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One Big Conversation: the Australia 2020 Summit

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We gather in the name of Sir Robert Garran, who on federation was Australia's first – and for several days only[2] – Commonwealth public servant. Garran would go on to serve 31 years as Secretary of the Attorney-General's Department, working for eleven attorneys-general and sixteen governments – a record unlikely to be broken, noted R.S. Parker.[3]

Garran set an important tone for the Australian Public Service he helped call into being – clear, lucid and devoid of pomposity, non-partisan but committed to national goals, with recognition that 'constitutional law is not pure logic, it is logic plus politics'.

Garran worked within the tradition of the public service as the trusted – and usually only – source of advice to the Prime Minister and Cabinet members. He built agencies as expert policy advisors to government.

More than a century later, Garran's founding values still influence the Australian Public Service. Many Commonwealth agencies can trace a continuous line back to 1901[4]. Much else has changed, of course, in response to new circumstances. During his long tenure Garran observed important shifts in the nature and complexity of federal government, and advocated periodic reviews of the Commonwealth constitution through elected conventions.

Garran died in 1957 and, in the decades since, governments no longer accept the Australian Public Service as their only source of formal advice. Ministerial staff offer an alternative stream of recommendations. Ministers routinely seek ideas from universities, think tanks, professional lobbying organisations, private sector strategy and consulting firms. They turn to the public through consultative mechanisms such as web dialogues, community cabinets, town hall meetings, even talk back radio.

More rarely, governments call national summits to review and refresh the national agenda.

Such summits offer an intermittent but interesting history as alternative ways to seek and legitimise policy solutions outside established political and public sector structures. So this Garran Oration reflects on the 2020 Summit – for the glimpse it provides of contemporary thinking about democracy, and as an example of a different mechanism for government to elicit and aggregate ideas.

In an op-ed published in early 2007, Professor Patrick Weller noted that, if elected, Kevin Rudd would be 'the first prime minister to have had the experience of running

a public service department'.[5] As a career public servant before entering Parliament, Kevin Rudd knew the strengths and weaknesses of the traditional public service model, including its capacity to generate policy proposals.

Since November 2007 Prime Minister Rudd has famously asked much of the public service. But he has also insisted on multiple sources of advice. Though schooled in the administrative system Robert Garran invented, the Prime Minister is at the same time the product of a political class that reaches widely for ideas.

During his first weeks in office, Kevin Rudd evaluated various ways to gather voices outside the usual channels. He settled on an audacious approach – he would invite 1,000 Australians to a national Summit in Canberra to explore the challenges facing the nation between now and 2020. The gathering, he declared, would discuss shared ambitions and capture ideas – both large and small – to shape into policy actions.

A Summit is risky. Participants might criticise government policy or support unpalatable options. Anticipating the hazard, the Primer Minister encouraged free and open debate, with no predetermined right or wrong answers. He made clear, however, that government would retain the right to decide – by the end of 2008 Cabinet would respond to the Summit's final report, stating which ideas would be taken up, which rejected, and the reasons why.[6]

When Prime Minister Rudd announced the Australia 2020 Summit on 3 February 2008, he also proclaimed an ambitious timeframe. The whole event would be planned and executed within twelve weeks, with the Summit scheduled for Parliament House on 19-20 April.

As co-convenor, the Prime Minister invited an academic. This is a public role we in universities are not accustomed to playing. We're timid and shy folk. But the chance to work with a thousand talented people, to learn about contending policy agendas, and to contribute in a small way to one big conversation, was an honour.

Over the following three months I was to discover the sheer scale of the logistics required, the sorrow at disappointing people who wanted to participate but were not chosen, the delights of Sydney talk-back radio, and the many opportunities for free character assessment by newspaper columnists.

Fortunately, a talented team assembled quickly to design and deliver the Summit. By necessity, the organisation spanned cities. Alongside the Prime Minister's own office in Canberra, a small secretariat within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet was headed by former Tasmanian departmental secretary Linda Hornsey. In Melbourne, a team of Victorian Public Service event managers led by Meredith Sussex worked with a panel of content experts from the University of Melbourne and the Boston Consulting Group, guided by Donald Speagle and Jane-Frances Kelly.

