

Local

Summit backs Labor's agenda

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* 2020 endorses ALP policy on federalism, climate * Rudd challenged on republic, rights, treaty

THE 2020 ideas summit has endorsed Kevin Rudd's economic and education policies but demanded the Prime Minister lead a fresh push for Australia to become a republic with a Bill of Rights.

And Mr Rudd, who had previously insisted a republic was not high on his list of priorities, acknowledged last night that the summit push was "a big step forward" but indicated he would proceed cautiously to build the case for change.

"We lost the last referendum 10 years ago," Mr Rudd said.

"We don't want to lose the next one. So we'll be building this one up very carefully."

The two-day summit yesterday produced a 38-page statement that mirrored the Rudd Government's policies across a range of areas, particularly endorsing Labor's push for reform of tax, business regulation and infrastructure provision.

In his concluding remarks, Mr Rudd highlighted another two of his favourite agenda items -- climate change as a whole-of-government priority and the urgent need to fix the federation. However, the 1000 delegates also handed Mr Rudd political hot potatoes including the push for a republic and a treaty between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.

Australians rejected severing ties with Britain in a 1999 referendum, with republicans split over whether the new head of state should be elected or appointed.

One hundred delegates discussing governance yesterday proposed a fresh approach, including an initial referendum on severing ties with Britain while retaining the governor-general with existing powers for five years. A second referendum would then examine a model for the new republic.

Last night, Mr Rudd said the summit had made clear there was "a big groundswell of support" for a republic.

"In order to bring a republic about -- and I am a longstanding republican and we've committed the party to bring about a republic -- you do need widespread community support."

As Mr Rudd hit the television airwaves to promote other summit ideas, such as HECS discounts for students who perform voluntary community work and a push for Australian scientists to develop a bionic eye, the Opposition warned that the support for a republic might not be indicative of community-wide views.

Brendan Nelson said the summit's make-up was not representative of the community and that the meeting could signal a return to the "political correctness" that loosened Labor's grip on

government in the early 1990s. "I think that if political correctness is not again off the leash, it has certainly been given a longer lead to run on," the Opposition Leader said.

Dr Nelson noted there was wild and spontaneous applause at every mention of an Australian republic and that the summit seemed imbued with the view that nothing good had happened during nearly 12 years of government under John Howard.

The summit began early on Saturday as the 1000 delegates flooded Parliament House, which is normally all but empty on weekends. The delegates split off into 10 policy-stream groups and were challenged to produce at least three big ideas for the Government. While most of the ideas were in areas already being addressed by Mr Rudd, there were new ones, including the creation of a national disability insurance scheme and greater use of retired people in mentoring young people through a "Golden Guru" scheme.

But the governance group produced the most controversial proposals, with delegates pressing Mr Rudd to act on a republic and also to "fix federalism" by redefining the roles of federal, state and local governments.

"The stream also discussed the importance of a rigorously accountable and open government and a strong, independent media," the group's summary statement said.

"Participants expressed a desire to revitalise the accountability of the executive to parliament as well as to the public."

In this, they stressed the role of

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a stronger and more open freedom of information network."

The group -- chaired by John Hartigan, chairman and chief executive of [News Limited](#), publisher of The Australian, and Labor MP Maxine McKew -- also called for greater public participation in the business of government through the use of the internet and the creation of a public television channel providing first-hand access to policy information and debate. Mr Rudd declared the summit a success, describing it as "a very Australian gathering" characterised by good humour, respect and straight talking.

The Prime Minister stressed he could not agree to all suggestions, but said he was anxious to attempt new approaches to governance, including "a rolling dialogue" with the electorate.

"I don't want to wake up one morning in the year 2020 with the regret of not having acted when I had the chance; that's why it's important to plan ahead," Mr Rudd said. "I don't want to have to explain to my kids, and perhaps their kids too, that we failed to act, that we avoided the tough decisions, that we failed to prepare Australia for its future challenges.

"We can either take command of the future or we can sit back and allow the future to take command of us."

Mr Rudd said the clear message from delegates was that people wanted to look beyond three-year election cycles and plan ahead.

He refused to commit to particular proposals, but promised to give all fair consideration and report back to participants by the end of the year.

Within minutes of the end of the summit, angry Aboriginal delegates accused Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin of under-playing their treaty demands in her report on the deliberations of the sub-group on indigenous affairs.

``The hard issues of the treaty -- constitutional change, real genuine dialogue to shift the existing philosophical framework to one of a new strategy -- didn't come clearly through in the report (delivered by Ms Macklin and Jackie Huggins)," said Aboriginal leader Pat Dodson, who had asked for a ``new dialogue" and a constitutional overhaul to create a new relationship with Aborigines.

``Hopefully it's in the detail, but I would have thought it could have been more courageous in reporting what was reflected. It was a bit disappointing."