‘out of touch’ at all.

67 Johnson and Mutchler, above n 66, 93.
69 Ibid 187.
72 See below Part III(A)(3).
2 Opening Up Opportunities for Younger Appointees

Mandatory retirement was also supported as it would open up avenues for ‘able legal practitioners’ to achieve judicial positions ‘while at the peak of their professional abilities and before suffering the limitations of declining health’. This reflects two concerns: first, the need to create opportunities for younger judicial appointees by increasing judicial turnover; and, secondly, concerns about declining capacity in old age.

In careers with a fixed number of positions (including the judiciary), longer work careers may limit opportunities for others. Judicial tenure (and mandatory retirement ages) ‘directly impacts the rate of judicial turnover’, facilitating more (and more youthful) judicial appointments. The desire to create opportunities for ‘able legal practitioners’ to achieve judicial positions reflects the ‘fair innings’ argument, or the idea that work policies should take into account all advantages an individual has experienced cumulatively over their life. This argument posits that ill-treatment of or discrimination against older workers can be offset by perceived advantages they enjoyed earlier in life. Older judges have had opportunities for progression and advancement in their youth, and these should be taken into consideration when deciding whether to impose mandatory retirement. Justice Kirby has argued that ‘[e]very office holder must keep in mind the need to make way for young people of honourable ambition who follow behind … to make way for fresh blood required to invigorate a vital branch of government’. By this reasoning, older judges, who have ‘had their chance’ on the bench, need to retire to make way for the next generation. Mandatory retirement will therefore open up jobs for (younger) judges in a fair and bloodless way. Thus, retirement ages are one way of securing intergenerational fairness in this context.

77 See below Part III(A)(3).
80 Kirby, ‘Sir Edward McTiernan — A Centenary Reflection’, above n 9, 182.
The ‘fair innings’ argument has been extensively criticised in the literature as being ‘fundamentally unsound’ and reflecting a flawed understanding of the labour market.\(^{83}\) The argument assumes there are a fixed number of opportunities in the economy, and that employment of a new (younger) worker requires the removal of another (older) worker. This does not hold at the macro-economic level, though it might at the level of an individual firm or, perhaps, within the judiciary as a whole.\(^{84}\) Thus, judicial retirement ages may be required to achieve intergenerational fairness in this context, particularly given the limited number of positions available in the most senior courts.

In addition, it is argued that making way for the next generation of judges through mandatory retirement will promote a more diverse judiciary,\(^{85}\) enhancing public confidence and the legitimacy of the courts,\(^{86}\) encouraging new ideas\(^ {87}\) and creating a judiciary which has a better overall understanding of society, improving the quality of judicial decision-making.\(^ {88}\) If older judges are predominantly privileged, heterosexual, Anglo-Saxon men, the use of mandatory retirement ages may open up opportunities for appointees with

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\(^{83}\) Fredman, above n 79, 47. See also Performance and Innovation Unit, ‘Winning the Generation Game: Improving Opportunities for People Aged 50–65 in Work and Community Activity’ (Report, United Kingdom Cabinet Office, April 2000) 39–40.

\(^{84}\) Elaine Dewhurst, ‘Intergenerational Balance, Mandatory Retirement and Age Discrimination in Europe: How Can the ECJ Better Support National Courts in Finding a Balance between the Generations?’ (2013) 50 *Common Market Law Review* 1333, 1352–9. The degree to which the ‘fair innings’ argument holds at the level of the individual firm will depend on the internal labour market in each firm. There is wide variation in internal labour markets across and between firms and in different industries and occupations: Peter B Doeringer and Michael J Piore, *Internal Labor Markets and Manpower Analysis* (M E Sharpe, 1971) xi, 2. The ‘fair innings’ argument is most likely to hold where the internal labour market of a firm has rigid ‘lines of progression’ and ‘internal career ladders’, limited ports of entry, and workers have limited mobility between firms: at 3. This may be an accurate description of the judiciary and judicial careers more generally.


\(^{86}\) Ibid.


more diverse individual characteristics, particularly in the areas of race, gender, sexuality and socio-economic status. According to Justice Kirby, ‘[f]or an appellate court to reach great strengths there is a need for diversity amongst its members. If everyone has the same judicial philosophy, background and experience, a court is seriously weakened’. Judicial retirement ages may create space on the bench to appoint judges with more diverse backgrounds and experiences. For example, four of the five female judges who have sat on the High Court have been appointed since 2005, largely as a result of judicial retirements at the mandatory retirement age. Increased age may also be associated with more “pro-elderly” decision-making, supporting the need for a more diverse and balanced judiciary, and potentially providing a key justification for mandatory retirement ages.

However, while there is increasing recognition that a diverse judiciary is essential for a democratic society, there is limited evidence that new judicial appointments are actually more diverse. At this stage, it does not appear that the existing judicial appointment process in Australia is encouraging or enabling appointment of diverse candidates to the most senior judicial positions. There have been only five women appointed to the High Court in its history, and women comprise only 30.9 per cent of Commonwealth judges and magistrates more generally. This lack of diversity has led to calls to introduce a judicial appointments commission in Australia, like that in the United Kingdom, to promote a more transparent and accessible system of appointments. Judicial retirement ages are unlikely to promote a more diverse judiciary without fundamental reform of judicial appointment

92 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Judges and Magistrates' in Gender Indicators (ABS Catalogue No 4125.0, 28 August 2013). Though, as noted above, many of these appointments have occurred in recent years.
processes; relying on judicial retirement ages alone to achieve diversity is futile and misplaced. That said, judicial retirement ages could be one means of opening up positions for more diverse appointees, and are accompanied by more temporal certainty than natural attrition. This certainty alone, though, is unlikely to be sufficient justification for judicial retirement ages.

3 Declining Capability

Judicial retirement ages were also seen as preventing the process of ageing and mental decline from inhibiting the judicial function. As noted by Mr Bowen in the parliamentary debates:

> The judges of the High Court … are not immune from senility. They are not immune from the geriatric process of mental decay and accordingly it follows that there must be some intelligent appraisal by the Australian people of whether we think sixty, sixty-five or seventy should be the age at which the man or the lady … should retire.94

This was put even more bluntly by Mr Falconer: ‘We do not want geriatric judges dominating the judicial system. … [N]ot everyone recognises when those intellectual talents are being dimmed’.95 Thus, mandatory retirement would ‘avoid the unfortunate necessity of removing a judge’ made unfit for office ‘by reasons of declining health … but who is unwilling to resign’.96 Removing a judge whose capacity had declined with age was likely to be insurmountably difficult, being ‘cumbersome’ and ‘almost unapproachable’:

> An address of the 2 Houses would be contemplated only in the most extreme circumstances. A government would be loath to move in such a way against a person of great stature who may have reached an advanced age, possibly with

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96 Senate Standing Committee on Constitutional and Legal Affairs, above n 10, 14. See also Minutes of Proceedings and Official Record of Debates of the Australian Constitutional Convention, Hobart, 27–29 October 1976, 38 (Ian McLaren), 42 (Lionel Bowen).
some lack of performance. I think it would be a much simpler and better process to have an automatic retiring age.97

If that meant the court ‘might lose occasionally a brilliant man who has a lot to offer’, that would just be ‘one of the penalties of having an automatic cut-off date’.98

This argument has three fundamental limitations. First, it reflects a decline theory of ageing, buoyed by the assumption that ‘older workers [and judges] would decline in competence and capability as they aged’.99 The decline theory of ageing fails to consider potential benefits of the ageing process100 and the social construction of age and ageing.101 Assumptions regarding the relationship between age and competence are normally underpinned by ageist beliefs about biological ageing.102 However, ‘age is a weak predictor’ of an individual’s capacity to work productively103 and ‘[old] age is not a good proxy for capability’.104 If anything, older workers form a more heterogeneous group than younger workers, as people age at different rates.105 Thus, while the capacity of some workers may decline with age, others will continue to fulfil their roles with esteem into very old age. Age-related cognitive decline is a complex area of study, and it is risky to draw any assumptions on the link

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98 Ibid.
101 Schaie, above n 100, 320.
104 See Fredman, above n 79, 40.
between age and declining capacity. Indeed, based on a study of cognitive information processing capacities in older adults, Ramscar et al have concluded that cognitive decline is no more than a myth: while older adults may take longer to complete certain tasks, this is because they have more information to process, and is not due to any issues of declining ability. These findings increasingly challenge our stereotypical preconceptions of old age, and the assumed correlation between old age and mental capacity.

