

A summit on the irrelevant is just a Rudd-y waste of time



PETER COSTELLO

When Kevin Rudd gathered delegates at Parliament House for his 2020 Summit, it was regarded as a hot ticket. Rudd said they were “1000 of Australia’s best and brightest”. Cate Blanchett came along with baby Ignatius. Jewish delegates got a special preview since the date clashed with Passover. The Victoria Police Chief Commissioner at the time, Christine Nixon, was invited, as

was Fairfax journalist David Marr; and the head of News Limited, John Hartigan, was co-chair of the future of Australian governance session.

People forget how chummy things were in the afterglow of Labor’s 2007 election. The only people excluded were those associated with the ancient regime – people like me. But these days, I find a lot of those who attended do not like to be reminded of it.

We could ask just how that summit shaped the nation’s future. Or perhaps we should ask an easier question. Can anyone remember any new idea that came out of it?

All this springs to mind as the government gathers its hand-picked audience for the tax summit in October. They are getting in before Yom Kippur, which means no need for a separate Jewish Community

Summit. But unless the government can get a headline act – say Angelina Jolie with her latest adopted baby – I can’t see it getting the same coverage as the 2020 Summit. And if all that palaver came to nothing, what hope is there for a summit that can’t even start with pizzazz?

The government has appointed 19 of its own MPs and asked the ACTU for 13 representatives. Labor and the unions will have as many representatives at the table as business and tax practitioners on the one side and the welfare groups on the other, thereby ensuring a two-thirds mandate for any recommendation it wants. It could write the recommendations now. In fact, knowing the public service, the recommendations probably have been written by now. We could save a lot of time by releasing

the final communique before the meeting is held.

If the government has a clear idea where it wants to go, it doesn’t need to stage events to get its ideas. Once it has decided the policy, the proper thing to do is to release it and, if it proposes major reform, put it to the electorate for a mandate. That’s what happened with the GST. It’s what should happen with the carbon tax. But this is a tax summit that can’t discuss GST or carbon tax or negative gearing or anything that matters, so attendees will just have to sit around and discuss all those things that don’t matter. As one Labor minister said to me: “We want it over with the least coverage in the quickest possible time.”

So why go through this charade? Well, the 2020 Summit decided it would be a good idea to have a root-and-

What hope is there for a summit that can’t even start with pizzazz?

branch review of the tax system. Ken Henry went away for 19 months and produced a 1200-page review. But apart from the ill-fated Resource Super Profits Tax, the government buried it.

The nominal independent Rob Oakeshott seems to have a thing for Henry. Recently boasting of his role in securing the carbon tax, he said: “If we can turn some of the Ross Garnaut work into Ken Henry work, we’ve done some good.” It’s naivety. He sees his role as implementing the work of “experts” – his intellectual superiors.

So he demanded another summit. This summit can look at the review initiated by the old summit and commission further reviews as long as they cover non-important tax issues. This is economic reform nowadays.

Only Oakeshott could think this is a worthwhile use of taxpayers’ money. He should just announce the tax changes he wants and ask for a mandate at the next election. And, by the way, he controls the timing of the next election.

But I suspect Oakeshott doesn’t want to make a decision or seek a mandate. He loves attention. He has a few more 17-minute speeches to deliver. And what better place than a summit to bore us all with that?

Peter Costello is the former Liberal treasurer