These skilled professionals were supplemented by volunteers from the Australian Public Service and private organisations, including a number of people who appeared in my office, keen to help. A number of consultants and think tank personnel helped with program design and event planning. All contributed without payment, driven by

the excitement of participating in a rare national conversation, a moment when ideas held sway.

Political Consultation

Why are such national conversations so rare? Because in a democracy, our elected representatives usually do the talking for us.

Once democracy was synonymous with direct political involvement. All citizens participated in the running of the polis. This system of government was contentious in its day – Aristotle denounced democracy as rule by and for the needy – and it was vigorously suppressed in later ages. Yet the democratic ideal revived regularly, and found new expression in the peaceful parliamentary government of Britain and the upheavals of revolution in America and France.

Our modern democracy is representative rather than direct. Occasionally this is criticised, as though the Athenian model represented the only 'true' form of democracy. Such criticisms lack historical perspective. Citizenship in ancient Greece was a narrow category, excluding women, slaves, and foreigners. Political communities were small, allowing direct democracies to swing between extremes under the sway of demagogues. As numerous political theorists observe, the classical ideal of participative government is incompatible with the modern freedoms achieved within representative government.[7] The fate of Socrates attest to the risks of a political system without institutional checks against what J.S. Mill memorably called 'the tyranny of the majority'.[8]

Representative democracy too has its drawbacks. It can be hard for local voices to be heard. Individual rights can be trampled. Government can grow large and distant. Hence the appeal of a more participatory democracy has found new strength. The political philosopher Hannah Arendt, for instance, lamented the failure of even the most successful political revolution – that of the United States – to create an enduring space for popular political engagement. 'Political freedom,' she wrote, '…means the right to be a participator in government, or it means nothing.'[9]

This plea for more local involvement, more opportunity for voice outside the existing political institutions, struck a chord with many in the 1960s and beyond. It was a key theme for Australian academic Carole Pateman, who argued that participation is essential for meaningful citizenship. We need, she suggested, to broaden and deepen the democratic process.[10]

By the 1990s, this drive for more participatory forms of decision making had caught the interest of officials and politicians. In part this responded to declining trust in traditional forms of governance, and the desire to recreate 'social capital' within the community. Offering stakeholders (that clumsy but now ubiquitous term) opportunities to be involved in decision making, was embraced by governments concerned about legitimacy. It was given impetus by organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, which invested considerable energy advising governments on increased public participation.[11]

In Australia, the sense of a widening gap between governors and governed played into political debate – think how John Howard evoked the language of 'elites' to characterise the Keating government as out of touch with citizens, or Pauline Hanson generated a political movement around claims that Parliament was not listening to, or speaking for, ordinary Australians.

No wonder so many governments, national, state and local, Liberal and Labor alike, anxiously sought ways to reconnect with constituents. Consultation and participation became policy principles for program design.[12] Hence the popularity of new consultation techniques, of deliberative democracy, web-based town meetings, community cabinets, even parliaments meeting in regional centres to bring democracy to the people. At their best, ambitious consultation exercises such as the *Tasmania Together* blueprint commissioned by then Premier Jim Bacon, could help communities think through a shared future.

Occasionally, such participation exercises occurred at national level – notably in the 1983 and 1985 economic and tax summits commissioned by the Hawke government, the constitutional convention of February 1998 to consider options for an Australian republic, the Rural Australia Summit called by the Howard government in 1999, and a summit on the teaching of history in August 2006, held at Parliament House.

So successive governments have used consultation to encourage a policy conversation. Premiers and Prime Ministers know that while Australians may be cynical about government they can be engaged with the right processes.

All this and more must have been on Kevin Rudd's mind when he called the Australia 2020 Summit. He knew issues such as climate change appear too complex to be solved in the usual partisan frame. He saw the need to find sources of advice outside traditional public sector structures, by building networks of intellectuals, technical experts, opinion formers and activists. And, as a political leader, no doubt the Prime Minister sensed the right moment to welcome new voices into the dialogue. Freshly elected governments enjoy a brief season when discussion is acceptable. All too soon, it is time to make choices.

