

2020 Summit: 'An Australian on Mars by 2020'

Bruce Chapman¹

My guess is that 100 per cent of participants in the 2020 Summit, including myself, didn't really know what to make of it beforehand. My guess is that 70 per cent of participants in the 2020 Summit, including myself, didn't know what to make of it during the summit weekend. My guess is that a large minority of participants in the 2020 Summit, including myself, still don't really know what to make of it.

Beforehand

When the summit was announced, the first issue concerned how best to get yourself invited. I knew that as a slightly post-middle-aged pink male I did not have the best demographics, so I would have to try some cunning tricks. The direct approach seemed a little tacky ('Hi Glyn, I was just in your office and wondered how the selections were going for the summit?') but there was some potential to be had in that we were required to propose some referees, and I had agreed to play this role for four colleagues. Judicious use of refereeing language would ensure that I could free up three or four of these places for my application.

I planned a few highly supportive and subtly damning responses to the refereeing invitation. For example: 'Professor A is a brilliant economic theorist and has extraordinary talents in the use of mathematical lemmas and differential equations that are bound to be useful to an informed policy discussion with laypeople and the media.'²

Preparation

We were asked to write 100 words on our wonderful idea, and also 100 words on something in public policy we had changed our minds about in the last 10 years. In the first category I suggested that income-contingent loan mechanisms were a fantastic and innovative instrument for solving all of the world's problems, such as for the financing of paid parental leave and drought relief, the collection of low-level criminal fines, and much more. This didn't take 100 words so I then added that income-contingent loans would eliminate terrorism, resolve global warming, secure world peace (quite soon), and provide the key to immortality. That should get their attention.

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² Professor A was chosen for the Summit.

Finding something that I had changed my mind about was harder, and I noticed that several of my colleagues responded to this question by saying 'Nothing'. For this second category I wrote something like: 'I used to think that income-contingent loans couldn't solve all of the world's problems, but now I realize that they can.' I reckoned a bit of a consistent theme would maximize my chances of getting this up at the summit. *[Editor's Note: Professor Chapman got nothing up at the Summit.]*³

At the summit

Among the thousands of words that could be written about the actual summit are: chaotic; engaging; chaotic; enlightening; chaotic; exhilarating; and chaotic. I was in the so-called Productivity Panel, which turned out to be less productive than I hoped for. This has nothing to do with my profound disappointment, indignation, resentment and bitterness about my brilliant idea, that income-contingent loans could solve all the world's problems, being ignored. *[Editor's Note: On the contrary, his idea being ignored has everything to do with Professor Chapman's judgment that his panel was unproductive.]*

Several days before we arrived it was clear that the organisation, effort and planning differed hugely between the Panels, with the Governance Panel apparently having been manipulating, settling issues and signing agreements since the last major Labor summit of April 1983. On the contrary, members of my panel had no idea if we would even be in the same room, or where Parliament House was. It turned out that there were to be four sub-panels in the Productivity group, of about 25 people each. In other Panels, such as the Indigenous Policy group, there were around 10 sub-panels of about 10 each, and in the Economy Panel there were around five sub-panels, including a breakaway group that wanted to talk about other stuff.

What happened in the sub-panels seemed to be completely different, even within the broad groupings. It became very apparent, with 2020 hindsight *[Editor's Note: Professor Chapman stole this joke from Professor Ann McGrath]*, that the quality of the facilitator and the rapport between group members were both completely important to the worth of the process. In my group the facilitator seemed not to understand the area much at all, which was completely obvious because she could not see that income-contingent loans would solve all the world's problems. Further, in this group we didn't have rapport as such; more like antipathy, combativeness, hostility and self-promotion. Amazingly, I was the only one to focus properly on the critical idea, that income-contingent loans would solve all the world's problems. *[Editor's Note: It has been reported by other members of this sub-panel that when it became obvious that Professor Chapman*

³ *Editor's Note:* The 'Editor's Notes' in this contribution are not the editor's notes.

was a fanatical self-obsessed zealot they decided to discuss issues outside his interests and expertise, and of these there were a very large number.]

What became part of the Productivity Panel's final list of ideas was a combination of opportunity, timing and mystery. The idea that got most media attention was that HECS debts should be reduced through community work, yet I have found no-one in my Panel who remembered that this was discussed. On the ABC's *The World Today* the following Monday, Warwick Smith, who co-chaired our panel with Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard, essentially said that indeed this idea wasn't part of the Productivity Panel's deliberations. Those ideas which did make it seemed to come from people being able to seize the moment with a compelling sentence (with a short and punchy justification) which was then not opposed.

After the summit

We all needed to recover from the turmoil and excitement which came from being included in what was in essence a very large public-policy jamboree and party. I have been in discussion with many colleagues since, and for these economists there is an emerging consensus about the Summit:

- It was invigorating to be there;
- We got most out of meeting other Australians interested in public policy from outside our fields;
- The all-inclusive sessions, with the 1002 'Summiteers', many politicians and the media, were not generally a good use of time for those wanting to develop policy issues; and
- Non-economists don't like us much because what really matters in terms of public policy are issues of fairness and equity.

I was initially quite disappointed in the absence of much informed debate and the significance placed on the snappy one-liner, but my consulting of the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* has helped me come to terms with this: 'Idea' is defined as 'vague belief or fancy'. [*Editor's Note: Professor Chapman's opinion that income-contingent loans can solve all the world's problems seems to sit quite comfortably with this definition.*]

Through the haze, confusion, and general positive feel of the Summit, there were naturally some memorable moments. The best example for me from the Productivity Panel entails all the members of one sub-group being asked at the death knell to state in a few words or less their one brilliant idea. Joshua Gans of the University of Melbourne, tongue firmly in cheek, sang out: 'Put an Australian on Mars by 2020!' A graver economist noted that 'would be very expensive'. Joshua retorted: 'We don't have to bring them back!'

Boring it wasn't.