More particularly, the performance of judges may not decline significantly with age. Longitudinal studies have found two key requirements for maintaining ‘high cognitive performance’ in later life, namely education in younger age, and ‘ongoing intellectual activity’. Judges satisfy both these requirements, reducing any link between declining capability and age. While some studies have found that the productivity of judges declines with age, the way these authors have defined judicial ‘productivity’ may make the results unreliable. Further, other industries with an educated and supported older


110 Bhattacharya and Smyth note the difficulties with defining and quantifying ‘productivity’ in this context: Bhattacharya and Smyth, above n 109, 210. The authors ultimately use the age-citation profiles of judges as a proxy for productivity (that is, the number of citations each judge receives in later decisions, as compared to their age at the time of delivering the original judgment). Whether judges are cited in later decisions depends on a number of factors unrelated to productivity, such as the nature of the court’s caseload, and the cases and judgments that are cited by counsel: Smyth and Bhattacharya, above n 109, 149. Further, the authors’ 2001 article covered citations of retired judges in High Court decisions from 1995 to 1999: Bhattacharya and Smyth, above n 109, 209. The 2003 article considered citations of retired judges in Federal Court decisions from 1998 to 2000: Smyth and Bhattacharya, above n 109, 149. These results are now dated, and may not reflect the capacity of today’s judges. At a more fundamental level, as in academia, citations do not necessarily indicate quality of output: see Clive Beed and Cara Beed, ‘Measuring the Quality of Academic Journals: The Case of Economics’ (1996) 18 Journal of Post Keynesian Economics 369.
workforce (like academia) have found no significant association between ageing and a decline in performance.\textsuperscript{111} Thus, anecdotal evidence of declining judicial capacity in old age\textsuperscript{112} may be misleading for the judiciary as a whole.

If ageing \textit{is} associated with decline in a particular case, many individuals will recognise the limits of their own capacity.\textsuperscript{113} For those that do not, a process of capability or performance assessment could remedy the issue. As Sir Harry Gibbs has noted:

judges do from time to time become incapable, by reason of illness, of performing their functions and although they can usually be persuaded to resign there have been instances in which judges, unfit by reason of serious and permanent illness, have resisted persuasion for too long.\textsuperscript{114}

Thus, this raises the need for an appropriate process of capability or performance assessment for \textit{all} judges, not just older judges.

The second fundamental limitation, then, is that arguments in favour of mandatory retirement recognise the difficulty of relying on s 72 and comparable state and territory processes as a means of managing declining judicial performance. Managing judicial capacity and performance without affecting judicial independence is an ongoing challenge for democratic systems.\textsuperscript{115} As noted by Spigelman CJ in \textit{Bruce v Cole}: ‘The independence of the judiciary is, to a very substantial degree, dependent upon the maintenance of a system in which the removal of a judicial officer from office is an absolutely extraordinary occurrence’.\textsuperscript{116} While individual performance appraisals might be

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{111} Alysia Blackham, ‘Managing without Default Retirement in Universities: A Comparative Picture from Australia’ (2015) 35 \textit{Legal Studies} 502.
\item \textsuperscript{112} See, eg, Kirby, ‘Sir Edward McTiernan — A Centenary Reflection’, above n 9, 180–2.
\item \textsuperscript{113} Though, according to former Chief Justice Murray Gleeson in ABC Radio National, ‘Chief Justice Gleeson To Leave Bench’, PM, 20 August 2008 <http://www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2008/s2341693.htm>:

\begin{quote}
we all know that there are people over 70 who have all their equipment and we all know that there may be some people under 70 who don’t. But it’s unfair to put people in a position where they have to judge themselves and decide whether they’re still fit to continue in the job.
\end{quote}
\item \textsuperscript{115} See Gibbs, above n 114, 146–7.
\item \textsuperscript{116} (1998) 48 NSWLR 163, 166.
\end{itemize}
appropriate for the general workforce, their ‘application to judges is problematic because of the countervailing interest in immunising the judiciary from executive discretion, where such assessments might be reposed’.117 Opeskin also questions whether it is possible ‘to make reliable assessments of capacity in relation to the nuanced cognitive activity of judging’.118 At the same time, judges should not occupy their position without scrutiny or assessment. Shartel has argued that judicial tenure should not be unlimited; rather, it should be ‘tenure for so long as the judge is fit to hold judicial office’.119 Thus, tenure should be terminated due to incapacitation, incompetence, neglect of duty or moral unfitness.120 The ‘crucial problem’ is how to devise and implement a system that achieves this end,121 without jeopardising the rule of law, judicial independence or the separation of powers.

The Constitution has in-built protection to guard judicial integrity: under s 72(ii), federal judges ‘shall not be removed except by the Governor-General in Council, on an address from both Houses of the Parliament in the same session, praying for such removal on the ground of proved misbehaviour or incapacity’.122 There is no power to remove for incompetence.123 According to Opeskin, ‘removal … is so purposefully demanding that it is seldom invoked’.124 Similarly, Sir Harry Gibbs has noted:

the very gravity of the procedure may provide a disincentive to its use, and political considerations may add strength to that disincentive. … [T]he procedure

118 Ibid.
120 Ibid.
121 Ibid.
122 For state and territory judges, see Australian Capital Territory (Self-Government) Act 1988 (Cth) s 48D; Constitution Act 1902 (NSW) s 53(2); Judicial Officers Act 1986 (NSW) s 41(1); Supreme Court Act 1979 (NT) s 40; Constitution of Queensland 2001 (Qld) s 61; Constitution Act 1934 (SA) ss 74–5; Supreme Court (Judges’ Independence) Act 1857 (Tas) s 1; Constitution Act 1975 (Vic) ss 77(1), 77(4)(aaa), 87AAB; Constitution Act 1889 (WA) ss 54–5; Supreme Court Act 1935 (WA) s 9. See also Christine Wheeler, ‘The Removal of Judges from Office in Western Australia’ (1980) 14 University of Western Australia Law Review 305.
124 Opeskin, ‘Models of Judicial Tenure’, above n 3, 628. Writing in 1987, Gibbs noted that no judge had been removed that century: Gibbs, above n 114, 146.
is hardly a satisfactory one for dealing with the position of a judge who is suffering from mental deterioration.125

Judicial pensions are also generally not payable if a federal judge is removed under s 72,126 perhaps increasing reluctance to make use of these provisions. Likely as a result, s 72 has been invoked only once, in relation to Justice Murphy of the High Court.127 Similar concerns have also been raised in relation to state systems for managing judicial capacity and performance.128

Reluctance or inability to address judicial incapacity via these mechanisms may have serious consequences in practice. While there are few recorded instances relating to the federal judiciary, judicial incapacity has raised difficulties at the state level. For example, Chief Justice Mack in Queensland suffered a heart attack in the late 1960s, and was incapable of performing his judicial functions. He stayed in office for a further two years.129 There have been a number of occasions where state judges and magistrates with mental health issues have been forced to prove their capacity to the legislature.130 However, these issues are not confined to older judges: while potentially more common among older judges, incapacity may occur at any age, and cannot always be addressed via mandatory retirement.131 Failing to address judicial incapacity is obviously undesirable. As noted by Appleby and Le Mire, ‘[p]ermanent physical or mental incapacity that is untreatable will not only

125 Gibbs, above n 114, 147.
126 Judges’ Pensions Act 1968 (Cth) s 17.
128 However, it is also important to recognise the presence of ‘informal’ checks and balances that regulate judicial behaviour, including through peer pressure and scrutiny: see James Thomas, Judicial Ethics in Australia (LexisNexis Butterworths, 3rd ed, 2009) 247 [14.1]. According to the Hon James Thomas, formerly a judge of the Queensland Court of Appeal, these informal forms of scrutiny mean formal systems are rarely required: at 247 [14.1]. In relation to judicial capacity, judges have a ‘duty to resign’ if they no longer are capable of fulfilling their role: at 55 [4.52]. However, it might require a ‘discreet appeal’ by a ‘trusted colleague’ before judges will acknowledged their declining capacity. This sort of approach has resulted in a few ‘timely resignation[s]’: at 56 [4.52].
129 Ibid 55 n 151.
131 See Thomas, above n 128, 56 [4.52].
reduce the individual judge’s capacity to perform the judicial function, but may also undermine public confidence in the institution’.\textsuperscript{132}

McFadden has noted concerns that performance or capability processes might ‘damage the public’s perception of the judiciary by raising doubts about the integrity and fitness of all judges’.\textsuperscript{133} However, there is no indication that the public would regard performance processes for one judge as indicative of the competence of the judiciary as a whole. Further, performance appraisals are not degrading and do not undermine older workers’ dignity unless declining capability with age is regarded as ‘stigmatic’.\textsuperscript{134} Thus, there is no reason why a system for dealing with incapacity should damage public perceptions of the judiciary, unless this stigma prevails. If so, this raises deeper questions about how Australian society regards age and competence.