The Australia 2020 Summit can be understood as a new government addressing a demand for political participation by an articulate and vocal citizenry. The Summit offered a new way to communicate directly with people, outside the standard pattern of policy debates, political institutions and media selection of issues.

A Summit About Ideas

Yet if the 2020 Summit followed the tradition of some earlier national gatherings, it also reflected one important change in public sentiment. When Prime Minister Hawke called an economic summit in 1983, he could invite well known interest groups to stand in proxy for the Australian people. Government might have credibility issues, but many private institutions still commanded loyalty from their members – industry associations, trade unions, churches, social and community groups. By 2008, the standing of such organisations could not be taken for granted.

The public has long held doubts about government. It now worries also about interest groups and their professional lobbyists. In the United States, the backlash against the influence of 'special interests' is so strong that 'defeating Washington' has become the catchcry of all presidential candidates. While the rhetoric is less well developed in Australia, the sentiment is similar.

Planning for the 2020 Summit reflected this atomisation of society. It would be a gathering of individuals not representatives. People would bring ideas rather than interests to the discussion. This angered some interest groups – the President of the Australian Medical Association, for example, was most vocal about not being invited.[13] Her response rejected any move from an 'interest group model' of consultation, despite the stated preference for individual voices over claims to speak for others.

Hence the unusual character of the 2020 Summit. It was not about transferring sovereignty from the parliament to some other body. Nor was the intent to co-opt public opinion around existing policy options. The brief was simple – find people who could contribute to a discussion about Australia's future. Give them time to meet and an agenda to discuss. Capture ideas and make these available far and wide. Don't expect, or seek, agreement. This is a long way from established models of public consultation.

In designing the program, the Prime Minister specified ten major issues facing the nation:

- Productivity;
- The economy;
- Sustainability;
- Rural Australia;
- Health;
- Communities and families;
- Indigenous issues;
- Creativity;
- Governance; and
- Australia's place in the world.

The invitation to contribute extended to the community - eventually 8,713 submissions were received from the public and circulated to participants before the Summit. Many ideas from these contributions were reflected in the final Summit report to government, completed six weeks after the event.[14]

The idea of specifying challenges and seeking a vision in response has parallels with business strategy. Yet it is perhaps more interesting as a constitutional innovation – finding ways to think about the long term future outside the strictures of partisan politics and representative institutions. As Garran observed, a constitution is more than a written document. It is a way of organising the work of government, of channelling ideas into public actions.

As a constitutional addition, summits suffer from significant imperfections. They happen infrequently. There is always controversy about the invitation list. Meetings favour the articulate. Even so, the chance for a national conversation outside the normal rules of political debate captured many imaginations. The symbolism of using Parliament House as the venue heightened a sense of occasion. Just calling the Summit sparked a national discussion about the place of ideas in our public life.

Issue 1: participation

When the Prime Minister announced a national summit of 1,000 Australians, he made clear people would participate as individuals not delegates. How then to choose participants from more than 21 million Australians, amid a tight timeframe?

There were only two options – choose without a public process, drawing on the great and good, or select through nominations. In a democracy, only the second seemed credible. Hence the call for public nominations to participate at the Summit.

To oversee selection of participation, and design the agenda for each stream, the Prime Minister announced a list of 10 (subsequently 11) community and 10 ministerial co-chairs:

