

"Delegates, let me say this as earnestly as I can . . . let us seize the day. If we fail, we will have no-one but ourselves to blame" — Neville Wran

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Weekend Aust.

IF there was an expectation that the Constitutional Convention would be dominated by a few — Malcolm Turnbull, John Howard, Kim Beazley, a stellar cast of prominent Australians — then the expectation has proved only partly true.

While they have been dominant figures at the convention, there has also been another factor in play: the common person.

It was there when the option of a democratically elected president appeared to be steamrolled on the second day. It was there again yesterday as delegates underlined their overwhelming desire to find common ground in the forging of a republic.

The unmistakable sound of the common person began on the first day with the address by speaker seven, youth delegate Misha Schubert. Ms Schubert, 24, found her metaphor in youth, saying it was time for the nation to "move out of home" and she berated the "political gatekeepers" for the "reduced sense of possibility which is the common hallmark of lifetimes in politics".

She spoke of "nay-sayers" and dull minds and the need to think "outside the realms of what has been, to ask what might be".

Kim Beazley later described her speech as "magnificent", although Peter Costello said the notion that we were still in any way "at home" was "repulsive".

It was there on Wednesday when it was not the politicians, or Malcolm Turnbull, or indeed even a republican, who drew the only standing ovation of the convention so far, but the Aboriginal former senator, Neville Bonner, 76, who lamented the many and continuing betrayals of his people and ended with his Jagera "sorry chant".

"You told my people that your system was best," the black elder statesman said. "We have come to accept that. We have come to believe that. The dispossessed, despised adapted to your system."

"Now you say that you were wrong and that we were wrong to believe you. Suddenly you are saying that what brought this country together, made it independent, ensured its defence, saw it through peace and war, and saw it through depression and prosperity, must all go. I cannot see the need for change. I cannot see how it will help my people."

And it was ordinary people who stirred when it appeared the option of a democratically elected president was dead on the second day.

It was not Malcolm Turnbull, or the politicians, who breathed life back into the democratic option, but Baptist preacher Tim Costello who despaired over the speech he might have made, former independent MP

Phil Cleary who took passion to the lectern, ageing democrat Clem Jones and many others who had come with good will rather than bruised political knuckles.

While the day was dominated by Peter Costello declaring himself for a republic, there was also Cleary declaring: "The conservatives are trying to frighten this convention into adopting a non-elected head of State by claiming there will be tension between the elected president and the parliament. Surely in a robust democracy we should welcome that creative tension."

There was also Steve Vizard, who has made a business of comedy, who reduced the royal connection — which has emerged as the point of least dispute at the convention — to ridicule.

Was it only the "Chopper Read-like" presence that kept Governor-General William Deane from doing a runner to Majorca with our gold reserves, Vizard wondered.

Moira Rayner, describing herself as a "non-professional wheeler and dealer", in her address warned the convention against becoming a faction meeting of the ALP or a boardroom lunch at the Melbourne Club.

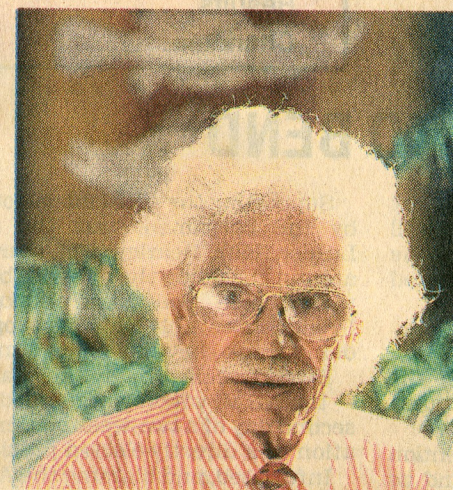
If Gareth Evans and Daryl Williams have been the draftsmen of change as the convention has shifted, it has also been the rumpled political scientist from Western Australia, Pat-

STAR QUALITY

The convention is an opportunity for ordinary people to have their 15 minutes of fame.
Stuart Rintoul reports on the unheralded, as well as familiar faces, who made an impact



Unmistakable voice of youth . . . Misha Schubert addresses the convention



Standing ovation . . . Neville Bonner

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rick O'Brien and his laterally-minded colleague Greg Craven, who have injected senses of possibility and compromise. Hybrid models for the republic have emerged on the floor of the convention.

There have been those such as the Tasmanian Christine Milne who warned against "the tyranny of mediocrity" and Paul Tully, the Ipswich councillor who in 1969 wrote himself into the *Guinness Book of Records* polishing off 30 packets of potato chips in 24 minutes, 33.6 seconds.

Tully, a visual republican in a Eureka flag tie, started counting numbers in a new alliance of democrats.

During the first week, the convention strained to the point that Bill Hayden warned that it ran the risk of being a fiasco and in a blunt personal attack, Clem Jones told the convention that Malcolm Turnbull was more likely to be remembered as the "mother of destruction" than the father of a republic. Turnbull's response was equally blunt.

"It is a pity that people seem to have chosen to demonise me," Turnbull told *The Australian*. "But really, their frustration at not having the numbers at the convention is not due to me, or my personal style, or anything like that."

But again, it has been ordinary delegates who have played a critical role in drawing the convention back together.

While Northern Territory chief minister Shane Stone yesterday spoke of avoiding the "train wreck" that Kim Beazley said the Australian people would not tolerate, Tully said he hoped the warring republicans would "kiss and make up".

While Neville Wran emerged as the main broker of compromise, reminding delegates the nation was "on the very cusp of success" and urging them to seize the day, there was also dramatic soprano Stella Axarlis, who chided tremulously: "I did not intend to be here to achieve a fiasco". She answered the delegates' laughter, saying, "I'm sorry, I'm emotional, I'm of Greek origin".

If there were concerns before the convention, voiced by Professor Craven and Victorian Premier Jeff Kennett, that the calibre of delegate would not compare with the founding fathers of federation, then those concerns have been comprehensively answered.

Prime Minister Howard opened this convention by remarking that the Parliament had never seen such a "wonderfully diverse group of Australians". He also said the convention was a time for plain speaking. There has been no shortage of that.

At the half way mark, there are strong senses at the convention that if powerful men are brokering a new republic, it is not being done without the involvement of ordinary Australians.