In sum, then, rather than relying on stereotypical assumptions of capability based on age, judges should be treated as individuals, and have their capabilities assessed on an individual basis in the event that issues arise.

While individual assessments of capacity might be desirable in principle, in practice, establishing more formalised processes for addressing judicial incapacity will be a difficult task. First, any system for managing judicial incapacity will need to be carefully framed to minimise risks to judicial independence and to ensure it does not undermine the judicial process.\textsuperscript{135} Secondly, any process should supplement (rather than usurp) the power of the Governor-General and Parliament under s 72(ii) of the \textit{Constitution} to remove federal judicial officers on the ground of proved misbehaviour or incapacity,\textsuperscript{136} and similar provisions in the states and territories. Thirdly, any body at the federal level must satisfy the restrictions on executive interference with judicial power under ch III of the \textit{Constitution}. Finally, the integrity of the process will need to be protected from collateral challenge through other proceedings.\textsuperscript{137}

Balancing these challenges with the need to better address capacity issues, Appleby and Le Mire propose the establishment of a judicial complaints

\textsuperscript{132} Appleby and Le Mire, above n 123, 11.
\textsuperscript{133} McFadden, above n 85, 89.
\textsuperscript{134} Fredman, above n 79, 45.
\textsuperscript{135} See Appleby and Le Mire, above n 123, 37.
\textsuperscript{137} Appleby and Le Mire, above n 123, 65.
system ‘administered by a body … removed from the ordinary judicial hierarchy and process’.138 While this body would likely need to be composed of members of the judiciary (and exclude members of the executive) to satisfy ch III of the Constitution, it could also include lay members appointed by a judicial panel.139 Appleby and Le Mire propose that this body enforce standards developed and adopted by the judiciary to provide guidance and examples of incapacity and inappropriate judicial behaviour.140 While removal of judicial officers is exclusively a matter for the Governor-General and Parliament under s 72(ii) of the Constitution, the authors argue that lesser penalties may be enforced by a judicial body in accordance with ‘judicially adopted standards’.141

Alternatively, a judicial tribunal could be established to examine allegations of misbehaviour or incapacity, and determine whether the facts as proven warranted removal.142 The tribunal could consider matters upon referral from the Attorney-General, and removal would still ultimately remain a matter for Parliament.143 To some extent, this proposal has been enacted via the Judicial Misbehaviour and Incapacity (Parliamentary Commissions) Act 2012 (Cth), which provides for the establishment of parliamentary commissions upon the passing of a resolution by both houses of Parliament in the same session, to investigate specific allegations of judicial misbehaviour or incapacity.144 Commissions are tasked with investigating allegations and reporting to Parliament on whether there is evidence that would let ‘Parliament conclude that the alleged misbehaviour or incapacity is proved’.145 The commission procedure is intended to inform the process under s 72(ii) of the Constitution, meaning it does not interfere with the constitutional role of Parliament and the Governor-General. Commissions are to consist of three members nominated by the Prime Minister after consultation with the leader of the opposition, and at least one member is to be a former Commonwealth

138 Ibid 67.
139 Ibid 49, 67.
140 Ibid 55.
141 Ibid 59. Though, on suspension, see Lynch, above n 136, 83–4.
142 Gibbs, above n 114, 148.
143 Ibid. See generally Thomas, above n 128, 302–30.
144 Judicial Misbehaviour and Incapacity (Parliamentary Commissions) Act 2012 (Cth) s 9.
145 Ibid s 10.
judicial officer, or former state or territory Supreme Court judge.\footnote{146} The integrity of commission proceedings is secured by s 65 of the Act, which provides that commission members have the same protection and immunity as a member of a house of the Parliament engaged in parliamentary committee work. Further, witnesses and lawyers are granted the same protection afforded to witnesses before a committee of a house of the Parliament. This may prevent many collateral challenges to committee processes and findings. While the Act has created a supplementary process to facilitate and inform the use of s 72(ii), there are likely to be few cases where this will be engaged in practice, particularly given the limited use of s 72(ii).\footnote{147} Unsurprisingly, then, the provisions have not yet been deployed at the time of writing.

Further, the \textit{Courts Legislation Amendment (Judicial Complaints) Act 2012} (Cth) now provides a statutory basis for chief justices to ‘handle’ complaints about judicial officers. In handling complaints, chief justices may consider, investigate, and refer the complaint as required, and may ‘take any measures’ they believe to be ‘reasonably necessary to maintain public confidence in the Court’, such as restricting the judge to non-sitting duties.\footnote{148} The Act does not apply to the High Court, and does not significantly extend existing practices in the internal management of courts. Rather, it provides a ‘legislative basis for … internal management’ processes.\footnote{149}

Thus, while there has been some legislative activity in this area, neither Act creates a comprehensive system for addressing judicial incapacity. Given s 72(ii) is rarely utilised, the \textit{Judicial Misbehaviour and Incapacity (Parliamentary Commissions) Act 2012} (Cth) will be engaged only rarely, and the \textit{Courts Legislation Amendment (Judicial Complaints) Act 2012} (Cth) still relies on chief justices to address concerns of incapacity on the bench. That said, particularly with the added legitimacy of a legislative basis, this internal management process may resolve many concerns of incapacity. Indeed, informal checks and balances, such as peer pressure and scrutiny, may mean additional formal systems to manage capacity would rarely be required or engaged.\footnote{150} Thus, while legislative reforms have not changed the landscape of

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{146} Ibid s 13.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{147} See Lynch, above n 136, 82.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{148} \textit{Courts Legislation Amendment (Judicial Complaints) Act 2012} (Cth) sch 1 cl 18.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{149} Lynch, above n 136, 82–3.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{150} Thomas, above n 128, 247 [14.1].}
judicial capacity management in any significant way, they may give sufficient symbolic weight to the internal management role of the chief justice that further reform is not required at the federal level.\(^{151}\)

Therefore, while arguments in favour of mandatory retirement raised in 1977 correctly identified issues with managing capacity under s 72(ii), this does not mean that retirement ages should be imposed. Rather than relying on mandatory retirement to address capacity issues, these concerns should prompt deeper consideration of how we respond to judicial incapacity, and how we support chief justices in fulfilling their internal management role. This may have beneficial consequences for the integrity of the judiciary as a whole; as Appleby and Le Mire note, ‘a rigorous system of complaints handling is necessary to promote public confidence [in the judiciary]’.\(^{152}\)

The third fundamental limitation is that seeking to avoid ‘the unfortunate necessity of removing a judge’ made unfit for office by reason of declining health\(^ {153}\) reflects the dignity argument, or a desire to avoid ‘humiliating’ performance management for older judges. This argument is highly controversial in a general employment setting. While mandatory retirement is arguably a ‘less intrusive mechanism’ for managing declining performance of senior judges than ‘degrading’ capability appraisals,\(^ {154}\) this conflates age with capacity and wrongly assumes that ageing is necessarily a process of decline and deterioration.\(^ {155}\) Further, as Fredman argues, ‘it is also an affront to the dignity of the individual to assume that he or she automatically shares the characteristics of everyone else in his or her age group’.\(^ {156}\)

\(^{151}\) Though, of course, this could not address incapacity on the part of the chief justices themselves.

\(^{152}\) Appleby and Le Mire, above n 123, 67.

\(^{153}\) Senate Standing Committee on Constitutional and Legal Affairs, above n 10, 14.


\(^{156}\) Fredman, above n 79, 45.
4 Community Acceptance

In 1977, mandatory retirement was also supported by ‘acceptance of the need for a compulsory retiring age for judges’ in Australia;\(^\text{157}\) acceptance of judicial retirement ages overseas and in the Australian states and territories;\(^\text{158}\) and public sentiment supporting the introduction of judicial retirement ages.\(^\text{159}\) The introduction of retirement ages brought ‘the circumstances of the judiciary into parallel with those of other members of the community’.\(^\text{160}\) Until that point, retiring judges had ‘been considerably older than people in other professions’.\(^\text{161}\) When the Senate Standing Committee delivered its report in 1976, academics had retirement ages of between 55 and 65, and magistrates and public servants were required to retire between the ages of 55 and 65, depending on the state in which they were employed.\(^\text{162}\) Retirement ages had also been set for Supreme Court judges in all Australian states and for Family Courts. In that context, it would be ‘anomalous that this distinction between federal and state judges of similar courts should exist and that the Commonwealth Parliament should be unable to do anything about the matter’.\(^\text{163}\)

Therefore, retirement ages in 1977 reflected ‘public sentiment’ and were consistent with practices relating to other professions. Further, it brought the Commonwealth in line with state practices. However, as noted above, there is no consensus at state and territory level regarding the appropriate age of retirement for judges and magistrates. Retirement ages vary within and between jurisdictions from ages 65 to 72. Thus, the change has not created consistency within or between jurisdictions.

