

THE CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION

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Politics is a dirty business, and I learned a lot about it during the Constitutional Convention in Canberra. I now understand why politicians are as necessary as blowflies in the bush. Attracted by the sweetness of decay, they clear away rotting material. I also found out that it's not just professional politicians who can't be trusted.

A good politician is a manipulator, of people and of circumstances. A good politician, I suspect, might find it hard to remain a good person. A politician's job is to make people do what the politician wants, and I got an early experience of how easy this can be.

Tim Costello and I were elected to discuss the real issues of a real republic - a form of government 'of the people, by the people, for the people', in the words of Abraham Lincoln. We wanted to talk about how any new arrangements protected the people's civil, social and economic rights, and ensured their government is accountable. So, on Day 1 of the Convention, I tried to open up the government's narrow agenda to have this debate. The ALP and Coalition party delegates, the constitutional monarchists and the Australian Republican Movement, all voted to defeat my motion, ensuring that we focus instead on the narrow, technical issue of whether or not Australians wanted 'an Australian Head of State'. The only way our core issues could be talked about at all was in workshops on a new constitutional preamble and developing recommendations for ongoing constitutional reform, and there was precious little time for discussion of even those after the interminable set-piece speeches from 152 delegates with pronounced opinions.

The next day the vote was manipulated again. It was blatant; it became a public relations disaster, and it nearly torpedoed the conference, because

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they blocked all serious debate about the republican model that 80% of Australians say they want: one with an elected president. The following day the rules were changed to leave it open, after a fashion. But the game had succeeded, diverting our focus from the people's rights, splitting republicans and isolating individuals.

So I have learned a lot about politics. After just 48 hours in the old Parliament House, we were infected by its history. I am humbled.