- Mr Warwick Smith - the productivity agenda – education, skills, training, science and innovation, working with Julia Gillard MP, Deputy Prime Minister, Minister for Education, Minister for Employment & Workplace Relations
- Dr David Morgan - the future of the Australian economy , working with Wayne Swan MP, Treasurer
- Mr Roger Beale AO - population, sustainability, climate change, water and the future of our cities, working with Penny Wong, Minister for Climate Change and Water
- Mr Tim Fischer AC - future directions for rural industries and rural communities, working with Tony Burke, MP, Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry
- Professor Michael Good - a long-term national health strategy, working with Nicola Roxon MP, Minister for Health and Ageing
- Mr Tim Costello AO - strengthening communities, supporting families and social inclusion, working with Tanya Plibersek MP, Minister for Housing
- Dr Jackie Huggins AM - options for the future of Indigenous Australia, working with Jenny Macklin MP, Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs
- Ms Cate Blanchett and Professor Julianne Schultz - towards a creative Australia, working with Peter Garrett AM MP, Minister for the Environment Heritage and the Arts
- Mr John Hartigan - the future of Australian governance, working with Maxine McKew MP, Parliamentary Secretary for Early Childhood Education and Childcare
- Professor Michael Wesley - Australia’s future security and prosperity in a rapidly changing region and world, working with Stephen Smith MP, Minister for Foreign Affairs.

To community co-chairs fell the difficult task of delegate selection. Nearly 8,000 Australians self-nominated or were proposed by others. When governors, ministers, opposition leaders, state premiers and opposition leaders and youth summit participants were factored in, there remained some 940 places available, or less than 100 in each stream. While the goal was to gather 1,000 talented and informed Australians together under one roof, this had to be a cross section – chosen not just for expertise, but also for demography and geography. The steering committee worked hard to ensure the participants mirrored in reasonable proportion the Australian population.

The community co-chairs achieved this important goal of diversity. There were criticisms, of course. Some excellent nominations missed out because they were a male from the ACT when the stream needed a woman from regional South Australia. Yet as Maxine McKew wryly observed, the Summit created a group more closely resembling the Australian people than the usual occupants of Parliament House.

Business leaders noted how few people they knew. And the gender mix – a slight majority of 2020 participants were female – made the gathering very different from most public events.

The choice of participants left some constituencies not well represented. There were fewer people than ideal from small business, for example. On the other hand, places such as the Northern Territory and remote Australia were over-represented, in contrast to their frequent exclusion from the national power triangle.

Indigenous peoples were capably represented by a cohort larger than their proportion in the overall population, so ensuring first Australians spoke not just on the future of Indigenous people, but on every topic, in every stream.

The somewhat chance nature of delegate selection mimicked a prominent feature of classical democracy – the drawing of ballots for public office to prevent demagogues and machine politicians establishing an oligarchy.

As one official noted after the event, problems with the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet database reinforced some randomness in the ballot. As always in public administration, decision-making is driven by the information available.

Still, participation was broadened by a related series of events – more than 500 school and community summits held throughout March and April, a Youth Summit in Canberra, an African community meeting in Melbourne and a Jewish symposium in Sydney, along with public submissions. An official website - http://australia2020.gov.au – recorded heavy traffic as Australians read submissions and offered views. A series of detailed background papers provided extensive information on each stream, along with data about current national performance.

Those participating turned out to be both well informed and realistic about the process. For many, the Summit began weeks earlier as delegates conversed through a 2020 intranet. This not only provided access to submissions and supporting material, but biographical information on participants and participant answers to two fascinating questions – ‘if you could do one thing in your stream area, what would it

be?', and 'what issue have you changed your mind on over the past 10 years?' Those who used the intranet arrived in Canberra already mid-conversation.

Issue 2: process

Choosing 1,000 participants was the first challenge. The second was designing sessions, to ensure key topics were covered and everyone heard.

In effect, the Summit comprised 10 simultaneous mini-conferences, each with around 100 people. Even these groups were too large, and often broke into smaller break-out sessions. Plenary sessions at the start and finish of each day explored common themes across streams, to create the symphony of a 1,000.

Scribes captured the conversation, and distilled these into running summaries. They joined some 210 volunteer guides, liaison officers and runners to support the work of the Summit. Some of this team worked through the Saturday night to ensure a printed interim report was waiting by the door as delegates departed on Sunday afternoon.

With only two days of discussion available, groups needed time to sketch the big issues, and opportunities to argue about ideas. To help cover the ground, each stream worked with professional facilitators, drawn from the major Australian consulting firms and all working pro bono.