\(^{157}\) Senate Standing Committee on Constitutional and Legal Affairs, above n 10, 14.


\(^{161}\) Ibid.

\(^{162}\) Senate Standing Committee on Constitutional and Legal Affairs, above n 10, 19.

Further, while retirement ages may have been publically accepted in
1977, they are not generally acceptable in a modern employment context. For
other occupations, the legislature has decided that mandatory retirement is no
longer acceptable. Compulsory retirement was abolished in Australia
progressively over the 1990s and 2000s.\textsuperscript{164} Compulsory retirement is now
prohibited within Australian workplaces.\textsuperscript{165} The \textit{Age Discrimination Act 2004}
(Cth) provides:

\section*{18 Discrimination in employment}

\begin{itemize}
\item[(2)] It is unlawful for an employer or a person acting or purporting to act on
behalf of an employer to discriminate against an employee on the
ground of the employee's age …
\item[(c)] by dismissing the employee …
\end{itemize}

However, discriminatory behaviour is exempt from the Act where the
employee is ‘unable to carry out the inherent requirements of the particular
employment because of his or her age’.\textsuperscript{166}

\textsuperscript{164} Linda Rosenman and Sylvia McDonald, ‘How Should Universities Respond to the Abolition
of Compulsory Retirement?’ (1995) 38(1) \textit{Australian Universities’ Review} 63, 63. See also
\textit{Abolition of Compulsory Age Retirement (Statutory Officeholders) Act 2001} (Cth); \textit{Age Discrimination Act 2004} (Cth) pt 4 div 2; \textit{Industrial Relations Reform Act 1993} (Cth); \textit{Anti-Discrimination (Amendment) Act 1994} (NSW).

\textsuperscript{165} While some state and territory legislation still contains mandatory retirement as an exception
to the principle of age equality, the passage of the \textit{Age Discrimination Act 2004} (Cth) has
likely rendered the sections irrelevant: Neil Rees, Simon Rice and Dominique Allen, \textit{Australian Anti-Discrimination Law} (Federation Press, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed, 2014) 61–2; \textit{Age Discrimination Act 2004} (Cth) ss 10, 12; \textit{Constitution} s 109; \textit{Anti-Discrimination Act 1992} (NT) s 36; \textit{Anti-Discrimination Act 1998} (Tas) s 35.

\textsuperscript{166} \textit{Age Discrimination Act 2004} (Cth) ss 18(4)–(5). In relation to ‘inherent requirements’:
Compulsory retirement is also prohibited by the *Fair Work Act 2009* (Cth), which provides that:

**Discrimination**

(1) An employer must not take adverse action [including dismissal] against a person who is an employee, or prospective employee, of the employer because of the person’s age.167

Again, this prohibition does not apply to action that is ‘taken because of the inherent requirements of the particular position concerned’.168 Mandatory retirement has been abolished for Commonwealth statutory office holders and other public servants.169 Thus, judges (and military personnel) are some of the few professions that may still be subjected to compulsory retirement.170 It cannot be said, then, that mandatory retirement for judges is still consistent with modern workplace practices. Indeed, other legislative provisions provide a clear indication that age discrimination is no longer morally or legally acceptable in Australian workplaces.

Judicial retirement ages have been criticised in the United States as representing ‘a prime example of arbitrary age discrimination that has become a serious problem’.171 Like other forms of age discrimination, mandatory retirement for judges raises inherent questions of whether it is morally right, socially profitable, economically wise or constitutionally sound to declare by legislative fiat that the useful life of these professional people is completed solely because they have reached an arbitrarily designated age.172

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167 See also *Fair Work Act 2009* (Cth) s 342. The *Fair Work Act 2009* (Cth) also prohibits modern awards and enterprise agreements from containing clauses which discriminate on the basis of age: ss 153, 194–5. See also *Re Australian Catholic University Ltd* (2011) 207 IR 372.


169 ALRC, *Grey Areas*, above n 43, 58 [2.98]. See also *Abolition of Compulsory Age Retirement (Statutory Officeholders) Act 2001* (Cth).


172 Ibid 154.
Thus, it must be ‘asked whether federal judges are … the victim[s] of constitutionally required age-ist discrimination’. 173 Similarly, Judge Anderson argues that ‘[w]e must continue to ask ourselves whether this abrupt retirement without dignity, hearing, or regard to the respective individual’s health or mental condition is the proper method of approach in our civilized society’. 174

We must therefore critically examine why judges should be the exception to the general prohibition of mandatory retirement in Australia. Judges, like other individuals, are entitled to be protected from age discrimination. 175 The issue is whether the ‘proper administration of justice’ justifies setting aside this entitlement. 176 As noted by the ALRC, the retention of mandatory retirement ages for judges has ‘important symbolic implications with respect to the Australian Government’s view of the “capacity of people to work competently until they are of a certain age”’. 177 Thus, retirement ages for judges are not only inconsistent with provisions relating to the general workforce, but may also undermine government attempts to extend working life and address age discrimination against older workers.

5 No Loss of Expertise

Finally, retirement ages for judges were supported on the basis that they would not lead to a loss of skills; rather, judges could just be re-employed in a different capacity. According to Mr Falconer in the parliamentary debates: ‘we would not lose the talents of experienced judges as a result of this measure. We will in fact be able to use them in many other areas where there is often a scarcity of suitable people’, including as royal commissioners. 178


175 Opeskin, ‘Models of Judicial Tenure’, above n 3, 635.

176 Ibid.

177 ALRC, Grey Areas, above n 44, 60 [2.107], quoting Government of South Australia, Submission No 30 to ALRC, Grey Areas — Age Barriers to Work in Commonwealth Laws, June 2012, 16; ALRC, Access All Ages, above n 2, 100 [4.100], quoting Government of South Australia, Submission No 30 to ALRC, Grey Areas — Age Barriers to Work in Commonwealth Laws, June 2012, 16.

Again, this argument has a number of limitations. First, judicial retirement ages may actually deprive the courts of judicial expertise and experience.\textsuperscript{179} Given judges are typically appointed at an advanced age, there is limited time to develop judicial expertise and hone judges' decision-making skills. According to Williams:

\begin{quote}
\hspace{1cm} Length of service is especially important for High Court judges because it can take a number of years for them to make their mark. They typically develop their views, not in one case, but during a succession of matters heard over years.\textsuperscript{180}
\end{quote}

In a survey of High Court appointees, Leigh found that the average age of appointment had risen from 45 years in 1921–40, to 46 years in 1941–60, 52 years in 1961–80, and 54 years in 1981–2000.\textsuperscript{181} Opeskin similarly found that the mean age of appointment to the High Court had risen from 51.4 years in 1995 to 58.3 years in 2013.\textsuperscript{182} Thus, the average tenure of High Court judges has changed from 19 years in 1903–19, to 25 years in 1921–40, 15 years in 1941–60, 11 years in 1961–80, and 14 years in 1981–2000.\textsuperscript{183} Given the current average age of appointment, High Court appointees will have, on average, less than 12 years on the bench. Indeed, Justice Nettle, who was appointed to the High Court in 2015, will be required to retire after a period of five years and 10 months, making it 'one of the shortest tenures in the history of the court'.\textsuperscript{184} Thus, a retirement age of 70 prevents judges from achieving their full potential on the bench, and may limit their ability to

\textsuperscript{180} George Williams, 'Bench Retirement Age Needs To Better Reflect Society', \textit{The Sydney Morning Herald} (Sydney), 9 February 2015, 20.
\textsuperscript{181} Andrew Leigh, 'Tenure' in Tony Blackshield, Michael Coper and George Williams (eds), \textit{The Oxford Companion to the High Court of Australia} (Oxford University Press, 2001) 664, 664.
\textsuperscript{182} Opeskin, 'Models of Judicial Tenure', above n 3, 645.
\textsuperscript{183} Leigh, above n 181, 664–5.
\textsuperscript{184} Williams, above n 180, 20. Such a short tenure will also mean that Justice Nettle is not entitled to a full judicial pension: \textit{Judges' Pensions Act 1968} (Cth) s 6. This late age of appointment may be compared with the appointment of Justice Gordon as a High Court judge in June 2015, at age 51: 'New Judge Appointed to the High Court', SBS News (online), 14 April 2015 <http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2015/04/14/new-judge-appointed-high-court>. 

influence legal developments. The 1977 referendum therefore now ‘appears short-sighted’.185

In the majority of the states and territories, this loss of skill and expertise has been managed via the use of retired judges in an acting or fixed term capacity.186 According to Opeskin, this has become a ‘flexible tool for returning mandatory retirees to the bench’,187 ameliorating ‘the consequences of forced departure’, and reflecting the states’ recognition that mandatory retirement laws ‘deprive their courts of fine talent’.188 However, this comes at a significant financial cost: acting judges are paid at a daily rate, in addition to their pension.189 This is obviously an inefficient use of public funds. The use of retired judges in a short-term, acting capacity may also pose risks to judicial independence. According to Opeskin:

The problem of preserving judicial independence is addressed in part by the fixed term nature of the appointment; by the constitutional prohibition on removing an acting judge during the fixed term other than for proved misbehaviour or incapacity; and by the setting of their remuneration by an independent tribunal. Yet, the ‘fragile bastion’ of judicial independence is not fully protected by these arrangements — there is no restriction on reappointment, which opens the door to executive preferment, and there is no restriction on acting judges holding other offices or employment.190

The majority in Forge rejected these concerns about judicial independence. However, given the scale of the use of acting judges in some states, these concerns should not be dismissed so lightly.191 Reliance on retired acting judges may seriously jeopardise judicial independence and courts’ financial efficiency.192 As a result, the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Refer-
ences Committee was ‘persuaded that acting appointments, by their nature, are inconsistent with the appropriate independence of the judiciary’,\textsuperscript{193} at least in the strict sense of that concept which is applicable at the federal level.

