

---

 THE AUSTRALIAN
 

---

# Kevin Rudd's 2020 summit symphony fell flat



Illustration: Eric Lobbecke

HENRY ERGAS THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM April 13, 2018

Listening, on the eve of its 10th anniversary, to recordings of the Rudd government's 2020 Summit, it was hard not to be reminded of Rossini's quip about Wagner. "One cannot judge Wagner's *Lohengrin* from a first hearing," said the maestro, "and I certainly do not intend to hear it a second time."

Rossini, it might be argued, was unduly harsh. But while many consider *Lohengrin* a great opera, the 2020 Summit, even on a second hearing, barely rises to burlesque.

There are, for sure, some gems in the seemingly endless proceedings. What is most striking, however, is the hysteria that periodically swept through the 1000 delegates, who were hailed by the newly elected prime minister as the nation's "best and brightest brains".

French sociologist Emile Durkheim coined the term "collective effervescence" to describe the delirium that grips participants in mass rituals. Well, as the love gushed through Parliament House, our brainiest lost all restraint.

Kevin Rudd, sitting tie-less on the floor of what could have been a 1960s teach-in, was mobbed, before being treated to a standing ovation. As for Maxine McKew, the lion slayer who defeated John Howard in Bennelong, she was feted as a future prime minister, as was Peter Garrett.

History, of course, thought otherwise, turning those hopes of glorious future vintages into so many sour grapes. But the summiteers' boundless enthusiasm was not limited to the stars.

On the contrary, much as at Soviet Communist Party congresses, the audience's reaction to even the most asinine statements alternated between applause, prolonged applause and stormy applause. And every mention of the "three Rs" — the republic, reconciliation and refugees — was greeted with what *Pravda* used to call "tumultuous acclamation". As for the outcomes, they stuck to the old saw: what there was of good was not original, and what was original was not good.

That is not to ignore moments that induce genuine nostalgia: who would not sob at the sight of Wayne Swan emphasising the need to make our "business tax regime more internationally competitive", while Bill Shorten nodded approvingly?

But for every ounce of common sense, there were pounds of proposals that were frankly unhinged, such as the Creative Australia stream's recommendation that "creative endeavours" be funded "through a 1 per cent creative dividend from all government departments", thus diverting \$5 billion to the arts. In a room crammed with those the bonanza would benefit, there was, perhaps unsurprisingly, scarcely a murmur of dissent.

Overall, the participants seemed determined to confirm Karl Marx's prediction that the bourgeoisie in its declining phase would reproduce all the irrationality and sentimentality against which it had once fought, causing its intellectual quality to collapse. "On the level plain," Marx wrote, "simple mounds look like hills", so that the "imbecile flatness" of the declining bourgeoisie could be

accurately gauged “by the altitude of its greatest intellects”.

Yet it would be wrong to dismiss the summit as merely a waste of public money.

For all its self-indulgence, it was an attempt at examining Australia’s future: yes, misconceived and poorly implemented, but at least it took ideas seriously enough to pretend to have them.

Politically, that helped Labor cement its image as a party of ideas; that they were little more than cliches mattered less than that they were the only ideas in town. Every bit as important, it allowed Rudd to give the impression that he was genuinely committed to forging a collective way forward.

In a country seeking purpose and direction, that mattered. And it still matters today.

Unfortunately, the Coalition shows every sign of not grasping that fact. It seems to believe that to succeed, it is enough to have good policies (or at least, policies not as bad as Labor’s) and to vaunt impressive jobs growth.

But even were its policies as good as it contends, politics is not merely the competent management of the nation’s affairs.

Rather, it is about leadership; and the primal and most politically charged task of leadership is to establish a common sense of the times, to say as Abraham Lincoln said to the Americans of his age, “where we are and whither we are tending”.

In doing so, leaders secure a warrant for the exercise of power, give meaning to the moment and indicate, to supporters and opponents alike, what is at stake in the political contest.

Discharging that function demands more than tactical manoeuvring: it requires the ability to tackle adversaries in the fortress of their strongest ideas, wasting no strength on minor skirmishes.

To its credit, Labor has shown itself willing to do that, launching a sustained assault on what it claims is an increasingly unfair society that is presided over by a government that is incapable of addressing the difficulties facing ordinary people. And flawed as Labor’s individual policies may be, they are internally coherent and match its wider picture.

But the brutalism of that ideologically charged vision contrasts starkly with the experience and instincts of most Australians, who — for all the problems — are broadly satisfied with life and want solutions, not revolutions. Nonetheless, the government, instead of demolishing it, remains hopelessly on the defensive and, when challenged as to “where we are and whither we are tending”, resorts to catchphrases that make the 2020 Summit look profound.

If that is the best it can do, here is its chance to put us out of our misery. At great expense to the taxpayer, the summit’s proceedings were placed in a specially designed time capsule. Next weekend, as the 10th anniversary strikes, let it be unlocked, in a ceremony that reunites the great minds that produced its Jabberwockian prose, and the tapes rebroadcast nationally.

With any luck, they will have gone blank.