

The 2020 Summit: 'The Future of Governance'

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The 2020 Summit was a mixed success. On one level it successfully encouraged the discussion of Australia's future, as well as supporting the propositions that ideas matter, that the community may contribute to government, and that change may be positive, rather than something to be feared. It also produced a great deal of public engagement through local, school and youth summits, public submissions and public nominations for participation in the summit. Televising the full proceedings on ABC2 permitted many people to feel involved in the Summit from their own homes. As a public education and participation process, it could therefore be judged a success.

If, however, the purpose of the Summit was to harness the ideas of the 'best and the brightest' and develop practical proposals, then its success is more doubtful.

There are a number of reasons for this.

The composition of the Summit

The Summit was not composed of the 'best and the brightest', despite the propaganda to the contrary. It comprised an eclectic mix of people who fell broadly into two groups: on one hand, academics and experts; and, on the other, people with community or 'on the ground' experience. Both groups had valuable ideas to bring to the table. As one academic remarked to me, the people from the community group were not only more enthusiastic but far more creative, as they were neither boxed into long-held positions, nor burdened by familiarity with failures of the past.

To bring out the best from each group the Summit should have been run differently. If it had been solely a Summit of experts, then the discussion could have commenced at a high level, with no need to address the fundamentals or background. It would have been more focused and more likely to produce well-reasoned and practical (albeit predictable) proposals.

If the Summit had solely comprised representatives of community groups and members of the general public, it could have been structured so that participants became informed of the issues, either in advance through briefing papers or through short presentations at the Summit. Once a common level of understanding had been achieved, participants could have drawn upon their

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own experiences and knowledge to develop the ideas that were sought. This is the approach taken in 'deliberative polls' and 'citizens' assemblies'.

Either approach would have been likely to have been effective. However, the combination of these two different groups produced much frustration. There simply was not sufficient time or opportunity for explanations to be given as to why some proposals were impractical or would probably be ineffective. Nor was there sufficient time for people to be persuaded to shake off entrenched views and prejudices.

The number of Summit participants

The number of participants, 1002, was simply too great to be manageable. While it allowed a wide variety of people to be invited, it meant that many of those invited had precious little chance to be heard. The participants were broken into groups of 100, each dealing with one of 10 listed subject areas. Some of these groups covered extremely wide areas, such as 'Population, sustainability, climate change, water and the future of our cities'.

These groups of 100 were still too large to allow genuine debate. The likelihood of being called upon to speak was low, with many people not getting a chance to speak at all. Given the fact that, if chosen, one was unlikely to be chosen to speak again, there was pressure on each speaker to raise their single-most-important concern, leaving no real opportunity to respond to other speakers and develop a meaningful debate.

It was therefore understandable that each group of 100 then broke into sub-groups of around 25, where there was a greater opportunity to discuss and be heard. The consequence, however, was that anyone who had ideas concerning matters being discussed by other groups had little chance of having those ideas heard.

Overall, it would probably have been better if there had been 300 participants broken up into 10 groups of 30. This would have allowed greater participation and a more sensible debate.

The imbalance between presentation and substance

The primary focus of the Summit appeared to be presentation rather than the development of substance. Both presentation and substance are important, but even more important is maintaining the appropriate balance between the two. While substance becomes irrelevant if it is not able to be communicated effectively, the first priority must be the actual generation of the substance. At the Summit presentation reigned supreme and substance played second fiddle. This was manifest in the structure of the Summit and its reporting.

On the structure side, too little time in the two days was dedicated to substantive debate of the issues. While the opening and closing sessions were

justifiable, there were also two so-called plenary sessions of the full group of 1002 which in reality were 'chat shows' performed for television. These were a complete waste of the time of the participants, who were press-ganged into constituting an audience. Even if these spectacles were regarded as essential to the public involvement aspect of the Summit, there was no need for a captive audience of 1002 people who could have spent their time far more productively. Even the most charitable would be hard-pressed to describe these sessions as public education. For the most part, they wallowed in the shallows of the superficial and puerile. When the chat show host asked his guests 'What do you find embarrassing about Australia?', one prominent Minister sitting in my row muttered 'this' and led a walk out, which I gratefully joined.

No doubt some participants enjoyed the chat shows and were happy to indulge in celebrity spotting. Others, however, felt used. Having given up their time for the purpose of contributing their expertise and ideas, they instead found themselves allocated the part of a television audience in a public-relations exercise. This squandering of goodwill was unnecessary. It was also an own-goal for a government fighting against claims that the Summit was nothing but a superficial talk-fest.

The other major problem arising from the focus on presentation concerned the use of facilitators and the translation of Summit recommendations into a more 'presentable' form. Whenever the sub-groups produced substantive recommendations that were then put to the larger groups of 100, the wording of the recommendations was stripped of substance by the facilitators so that the recommendations were meaningless and incomprehensible to the larger group. As a consequence, the plenary sessions of the groups of 100 descended into confusion and ambiguity, with members of each sub-group trying to explain what they had really decided. Many recommendations were lost in the resulting chaos.

At one stage the Governance group facilitator said that what was being proposed had to be reduced to a T-shirt slogan by 4pm. He was only half joking. The professional facilitators were working under the imperative of having to produce a slick and neat presentation by an extremely tight deadline. However, in many cases they had no expertise in the subject matter and their stripping of detail from proposals rendered them little more than vague platitudes, frustrating the participants.