Secondly, while judges may be re-employed in a different capacity following retirement, this also has the potential to jeopardise judicial independence. While Crawford and Opeskin have argued that ‘[i]t is hard … to see how the independence of the judiciary could be affected by judges having to retire at a fixed age’,\textsuperscript{194} other authors have less confidence that this is the case. In North America, judicial retirement ages are seen as having the potential to jeopardise judicial independence in decisions made prior to retirement. According to Friedland, ‘[a] judge who retires at an early age may in many cases start a new career — business? politics? — and the public will then start wondering whether earlier judgments may have been designed to further this later career’.\textsuperscript{195} Similarly, McFadden has noted that

> mandatory retirement policies create the … potential for bias or the appearance of bias … The policies force judges to vacate the bench at an age when many would prefer continued employment. As a result, the policies either tempt, or appear to tempt, judges to decide cases for or against a particular litigant in order to possibly obtain future favors, employment, or other consideration from the litigant.\textsuperscript{196}

For Chief Judge Posner,

> judges are less likely to decide cases with a view toward maximizing their future career opportunities, and are therefore more likely to decide cases impartially, the less of a future they have. We want judging to be a terminal job rather than a springboard to another career.\textsuperscript{197}

Judicial careers post-retirement, particularly those in legal practice or involving corporate appointments, risk creating an impression of ‘unfair

\textsuperscript{193} Ibid 41 [4.44].

\textsuperscript{194} Crawford and Opeskin, above n 127, 36.

\textsuperscript{195} Martin L Friedland, ‘Judicial Independence and Accountability in Canada’ (2001) 59 Advocate (Vancouver Bar Association) 859, 861.

\textsuperscript{196} McFadden, above n 85, 87.

\textsuperscript{197} Posner, above n 81, 193.
advantages’ and ‘the danger of the perception of corruption while on the Bench’. Justice Alan Blow of the Supreme Court of Tasmania has described the importance of the convention that retired judges do not appear as advocates before courts of which they were previously members: ‘The greater the turnover of judges, and the more they retire to resume private practice, the more likely it is that this important convention will be eroded’.

However, in the United States context, Friedland has regarded a retirement age of 65 as ‘an age when it is more difficult to engage in a further active career’, minimising any risk to judicial independence. If this were correct in Australia, a retirement age of 70 would be unlikely to raise any concerns. However, it is clear that many High Court judges undertake active and public careers post-retirement. For example, Michael Kirby has held a number of diverse positions since retiring from the High Court, including as President of the Institute of Arbitrators & Mediators Australia, and head of the Commission of Inquiry on Alleged Human Rights Violations in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. Similarly, since retiring from the High Court, Dyson Heydon has been involved in an inquiry into Macquarie Generation, and led the Australian Government Royal Commission into Trade Union Governance and Corruption. Michael McHugh has worked as an arbitrator and mediator for a number of years, and Margaret Stone, formerly of the

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198 Appleby and Le Mire, above n 123, 28.
200 Friedland, above n 195, 861.
Federal Court, was appointed as the Inspector-General of Intelligence and Security in 2015. Thus, a retirement age of 70 clearly does not preclude an active career post-retirement.

While there is no suggestion of bias or impropriety in how these judges behaved prior to retirement, their post-retirement careers may have implications for actual or perceived judicial independence. This is particularly the case where governments appoint former judges to lend an air of independence to a commission or other body. As Dyson Heydon’s role on the Royal Commission into Trade Union Governance and Corruption shows, a public perception of bias associated with a judge’s post-retirement career has implications for the standing of their former court, particularly when a judge’s past political linkages are unearthed. Ackland has vividly described the impact of the Heydon affair as meaning ‘[t]he High Court must be wincing in horror at the reflected muck on its escutcheon’. Thus, when issues arise in relation to a judge’s post-retirement career, this may have implications for the perceived independence of the judicial branch as a whole.

Post-retirement careers may be pursued after both mandatory and voluntary retirement. Thus, removing retirement ages may not address these issues completely. However, judges who have been unwillingly mandatorily retired may be more likely to pursue a post-retirement career. Being tired of working

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205 Though, of course, this is not confined to those mandatorily retired; Sir William Deane, who resigned from the High Court at the age of 64, was appointed as Governor-General of Australia soon after: Sir William and Lady Deane (3 March 2012) Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia <https://www.gg.gov.au/former-governors-general/sir-william-and-lady-deane>. Similarly, Sir Ninian Stephen was appointed as Governor-General of Australia after resigning at age 58: Hilary Charlesworth, ‘Stephen, Ninian Martin’ in Michael Coper, Tony Blackshield, and George Williams (eds), The Oxford Companion to the High Court of Australia (Oxford University Press, 2001).


207 See Mark Kenny, ‘When a Judge Is Asked To Rule on Their Own Fate, It Is Inevitably a Conflict of Interest’, The Sydney Morning Herald (Sydney), 31 August 2015, 4.


is a significant contributor to the decision to retire, and previous studies have found that pre-retirees who were feeling tired of work were less likely to be intending to engage in work in retirement. Further, voluntary retirement increases positive attitudes towards retirement, facilitating the transition to being retired, at least in the short term. ‘Thus, judges who choose to retire, whether due to personal weariness or for other reasons, may be less likely to embark upon a career post-retirement, and are more likely to adjust positively to being retired. Removing mandatory retirement ages may therefore reduce, though not eliminate, the challenges associated with post-retirement careers.

The risks to judicial independence associated with post-retirement careers reflect similar concerns with the conferral of non-judicial roles on federal judges as persona designata. In Grollo v Palmer, the High Court identified two limits to the conferral of non-judicial functions on federal judges: first, that the judge must consent to the appointment; and, secondly, the appointment cannot be incompatible with the judge’s performance of their judicial functions, or with the judiciary’s proper discharge of its responsibilities. Thus, an appointment to perform non-judicial functions which ‘are of such a nature that public confidence in the independence or impartiality of a federal judge to carry out judicial functions is threatened’ will be invalid. It is arguable that similar restrictions could (or should) apply to the roles conferred on judges post-retirement, to address any concerns related to judicial independence. However, these restrictions are unlikely to be derived from

ch III of the *Constitution*, as judges in retirement have already relinquished their judicial power.215

Limitations on post-retirement judicial careers may instead be derived from convention, peer-censure or self-censure. However, relying on these informal mechanisms is likely to become more problematic as judges increasingly have extended capacity in old age, and are therefore likely to anticipate having new careers in retirement.216 Advancements in medical care and improved living conditions mean that individuals are living longer and can reasonably expect substantially more productive, healthy years in their old age.217 Therefore, individuals are likely to be capable of working for a longer period in old age. Further, judges are likely to be productive for a much longer period than the general population.218 Judges are in a particularly privileged work position, undertaking a role with few physical demands and high levels of intellectual stimulation. Thus, it has been noted that ‘[f]ew occupations appear so calculated to preserve one’s mental powers and physical stamina’,219 and Chief Judge Posner has labelled the judiciary the United States’ ‘premier

215 It is also arguable that removing judicial retirement ages will lead to more roles being conferred on sitting federal judges as *persona designata*, thereby increasing risks to judicial independence. However, given the limitations placed on these appointments by ch III of the *Constitution*, which are expressly intended to maintain and protect judicial independence, these risks are unlikely to eventuate. Instead, governments may need to look elsewhere for appropriate appointees to take on these roles. In some cases, this may lead to better appointments; questions have been raised as to whether judges are best placed to act as commissioners, given the different skill sets and approaches required: see, eg, John Barron, ‘Dyson Heydon: Who Is the Royal Commissioner Being Urged To Resign over Liberal Links?’, *ABC News* (online), 19 August 2015 <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-08-19/dyson-heydon-who-is-the-trade-union-royal-commissioner/6706416>.


