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The Australia 2020 Summit – Few New Ideas but Moving Australia to the Left

Sam Bateman

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The Australia 2020 Summit was convened by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to explore the challenges facing Australia over the next decade, and to capture new ideas to respond to them. Despite its lofty aims, the summit produced little that was new but the symbolism of the event was important, including signals that the Rudd Government is moving to the Left.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd convened the Australia 2020 Summit in Canberra over the weekend of 19-20 April to explore the challenges facing Australia over the next decade or so, to discuss where Australia is heading as a nation, and to identify relevant policy responses. The challenges include the sustainability of long-term economic growth, the threat of climate change, national health and education, and the future place of Australia in the world.

The Summit brought together 1,000 Australians from all walks of life, the so-called “best and brightest”, to discuss these challenges and how the nation should respond to them. In addition to the Summit itself, associated events were held around the country in schools and local communities. In the weekend prior to the 2020 Summit, a national Youth Summit was also held in Canberra. Additionally about 8,000 separate individual and institutional submissions were received from non-participants identifying issues for the Summit.

Summit participants were assigned to one of ten separate streams: Productivity and Education, National Economy, Sustainability and Climate Change, Rural Industry, Health, Social and Community Services, Arts and Culture, Governance, Indigenous Australians and Australia’s place in the world. About five hours of the available time were taken up in plenary sessions and the streams only had about seven hours to consider their issues.

The Summit was an interesting experiment in national agenda-setting. However, it did not satisfy all participants. There was considerable grumbling after the event that it was structured and tightly controlled by facilitators who appeared to be well briefed on what could be discussed and what could not. Rumours abounded that the outcomes were pre-determined and that some issues reached the final

reports although they had not been mentioned over the weekend. Some very specific government wish-list items appeared to have been inserted into the outcomes.

Activists who were not present at the Summit also queried whether the Summit truly represented community views. This was particularly the case with the Summit report that there was strong support for an Australian republic. This may not represent a true national consensus. The Opposition Leader, Brendan Nelson, claimed that the Summit had been stacked with pro-Government people.

Governance: A New Republic

An overwhelming message from the Summit was that Australia is currently governed in a clumsy way and that the mechanisms of the Federal system of Government needed to be redefined. Currently, there is a diversity of approaches across the country to health, education, local government and industry regulation. The current system of government is a major impediment to an efficient national economy.

The Governance stream strongly supported a new Australian republic, as well as a statutory Bill or Charter of Rights. The participants suggested that the introduction of the Republic should be via a two-stage process, with Stage 1 being the ending of ties with the UK while retaining the position of the Governor-General as Head of State; and Stage 2 involving extensive consultation on the prospective new models prior to a national referendum.

Economy: Seamless Regulations Needed

Due to the current Federal system, Australia's economy in major markets is fragmented with the states and territories to some extent "doing their own thing". What is required is a seamless national economy unhampered by regulations that vary between the states and territories. A major review of the national tax system was called for.

There was a heavy focus at the Summit on human capital. This was a "cradle to grave" approach: the development of children would be at the heart of the productivity agenda and there would also be a role for "golden gurus" – retired people acting as mentors in the workplace. There was also concern among participants that Australia had not been clever in using the skills and ingenuity of its people.

Society: Close the Gap

Various measures to strengthen civil society were discussed, including the urgency of remedying the disadvantages experienced by indigenous peoples. Participants wanted social inclusion to be a national priority, and expressed an overwhelming desire to "close the gap" between the relatively well-off and the disadvantaged in society.

The sustainability of rural industry and communities received special attention. An opportunity was identified for Australia in fostering global and rural food security with research to increase food production and to bring currently dry and arid areas into production. However, climate change and water issues are obviously major challenges.

Participants also stressed the importance of healthy lifestyles, health promotion and disease prevention, including the suggestion of a tax on "junk food".

Australia's Place in the World: Softly, softly

The stream on Australia's future security and prosperity identified three main ambitions. The first was to create an image of Australia as an effective global citizen; the second was to invigorate Australia's engagement with Asia and the Pacific; and the third was to ensure that major regional languages and

cultures become more mainstreamed into Australian society. But these ambitions already reflect Government policy to some extent.

The focus of the stream was very much on non-traditional security and there was no consideration of conventional defence issues. Indeed it would be easy to draw a conclusion that the defence budget could be cut significantly with resources being diverted to softer security requirements, including Asian language training. While much of the focus was on domestic issues, regional issues were never far away. A collaborative regional group was suggested to deal with possible pandemics and emerging infectious diseases such as Bird Flu and Dengue Fever, and to develop best practice on chronic and preventable diseases.

The importance of Australia's large maritime domain to future security and prosperity was the other topic "missing in action" from the summit outcomes. This was surprising as coincidentally over the weekend of the Summit, the Government announced the extension of Australia's continental shelf.

Radical Change Ahead?

There was little new in major outcomes from the Summit. It has been suggested that the Summit was set up to provide an excuse for the Rudd Government to move to the Left in respect of issues such as social justice, multi-culturalism, regional engagement, and the Republic. The Summit offered Kevin Rudd the opportunity to live up to his election platform of providing new ideas and fresh leadership. But it also provided an opportunity for the Government to sharpen its differences with its predecessor.

The Rudd Government was elected last November after promoting itself as solid and non-radical, an image to match that of the Howard Government. But people in the Centre and on the Left remained dissatisfied. Rudd himself could not seize the initiative of radical change, but the Summit now serves as a symbol to demonstrate that more far-reaching changes are in the pipeline.

Indeed symbolism was very evident at the Summit. There was a lot of national hype! National celebrities, including well-known international actors, Cate Blanchett and Hugh Jackman, were high profile participants. Multi-culturalism was very evident, and the right-wing commentators who were much in vogue during the latter years of the Howard Government now have to rethink their approach. How much has changed in Australia in just a few short months!

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