Even worse was the fact that the final recommendations of the Governance group — fought out in a frantic and chaotic final session — were not correctly incorporated in the report presented to the Prime Minister. For example, the report listed as one of the top ideas of the Governance group: 'Introduce an Australian republic, via a two-stage process, with Stage 1 ending ties with the

UK while retaining the Governor-General's titles and powers for five years. Stage 2: Identifying new models after extensive and broad consultation.'

In fact, the Governance group decided that first a plebiscite should be held on the question of whether or not Australia should become a republic and that if this were successful, then there should be a process of public consultation and involvement to determine what model for a republic would be later put to the people in a referendum. This discrepancy is not one of emphasis or interpretation, but substance. It arose because the focus of the facilitators in the limited time available was on the presentation to be given in the final session, not the text of the report.

The mantra at the Summit was (and continues to be) not to worry, because everything has been taken down and will be recorded in the final report. However, as those focused on presentation well know, the crucial point was when the media reported the outcome of the Summit to the public immediately after it concluded. The public record has now been written. No matter how many corrections or complete reports are later issued, the public perception of what occurred has already been created, and will not be shifted.

What worked well

Having made these criticisms, it should be said that there were a number of things that were done very well at the 2020 Summit. The reduction of costs was very cleverly arranged. By making the Summit a prestigious event and asking that participants volunteer their time and pay their own way for the honour of attending the Summit, the financial and administrative burdens of running such an event were significantly reduced. Similarly, the facilitators, scribes and guides were all induced to attend as volunteers.

The system of public nomination of participants was also clever as it increased public interest and involvement in the event. The only problem with the system was that some of the people with the greatest expertise would not contemplate self-nomination. This meant that they were either left out, or nominated without their knowledge, as occurred in the case of at least one former High Court judge, who ultimately declined to attend.

The idea of setting up a database for participants where they could communicate about issues in advance of the Summit was also sensible. Much discussion has continued post-Summit by way of email. The instruction that participants write 100 words setting out one idea, and another 100 words on a subject about which they had changed their minds in the last decade smacked of the psychological manipulation well beloved of management consultants. (At least participants were not asked to explain what type of fruit they would like to be.) In any event, the website was so badly organized that it was too difficult to find in advance the statements made by other members of one's group. Every

participant was given their own webpage and, instead of organizing them according to groups and in alphabetical order of surname (which would appear logical), the 1000 or so different pages were arranged by the alphabetical order of a person's title. Hence under 'A' one found Associate Professors, 'D' gave us Doctors, 'P' was for Professors, but the biggest category was 'M' for Mrs Ms and Mr. I suspect most people probably gave up looking after the letter A. I certainly did. Public submissions were also accessible from a website, which listed each one next to the column intriguingly headed 'possible profanity'. No doubt those marked as potentially profane were the first and only ones read.

Despite the website glitches, the mechanical organisation of the event was certainly done superbly, including the organisation of facilities, the catering and the movement of such a large number of people about the building. Given the short period of time between the announcement and the holding of the Summit, this aspect of the organisation was very impressive indeed.

The lessons

Some participants found the Summit 'inspiring', and have suggested to me that the criticisms aired above are born of unrealistic expectations of what could be achieved in one weekend. But I have attended a number of deliberative conventions that considered change in Australia's system of governance. Some were composed solely of experts; others of members of the general public. All took place in a limited time, over a day or a weekend. Many were run by the Constitutional Centenary Foundation; others by governments. *All* were better structured, better managed, and better focused on developing substantive proposals, while giving all participants a fair chance to have their say.

The primary lesson is that if a similar exercise were to be undertaken again, such as the constitutional convention recommended by the Governance group, then much more thought would need to be given to the detail well in advance of even announcing the proposal. My impression of the 2020 Summit is that officials were caught on the hop with the proposal and that more attention was given to the logistics (which worked well) and the presentational aspects (which went too far), than to giving the participants a reasonable opportunity to produce the 'ideas' which were ultimately the objective of the Summit.

Matters that would need to be considered if a constitutional convention were to be held include:

- the number of participants;
- the composition of the convention (for example, experts or the broader public);
- how participants are chosen (for example, election or appointment, by what method and by whom) and who, if anyone, they represent;
- the involvement of politicians;

- the purpose of the convention (for example, public education, the development of broad principles or the formulation of substantive reform proposals);
- how the structure of the convention supports its purpose and the type of participants chosen;
- the duration of the convention;
- how the convention is to be informed (for example, research, papers, or speakers);
- the opportunity for participants to discuss matters with each other in advance and to communicate back to the public (for example, an adjournment during a longer convention);
- the use of facilitators and whether they should have expertise in the subject matter under discussion; and
- the extent to which the convention establishes or controls its own rules and agenda or is directed in the matters that it is to consider.

Conclusion

The 2020 Summit was enormously important from a symbolic point of view. It marked the beginning of a new government with a willingness to discuss the long term, encourage ideas and permit community involvement. It not only opened the doors to Parliament House but also opened the windows of government to let in the fresh air.

Whether more comes of the Summit than symbolism remains to be seen.