217 See Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Healthy Life Expectancy in Australia: Patterns and Trends 1998 to 2012* (2014) 1–2. This does not mean that older Australians do not have particular health needs; according to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 49 per cent of 65 to 74 year olds living in the community in 2009 had five or more long-term health conditions. For those aged 85 and over, this increased to 70 per cent: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Australia’s Health 2012: The Thirteenth Biennial Health Report of the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare* (2012) 9, 82–5. However, overall, older Australians have still seen significant improvements in health and life expectancy in recent years: at 120–3.

218 Posner, above n 81, 187.

The extended capacity of judges is also reflected in the push for retired judges to return to the bench in a temporary or acting capacity with short-term tenure, and in the variety of roles that increasingly fall to retired judges to fulfil (including under anti-terror legislation). While these roles do not need to be filled by retired judges specifically, governments appear to increasingly desire the appearance of independence and significant skills associated with these appointments. However, there is a very real risk that this instrumental use of retired judges will damage the appearance of judicial independence. Thus, while retired judges might be a useful source of skill and expertise, there are substantial risks associated with this course of action. A preferable alternative would be to find others with the skillset to fulfil these roles.

B Practical Impact of Retirement Ages

At a practical level, it is also unclear whether retirement ages are necessary for the judiciary. Many judges will leave before retirement age, making any legislative limit unnecessary. As noted by Opeskin:

Judges may voluntarily resign by reason of ill health, infirmity, boredom or impecuniosity, or to pursue other positions; they may be nudged out of office by their peers or head of jurisdiction if their capacity to discharge the functions of office is in doubt; or they may be removed by reason of misconduct or incapacity.

Judicial pensions may also encourage early retirement: a federal judge (other than a federal circuit judge) who has attained the age of 60 with at least 10 years on the bench can retire with a non-contributory pension of 60 per

220 Posner, above n 81, 180.
cent of their salary and pursue other interests for additional recompense. There is therefore limited financial incentive for federal judges to continue beyond the age of 60, once they have accrued 10 years’ service. Maitra and Smyth have thus concluded that a range of factors, including pension eligibility, active engagement in the [High] Court’s most important cases proxied by judgements [sic] reported in the Commonwealth Law Reports and the political persuasion of the appointing government are important predictors of when [High Court] judges retire.

Indeed, a survey of the judiciary in 2007 found only 18 per cent of judges identified statutory age limits as a factor influencing their planned retirement age. Therefore, retirement ages may have limited impact on judicial retirements in practice.

To test this argument, a survey was conducted of the retirement age and tenure of previous High Court judges. In this sample of 44 judges, 15 were subject to the retirement age in s 72. Of these, five had resigned years prior to that age. Thus, s 72 influenced individual behaviour in only two-thirds of cases. At the same time, it is entirely possible that some judges would have continued past the age of 70 if allowed. At this stage, the sample of High

226 Judges’ Pensions Act 1968 (Cth) ss 6(1), 6A(2); Maitra and Smyth, above n 224, 194.
227 Though with the increasing age of judicial appointments, few High Court judges may benefit from these provisions.
228 Maitra and Smyth, above n 224, 202.
229 Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee, above n 44, 35 [4.20].
231 Sir Ronald Wilson, Sir William Deane, Sir Daryl Dawson, John Toohey and Mary Gaudron.
232 Alternatively, judges may continue to occupy their position until age 70 due to the presence of the retirement age, with the retirement provisions creating a statutory age boundary or a natural end to their working lives. Given retirement ages can shape individual conduct, it is difficult to anticipate when judges would choose to retire without a retirement age: see, eg, Anne-Marie Guillemard and Martin Rein, ‘Comparative Patterns of Retirement: Recent Trends in Developed Societies’ (1993) 19 Annual Review of Sociology 469, 493; Helga Krüger and Bernd Baldus, ‘Work, Gender and the Life Course: Social Construction and Individual Experience’ (1999) 24 The Canadian Journal of Sociology 355, 356; Martin Kohli, ‘The Institutionalization of the Life Course: Looking Back to Look Ahead’ (2007) 4 Research in Human Development 253, 256–7; Pat Irving, Jennifer Steels and Nicola Hall, ‘Factors Affecting the Labour Market Participation of Older Workers’ (Qualitative Research Report, Department
Court judges subject to the retirement age in s 72 is still too small to make any generalised conclusions. However, recent retirements from the High Court have all been at or around the retirement age,233 indicating that s 72 is having some impact in practice, at least on the High Court.

That said, it is questionable whether the retirement patterns of High Court judges will be representative of the retirement behaviours of judges on lower courts. These patterns have not been the subject of detailed study to date. However, based on data obtained from the Federal Court of Australia, the average age of retirement or resignation of former Federal Court judges was 63.84 years, and the median 65.22 years.234 Excluding judges who were appointed to another court (such as the High Court or the New South Wales Court of Appeal), the average age of retirement or resignation was 64.65, and the median 66.12.235 That said, 19 judges have retired at the retirement age. Further, for those not subject to the retirement age, three continued in their role until an advanced age.236 This may be compared with data obtained from the Federal Circuit Court:237 of the 24 judges who have left the Court, two passed away in office and five resigned to take up other judicial appointments.238 The remaining 17 judges had an average age of retirement or resignation of 61, and only six (35 per cent) retired at or around the retirement age.239

While judicial retirement ages may assist with workplace and succession planning240 by ‘allowing for continuous, efficient retirement and replacement

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233 Those retirees are Michael McHugh, Ian Callinan, Murray Gleeson, Michael Kirby, William Gummow, John Dyson Heydon, Susan Crennan and Kenneth Hayne.

234 Author’s own calculations, using data from the Federal Court of Australia: Email from Eva Ryan (Federal Court of Australia) to Alysia Blackham, 21 July 2015.

235 Ibid.

236 Sir Nigel Bowen (age 79.60), Sir Reginald Smithers (age 83.66), and Charles Sweeney (age 80.17).

237 Previously known as the Federal Magistrates Service and the Federal Magistrates Court.

238 Author’s own calculations, using data from the Federal Circuit Court: Email from Albin Smrdel (Assistant Secretary Courts, Tribunals and Justice Policy Branch) to Alysia Blackham, 4 August 2015.

239 Ibid.

240 See Hepple, above n 81, 91; Posner, above n 81, 324; Epstein, above n 154, 28.
of appointed judges’, judicial attrition is not solely dependent on retirement. Indeed, other than for judges on the High Court, members of the judiciary often leave their post as they are promoted to more senior positions. Thus, on its own, mandatory retirement is unlikely to make workforce planning for the judiciary substantially easier. Indeed, judicial retirements may actually exacerbate court planning issues in some cases. For example, Justices Hayne and Crennan of the High Court were both required to retire within weeks of each other in mid-2015. This would have left only five members on the High Court, making the hearing of constitutional matters problematic. To resolve this, Justice Crennan retired at the age of 69 and seven months in February 2015. Thus, mandatory retirement ages may also cause disruption and practical difficulties for courts, though these can at least be planned for and proactively managed.

Planning issues are also compounded by the risk that judges may die in office. According to Maitra and Smyth, ‘a sizeable proportion of High Court judges have died in office. Of the 35 High Court Justices who were no longer on the Court as of 2000, 10, or just less than one-third of the total, have died in office’. This is a risk for all judges: death and misfortune are by no means confined to the elderly. Indeed, seven of the deaths on the High Court have related to judges under the age of 70. Mandatory retirement will not prevent deaths in office or allow a smooth handover of judicial responsibility in all cases, though it may assist workforce planning in some circumstances.

241 McFadden, above n 85, 89.
244 See Gould v Brown (1998) 193 CLR 346, where the High Court was split evenly following Justice Dawson’s retirement during the period in which judgment was reserved. See also Jeremy Gans, ‘News: Crennan J Stops Hearing Cases ahead of Retirement’ on Opinions on High (20 November 2014) <http://blogs.unimelb.edu.au/opinionsonhigh/2014/11/20/news-crennan-j-stops-hearing-cases/>.
245 Maitra and Smyth, above n 224, 193. These were Sir Edmund Barton, Richard O’Connor, Henry Higgins, Sir Wilfred Fullagar, Sir Alan Taylor, Sir Douglas Menzies, Sir William Owen, Sir Cyril Walsh, Lionel Murphy and Sir Keith Aickin.
246 Richard O’Connor, Sir Wilfred Fullagar, Sir Alan Taylor, Sir Douglas Menzies, Sir Cyril Walsh, Lionel Murphy and Sir Keith Aickin.
Thus, while workforce planning is one argument in favour of mandatory retirement ages, its force should not be overstated.

