

A summit that had no idea

YOU can measure the power of an event by the way it captures and holds public attention. In our throwaway world we discard information quickly.

The most shallow form of communication yet invented, Twitter, lasts no longer than 140 characters. Snapchat disappears once you've finished looking at it.

Naturally, people focus on lasting things that really affect them or the world around them. Events of real significance generate interest and attention for weeks, months, sometimes years.

Which is why I wanted to say something about the National Reform Summit. It is fading faster than the curtains of a Queensland house under daylight saving. Although it happened less than a week ago, already it seems to have disappeared from public discussion. So allow me to recap.

Craig Emerson, Labor's former trade minister, and Nick Cater, of the Liberals' Menzies Centre, got two major national newspapers to sponsor a conference with the aim of "kickstarting" a national reform agenda. The conveners decided the guest list. It excluded publicly elected representatives. Those attending consisted of paid staff at the business, union and welfare lobbies, representatives of the "think-tanks", some individual business and union people and officials from the industry groups. Like the 20-20 Summit, it was designed to bring together the "Best and the Brightest", only this



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time it was the top 100, rather than the top 1000 who sneaked into Kevin Rudd's talkfest.

Emerson helpfully drafted a concluding statement in advance, which changed little as a result of the discussion. As statements go it is well written. As is the case with communiqués it is long on sentiment and short on detail. As you would expect, since two newspapers sponsored the conference, the media gave it full and positive coverage.

What did we learn?

The first thing I learned was that the Parliament isn't so bad after all. The conference was called out of frustration with our political leaders and MPs. It was designed to show how much progress we could make if we got them out of the way and had a better type of person grappling with the issues in their stead. But there were no memorable speeches. No one showed any danger of inspiring the conference, let alone the public. We didn't hear one new idea.

There was no indication that any of the people at the conference could sway public opinion. Comparing this convention of hand-picked professional

conference-goers with the elected assembly of the Parliament showed Parliament in a new favourable light. Nothing would please me more than to be able to report that, as a result of the summit, there is a new determination in the land to make our economy stronger and to bulldoze through the impediments to growth.

Far from developing an urgency about the need for action to rescue our prospects, in some respects, the summit seemed to excuse it.

The only timetable set out in the



concluding statement relates to balancing the Budget. You will recall when Labor was last in government it said that would happen in 2012. The Coalition Government originally said it would happen in this term. Now it says it will do that in the next term.

BUT the summit said we should work to a target of balancing the Budget in 10 years. That's in 2025, after 17 years of deficits! Wasn't this summit meant to start a reform agenda?

And then there is the delicate issue of tax reform. The last comprehensive tax reform in this country was announced 17 years ago and implemented two years later. Look in vain for some progress in this area out of the summit. The newspapers were very taken with the suggestion of Martin Parkinson, the former Treasury secretary, that we could use the "Henry review" of 2009 as a "mud map" for future tax reform. I thought it a strange description thinking such a map would be "as

clear as mud", but evidently the idea is to follow a "mud map" when nothing else is available.

Dear readers, we can do so much better than that. You will recall the major recommendation of the Henry review was a Resource Super Profits Tax, a tax implemented nowhere else in the world, a tax that brought down Kevin Rudd when he tried it and then morphed into the mining tax under Julia Gillard, a tax that raised no revenue.

People who follow these things will also recall the GST was ruled off limits to the Henry review. That meant the review was deliberately neutered from the beginning. The whole idea of looking at the tax system is because that review was never allowed to be comprehensive. It was set to fail. To suggest we go back to the cause of the problem as a map to the future shows such a mischievous sense of humour.

And then I realised that the summit demonstrated there is no substitute for political leadership. The representatives of the people have to draw the laws and pass them and implement them. If they do not want to lead public opinion in unpopular areas, then this leadership cannot be manufactured from outside. The most outsiders can ever hope to do is to change public opinion so that elected leaders follow it.

All those welfare and industry leaders, all those public servants should remember one advantage they have that elected representatives will never share. They don't have to account to the public in elections. That is the hardest part. It might have been worth having someone make that point at the summit.

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