

Australian Constitutional Convention

A lesson in capitalist democracy

Our Reporter
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Extraordinary efforts have been made by politicians and media commentators in Australia to depict the Howard government's Constitutional Convention as a healthy and vigorous exercise in democracy. The highly-orchestrated two-week gathering voted in favour of shifting the form of rule from a monarchy to a republic.

"The convention has been a grand success and an innovation for our democracy that must inspire adaptations," enthused Paul Kelly on The Australian's front page of February 14. "The exhilaration in Old Parliament House touched hardened political hearts and warmed the spirit of the nation," gushed Tony Stephens in the Sydney Morning Herald.

What is going on here? After all, the convention was hardly democratic. In the first place, the Liberal Party government appointed half the delegates—including most of the government's own frontbench, their Labor counterparts, and all the state and territory premiers and opposition leaders. And only 45 percent of voters participated in the postal ballot for the other delegates, despite an intensive advertising campaign.

Moreover, as this supposedly grand exercise in democracy met, the Howard government unveiled compulsory "work-for-the-dole," backed a military-style drive to break the conditions of waterfront workers, and dispatched military forces to the Gulf—all without the slightest pretence of consulting the Australian people.

Not one word was heard of these issues in the convention or in the orgy of bipartisan self-congratulation that concluded it. Such was the vast social gulf between the assembled business people and politicians and the pressing needs, concerns and aspirations of the vast majority of ordinary working people.

To understand the media hoopla surrounding the convention it is necessary to examine the historical processes that gave rise to it. The gathering in Canberra did not arise from any popular movement for a republic. It was the outcome of a protracted push by key sections of big business, launched in earnest in 1991 with the formation of the Australian Republican Movement (ARM) by millionaire investment banker Malcolm Turnbull and other corporate figures.

By that year the post-war order had disintegrated, with the downfall of the Stalinist regimes in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Three antagonistic trade blocs had developed—the

US, Japan and Europe. The economic interests of Australian capitalism had sharply diverged from those of Britain, and in fact, the perceived tie to the old colonial power had become a handicap in exploiting Asian markets.

In addition, the monarchy no longer commanded popular respect at home—a dangerous development for the ruling class under conditions of growing discontent with deteriorating living standards and widening social inequality. As the government's budget-cutter-in-chief, Treasurer Peter Costello, emphasised at the convention: "The symbols which underlie the current system are running out of believability and this gnaws at legitimacy."

But the shift from the monarchy is also fraught with dangers for the ruling class. Speaker after speaker at the convention warned of unprecedented hostility toward politicians and the entire political system. Queensland Labor leader Peter Beattie, for example, declared: "The bottom line is that politicians and political parties are at their lowest ebb in terms of public support in the history of this nation."

The leaders of the three main blocs at the convention—the ARM, the monarchists and an "elect the president" grouping—all issued similar warnings. For all their acrimonious exchanges, they each represented different factions of the ruling elite. They had a common objective—how to maintain or strengthen the political order, without allowing a discussion that could open up cracks and fissures in the system.

Prime Minister Howard, himself still a monarchist, worked closely with Labor and ARM leaders such as Turnbull, pastoral magnate Janet Holmes a Court, trucking boss Lindsay Fox and media entrepreneur Steve Vizard to produce a "minimalist" outcome that simply transfers all the ancient, vague and unspecified powers of the English monarchy to an appointed head of state.

Conscious of mounting popular disaffection, the monarchist and "direct election" representatives warned their colleagues that any republican model that did not at least pay lip service to popular "consultation" in the selection of a president was doomed to defeat in a referendum. Predictably, after a sop of "community consultation" was added, most of the "direct election" delegates embraced the ARM model.

All three factions ruled out scrapping or even defining the

“reserve powers” of the monarchy. This issue is extremely sensitive. Any discussion of these hidden powers points to the essential function of the state. The Crown retains the power to sack governments, dissolve parliaments, mobilise the military and take control of the country in periods of crisis. Former Governor-General Sir John Kerr exercised these “reserve powers” in November 1975 when he sacked the Whitlam government.

By entrenching these powers in the hands of a president, the convention was acting in the true anti-democratic traditions of the Australian capitalist class. Last century, similar conventions were summoned in 1890, 1891, 1897 and 1898 to agree to an Australian Federation and draft the Constitution. The largely unelected assemblies of businessmen, colonial politicians and lawyers deliberately clung to the monarchy and left its powers unfettered in the hands of the Queen’s representative, to be used in periods of political crisis, and above all to deal with mass struggles of the emerging working class.

Thus, an amendment to make the governor-general’s role as military commander-in-chief subject to the advice of his ministers was defeated on the grounds that military intervention would be needed when “responsible government” broke down.

Federation was organised by the capitalist class to strengthen its position amid bank crashes and recession that brought the emerging working class into repeated clashes with the employers in great strike struggles during the early 1890s. For fear that their draft Constitution would be defeated, the document was never put to a popular vote—it was implemented as a British Act of Parliament!

Even as the 1891 convention sat, one of the “founding fathers,” Sir Samuel Griffith, had to absent himself to send a telegram to Brisbane authorising the use of legal action against the sheep shearers’ strike. At the 1998 convention, National Farmers Federation chief Donald McGaughie missed most of the proceedings because he was leading the attack on waterside workers at Melbourne’s Webb Dock.

Today’s convention sat in the shadow of a deepening Asian economic meltdown, which has dire consequences for corporate Australia. Big business is demanding that the government intensify its assault on the social position of the working class, further cutting wages and conditions and slashing health, education, child care, aged care, public housing and other social services. As the attack at Webb Dock demonstrates, these measures will increasingly be implemented by the most authoritarian means.

Throughout the convention, various self-styled “radical republicans” such as Phil Cleary, Ted Mack and Pat O’Shane sought to sow the illusion that an elected presidency, combined with references to social justice in the Constitution’s Preamble, would represent a more progressive system.

But the debate on the Preamble only highlighted the chasm between the convention and ordinary people. A proposal to refer to “decent living standards” was rejected out of hand.

Even calls to include vague commitments to “democracy” and “equality” were denounced as “truly disastrous” by one of Howard’s appointed lawyers. Promises to abide by such “abstract values” would be like a “timebomb waiting to explode,” Professor Greg Craven insisted. In the end, the delegates added a clause declaring that whatever was in the Preamble, it would not affect the Constitution’s interpretation.

The convention’s final day only underscored the collaboration of the ARM, Liberal and Labor leaders to achieve the designed result: a referendum that offers two “choices”—the maintenance of the monarchy or the adoption of the ARM’s model. Howard quickly announced such a referendum before the convention closed, even though the ARM’s final model was actually rejected by the majority of the 152 delegates (they voted 73 for and 57 against with 22 abstentions).

The convention revealed, in microcosm, the essential relations that exist under capitalist democracy. As Leon Trotsky once observed: “The essence of the democratic state consists, as is known, in that everybody has the right to say and to write what he will, but that in all important questions the final word rests with the big property owners.”

For 10 days the delegates gave the appearance of saying and writing what they willed. But at the end of the two weeks, the convention’s outcome was determined entirely by the interests of big business.

The working class has no interest in supporting any version of the proposed republic. Instead, as the ruling class prepares to introduce a new form of rule and impose deeper social cuts, workers and youth must make their own preparations, based on their independent class interests.

Only one form of government will provide genuine democracy, equality and social justice—a workers’ government based on democratically elected workers councils, that will completely reorganise the economy on socialist foundations to secure the social needs of all, not the profits of a few.



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