IV ALTERNATIVES TO RETIREMENT AGES

Recognising these criticisms, and the fact that many of the original justifications for mandatory retirement are no longer persuasive, the ALRC has called for a review of judicial retirement ages. In its 2012 discussion paper Grey Areas — Age Barriers to Work in Commonwealth Laws, the ALRC noted that:

As a matter of principle, the ALRC favours individual capacity-based assessment rather than the imposition of compulsory retirement. The imposition of compulsory retirement fails to account for the capacity of individuals, reinforces stereotypes about the abilities of mature age workers and reduces utilisation of the workforce contribution of mature age workers.247

In its 2013 report Access All Ages — Older Workers and Commonwealth Laws, the ALRC further recommended that the Australian government, in cooperation with state and territory governments, initiate an independent review of compulsory retirement for judicial and quasi-judicial appointments, to consider whether age limits remain appropriate.248 However, the ALRC has also noted that there are ‘certain complexities associated with removing compulsory retirement for judicial officers’; these might include constitutional requirements, public policy reasons for retaining compulsory

247 ALRC, Grey Areas, above n 43, 58 [2.99].

During this inquiry, no major concern was raised about either the existence of a compulsory retirement age in the federal judiciary, nor the age at which retirement is set. The general view put to the committee is that a compulsory retirement age is appropriate. In fact, the Law Council of Australia noted that ‘the question of security of tenure until the maximum retirement age appears uncontroversial, as it is a fundamental aspect of the separation of powers doctrine and Australia’s constitutional structure, and is an essential underpinning of judicial independence’ and that ‘anything less than those arrangements has the effect of compromising judicial independence’.
retirement, and implications for judicial pensions.\textsuperscript{249} Thus, the ALRC recommends, as a minimum, that the review achieve ‘national consistency’ in judicial retirement ages.\textsuperscript{250}

Given the ALRC’s recommendations, this section canvasses the possible complexities of removing or amending retirement ages for judges, and considers the alternative structures that might be put in place. While recognising the inherent difficulties of removing judicial retirement ages, and the likely impracticability of constitutional reform at the federal level, I argue in this Part IV that judicial retirement ages represent an arbitrary, discriminatory and outdated feature of Australian constitutional law. Therefore, there is a need to revisit their operation, with a view to their ultimate abolition. However, as the ALRC has foreshadowed, this may also require a review of other areas of law and practice.

There are three key alternatives to the current use of judicial retirement ages. First, we might adopt a later age of retirement for judges. At the federal level, this would require constitutional amendment in accordance with s 128 of the Constitution. The process of constitutional change is notoriously difficult, and is generally unsuccessful. According to Williams, ‘[t]he expense and difficulty of [another referendum] means that no change [to s 72] is likely to occur’.\textsuperscript{251} Indeed, Attorney-General George Brandis has expressly disavowed any interest in constitutional change on this issue: ‘Getting a constitutional referendum up is an enormous undertaking. The government is not considering reopening that question’.\textsuperscript{252}

Further, even if change was possible, merely increasing the federal judicial retirement age is unlikely to ‘future proof’ s 72: as noted by Opeskin, ‘[t]he Australian … experience show[s] that constitutions falter when they over-specify and thus entrench policy choices that are impervious to changing social circumstances’,\textsuperscript{253} like the use of a retirement age of 70. It is likely that any higher retirement age would quickly also appear to be short-sighted. There is also no consensus as to what a higher retirement age should be.\textsuperscript{254}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\item 249 ALRC, \textit{Grey Areas}, above n 43, 60 [2.109]; ALRC, \textit{Access All Ages}, above n 2, 101 [4.102].
\item 250 ALRC, \textit{Grey Areas}, above n 43, 60 [2.110]; ALRC, \textit{Access All Ages}, above n 2, 101 [4.103].
\item 251 Williams, above n 180, 20. See generally Williams and Hume, above n 15.
\item 252 ‘New Judge Appointed to the High Court’, above n 184.
\item 253 Opeskin, ‘Models of Judicial Tenure’, above n 3, 34.
\item 254 See Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee, above n 44, 33–5 [4.13]–[4.16].
\end{thebibliography}
An alternative endorsed by the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs References Committee is to amend s 72 to provide that federal judicial officers are appointed until an age fixed by Parliament. This approach ‘would enable the age limit to be set from time to time to meet community expectations without the need for constitutional amendment, an historically infrequent and difficult process’. However, Justice Michael Barker has argued that age 70 should be retained as the minimum retirement age for judges, which Parliament may legislate to increase. This approach has also received some endorsement from former Chief Justice of the High Court Murray Gleeson, who has suggested that it might have been ‘a little better if [the compulsory retirement age] had been put in a statute than in the [Constitution]’. While this option may to some extent accommodate the extended capacity of judges, and address the loss of judicial skills and expertise occasioned by mandatory retirement, it is unlikely to address the symbolic discriminatory impact of judicial retirement ages. Thus, pursuing this course of action requires serious consideration of why judges, unlike other individuals, should not be protected from age discrimination, and whether the administration of justice justifies the use of discriminatory provisions. In the event the same public law ends can be achieved in a non-discriminatory manner, that latter approach should be adopted. Thus, if there is a better and non-discriminatory alternative to this option, that should be preferred.

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255 Ibid 37 [4.28].

256 Barker, above n 173, [46]. This approach was explicitly rejected in the Australian Constitutional Convention debates in 1976, as it was felt that providing for retirement ages in the Constitution ‘would be more acceptable to the electors’: see, eg, Minutes of Proceedings and Official Record of Debates of the Australian Constitutional Convention, Hobart, 27–29 October 1976, 43 (John Button); Minutes of Proceedings and Official Record of Debates of the Australian Constitutional Convention, Melbourne, 24 September 1975, 95 (Kep Enderby). Cf Minutes of Proceedings and Official Record of Debates of the Australian Constitutional Convention, Hobart, 27–29 October 1976, 45 (Joseph Dixon); Minutes of Proceedings and Official Record of Debates of the Australian Constitutional Convention, Melbourne, 24 September 1975, 93 (Doug Lowe).

257 Barker, above n 173, [46].

258 ABC Radio National, above n 113.

259 Opeskin, ‘Models of Judicial Tenure’, above n 3, 635.

260 Ibid.
Secondly, we could move to a system of fixed-term appointments or term limits for senior judicial figures.\textsuperscript{261} Again, this would likely require constitutional change at the federal level.\textsuperscript{262} However, there is also the possibility of adopting an informal system of term limits, via term ‘pledges’, court rules or voluntary retirement.\textsuperscript{263} A formal model of term limits has been adopted in part for the Constitutional Court of South Africa, via the use of a hybrid model that combines term limits with age limits.\textsuperscript{264} Such a hybrid model would add additional complexity to the current Australian arrangements, and would not resolve the discriminatory impact of judicial retirement ages. The use of fixed-term appointments also raises complex normative questions about how long a judge \textit{should} occupy judicial office, linked with desires for both ‘constancy and change’,\textsuperscript{265} and recognising the need for an extended period in office to develop judicial skills and expertise. There are no easy answers to these questions. Using a pragmatic approach, Opeskin has found that the mean length of service of High Court judges was 13.3 years for the last seven terminations, and 15.9 years over the entirety of the Court’s history.\textsuperscript{266} Thus, if a fixed-term model was to be adopted, 15 years might be an appropriate term to impose. However, this would not address capacity issues that might arise during the term of office, and would therefore still require some improved system of capacity management for judicial officers. Adopting a model of fixed-term appointments is likely to be a problematic and fraught process, particularly given current concerns relating to judicial independence.

\textsuperscript{261} Williams, above n 180, 20; ibid.

\textsuperscript{262} But see the dicta in \textit{Alexander’s Case} (1918) 25 CLR 434, 474 (Higgins J):

\begin{quote}
It seems to me, in short, that under sec. 72 of our Constitution there is nothing to prevent a tenure for years, if Parliament (or the Government) so decide. A tenure at will is incompatible with sec. 72; for no Justice is to be removed except on an address from both Houses praying for removal on the ground of proved misbehaviour, &c.: but a tenure for years is not incompatible. The Constitution, by sec. 72, does not make a life tenure imperative in all appointments, but provides against that which is the greatest danger — the danger of an offended Government removing a non-compliant Justice, or reducing his remuneration.
\end{quote}

See also at 478 (Gavan Duffy J).


\textsuperscript{264} See generally Opeskin, ‘Models of Judicial Tenure’, above n 3.

\textsuperscript{265} See ibid 656–8.

\textsuperscript{266} Ibid 646.
and acting appointments. Thus, the use of term limits is not an ideal alternative to judicial retirement ages.

Thirdly, and finally, we could remove age-based limitations on judicial tenure. This option would eliminate the discriminatory impact of judicial retirement ages; address the loss of judicial skill and expertise due to mandatory retirement; resolve issues related to extended judicial capacity; reduce reliance on acting appointments at the state and territory level; and bring judicial retirement into line with other professional occupations and community expectations. Thus, at least in theory, this third option is to be preferred. Moving to a system without age-based limitations would again require constitutional change for the federal judiciary. Putting these practical challenges temporarily to one side, we also need to ascertain how this change would impact upon key public law principles, and whether this should be the preferred option in practice.

This third option reflects the system in place in federal courts in the United States, where judges are granted life tenure. The United States system has been the subject of extensive academic study, particularly in the face of increasing judicial tenure with demographic ageing. The merits of introducing retirement ages for federal judges in the United States have been debated for many years, though age limits have not been introduced. Thus, the use of life tenure has not been without criticism in other jurisdictions, and should be carefully scrutinised before being applied to the Australian context.


In Australia, the key public law implication of removing judicial retirement ages relates to judicial independence, and how this would be secured without judicial retirement ages. Judicial tenure is ‘crucial to judicial independence, particularly from the executive government’. Security of tenure may be achieved by life tenure, tenure until a statutory retirement age, or tenure ‘for a substantial fixed term’. According to Opeskin, ‘life tenure provides the sturdiest protection against executive interference’. However, this comes at a ‘high cost’ due to the risk of ‘mental frailty in old age’. In the United States, where life tenure is granted to federal judges, there have been recurring concerns about judicial capacity. Indeed, Garrow describes ‘mental decrepitude’ on the United States Supreme Court as ‘a persistently recurring problem that merits serious attention’.

If this risk of frailty eventuates (and, as noted above, this is by no means guaranteed), judicial independence is consistent with a process for disciplining or removing judges which is ‘limited to cases of serious misconduct or incapacity to discharge the duties of office’; provided decisions are made by an independent judicial body (or, if made by a legislative body, only made on ‘recommendation by a court or similar independent judicial body’). Thus, judicial independence does not preclude a system of life tenure, subject to a process of removing judges on the grounds of capacity. However, this may require additional rigour in the processes for managing declining judicial capacity at federal, state and territory level.

The removal of age-based restrictions may also require a review of judicial pensions. Pensions may provide some incentive for judges to leave their

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271 Ananian-Welsh and Williams, ‘Judicial Independence from the Executive’, above n 24, 599.
273 Ibid.
277 See above Part III(A)(3).
employment, thereby avoiding potential issues of declining capacity and promoting judicial turnover. Thus, removing age-based restrictions on judicial tenure may arguably prompt stronger reliance on judicial pensions to incentivise judges to retire. However, Australian judges are generally already entitled to a generous pension prior to retirement age, which few take up. As noted above, it has been unusual for judges on the High Court to retire prior to the age of 70, at least in recent years. Thus, pensions may not be the only driver of judicial retirement and retention. Pensions may therefore have limited utility as a means of encouraging judicial turnover or addressing issues of capacity. These ends are better achieved via proper systems of capacity assessment or alternative positions for senior judicial figures.

Instead, removing judicial retirement ages may actually decrease the current cost of judicial benefits. The judges’ pension scheme for federal courts (excluding the Federal Circuit Court) is non-contributory and unfunded, and is financed from consolidated revenue. Thus, the Commonwealth and taxpayers meet the costs of judicial pension benefits. As at 30 June 2011, the scheme was calculated to have unfunded liability of $782 million. As life expectancy increases, these liabilities will continue to expand, particularly if judicial tenure is constrained by mandatory retirement. Removing judicial retirement ages may allow judges to defer drawing on their pensions, reducing the overall cost to the public purse. Further, as noted above, in the states and territories retired judges are often re-employed in an acting or fixed-term


279 Judges’ Pensions Act 1968 (Cth).


281 See Senate Standing Committee on Constitutional and Legal Affairs, above n 10, 9–11.


284 Ibid 64–6.
capacity, for which they are paid a day rate in addition to their pension. Removing judicial retirement ages would allow the retention of judicial skills, without judges effectively being reimbursed twice. Thus, the removal of judicial retirement ages may have financial benefits for Australian governments and taxpayers. 285 As there is increasing attention paid towards the overall cost of judicial pensions, 286 this is an attractive possibility. 287

Finally, if judges are to remain in employment for a longer period, it may be necessary to consider workplace accommodations to accommodate their changing needs. In reflecting on Justice McTiernan’s retirement after breaking his hip, Justice Kirby has noted: ‘Chief Justice Barwick declined to alter the accommodation of the High Court to provide for a judge in a wheelchair. It would cost too much’. 288 These considerations may become more relevant to the Australian judiciary over time. Modern chief justices would presumably take a more accommodating approach to changing judicial needs.

Similarly, it may be necessary to consider alternative models of utilising judicial skills in older age. For example, the United States judiciary has seen a growth in ‘senior judges’ with different responsibilities. Senior judges may ‘opt out’ of certain cases, but are excluded from institutional matters. 289 This may be an attractive option for older judges; in the United States, most federal judges choose to become senior judges upon qualifying for their pension. 290 This arrangement allows a successor to be appointed, but enables the judge to remain actively engaged in the judiciary. 291 According to Yoon, ‘[t]hese older judges feel a continuing responsibility to help the court address its expanding caseload, but at the same time truly appear to enjoy their jobs, even if it means

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287 Of course, judicial pensions could be reformed independently of retirement ages, including by moving to a contributory scheme. However, it is worth noting the close interaction between the two issues.
290 Ibid.
291 Ibid.
effectively working for free’. The introduction of more flexibility in judicial appointments, such as by the use of senior judges, has received the support of Justice Michael Barker: ‘In this way we would retain the wisdom, learning and experience of judges who have the desire and the capacity to continue’. It is questionable whether this model would be feasible in Australia; in the United States, senior judges are generally employed on a full salary, making this an expensive model for utilising individual skills and experience. However, given many federal judges are already granted a pension equivalent to 60 per cent of salary, and may then be employed at state level as an acting judge on a day rate, the overall cost of this model may not prove to be prohibitive.

V Conclusion

When introduced in 1977, mandatory retirement for federal judges was seen as a logical development that brooked limited objection. However, changing social norms, the rejection of age discrimination in employment, and demographic change must prompt a re-examination of judicial retirement ages. Mandatory retirement is not the best way to manage declining judicial capacity, is likely to lead to a loss of judicial skills and expertise, and may jeopardise judicial independence with the growth in post-retirement judicial careers and acting judicial appointments. At the same time, while individual arguments in favour of mandatory retirement are not persuasive on their own, their cumulative effect might be more convincing. Indeed, retirement ages may have some (albeit limited) utility in managing declining performance, facilitating workforce planning, and promoting judicial diversity. Thus, mandatory retirement might be useful in some circumstances, though its functionality should not be overstated. That said, if there is a non-discriminatory alternative that fulfils these functions, that option should be preferred over mandatory retirement ages.

This article has canvassed three alternatives to the current systems of judicial retirement, and has argued for the removal of age-based limitations on judicial tenure in Australia. This is likely to require reconsideration of processes for managing judicial capacity, judicial pensions and workplace
accommodations for older judges. Managing this new landscape is likely to pose a number of practical and theoretical challenges that warrant further study, particularly in relation to how individual capability assessments might be deployed in this context. That said, operating without age-based limitations is unlikely to undermine key public law principles, and is fully consistent with judicial independence. More difficult, however, will be achieving constitutional change at the federal level, which is likely to be a difficult and fraught road. However, this is no barrier to change at the state and territory level, where judicial retirement ages are not entrenched. One of the significant benefits of a federal structure is the scope for experimentation and mutual learning between the states and territories (the ‘laboratory federalism’ argument). 295 The states and territories must take a lead on this issue, given the barriers to change at the federal level. Indeed, progress at the state or territory level may ease the path to federal change. To advance this, we must continue to seriously consider the practical impacts of removing judicial retirement ages, and how these can best be managed. This will require more detailed empirical consideration of judicial retirement behaviour in both superior and lower-level courts. While a process of reform is unlikely to be easy, it may reap rewards for public finances, individual judges who do not wish to retire, and for the administration of justice more generally. As societal views on age and ageing continue to shift, it is anachronistic to retain judicial retirement ages for Australian judges. The time has come to remove age-based limitations on judicial tenure.