Yet at times the streams declined to take the mapped out pathway, and firmly went their own way. Several streams decided to change agendas and organisational arrangements. The Future of the Economy group, for example, created an additional sub-group around human capital. The Governance group decided to vote on some matters of process and substance. The Creative stream not only redesigned its work program, but later set up a dedicated website to keep the conversation flowing.

Many streams likewise went on arguing long after the Summit concluded, with emails proposing further ideas, challenging records of the discussion, contesting the priority order of recommendations. This lively contest around structure and content eloquently refuted some claims the Summit was carefully scripted in advance. The process of herding 100 stream participants left some very exhausted co-chairs and facilitators.

Naturally there were guidelines about acceptable behaviour. Summiteers were asked to respect the views of others, to propose new and big ideas, to be concise, to remember that not every idea could receive majority support, and to remain positive, even when their own ideas were defeated.

The result was animated, unstoppable, discussion. In the sessions, in the breaks, over dinner on Saturday night, at airports and train stations on the way home. People conversing with friends and strangers alike.

Indeed, many participants welcomed an occasion at which 'you can talk to anyone.' With the big spaces of Parliament House providing few seats during breaks, Summiteers sat on the floor to argue while eating from lunch boxes. One such group included Lachlan Murdoch and Kevin Rudd. One participant recounted her surprise

in discovering after 20 minutes of stimulating lunchtime conversation that she was talking to a state governor.

This echoes classical democracy, in which citizens and leaders rubbed shoulders and argued in the public market place, with each treated as a political equal.

The venue too proved influential. During a Saturday plenary, participant Sam Mostyn expressed pleasure at seeing 1,000 Australians working together in a building usually reserved for representatives and officials. Members of the Creative stream, who often feel excluded from the big economic agendas, took particular pleasure at meeting in the government party room.

Indeed, the Summit revealed much about how Parliament House can function. With insufficient meeting rooms – conspicuously the two legislative chambers were not made available to organisers – stream meetings were scattered around the vast spaces of the building. Minister Tony Burke found himself chairing sessions in the Opposition party room.

'I didn't expect to be back here so quickly', he quipped.

The organisers quickly learned that committee room settings induce formal discussions, while open spaces and natural light elsewhere encourage more free-wheeling debate.

These conversations happened in full public view, with a media contingent approaching 300 journalists and production staff. Many sessions were broadcast live on ABC and Sky television.

This presented challenges for media about how to convey conversation as worthwhile for its own sake. One frustrated television crew approached an organiser about a Creative Australia break-out group – 'can't you get them to move around or something?' asked the producer. 'They're just sitting there talking.'

Indeed the Summit challenged traditional journalistic routines. Journalists are not usually in the room when the real arguments happen. But here they could see a deliberative process with conflict and consensus on full display. Some rose to the test, and captured superbly in reports the complexity of the discussion.

Others reverted to celebrity watching, preferring pictures to talk.[15]

Note, for example, how on-line capacity extends indefinitely the start and finish of a discussion. Perhaps in the future we will recall the Summit not as a Parliament House event, but as an early example of policy debate using Web 2.0 resources. The rise of social networking technologies will likely shape policy consultations in the future. Such an approach is less formal, more chaotic and less predictable than existing consultation mechanisms, but has the potential to create novel forms of collaboration.

There are already examples in action. New Zealand recently redrafted its *1958 Police Act* using a wiki approach, with web consultation followed by collaborative legislative drafting, much as a Wikipedia entry is written.[16] Several hundred people then

participated in the drafting process. Hundreds of people participated. Understanding and applying this technology in the policy process will be a key priority for the public sector. The lure of an endless electronic Summit beckons.

Outcomes

The Australia 2020 Summit was not designed to produce a consensus. This was inevitable – two days of discussion is barely sufficient to agree on major challenges and consider some interesting ideas. Moving to agreement would require more consideration and, often, significant additional evidence. Hence the Summit was planned as the starting point for a longer conversation.

The gathering produced hundreds of ideas on a vast array of topics. It also produced some unanticipated consensus. Further investment in education was mentioned in almost every discussion. The possibility of an Australian republic was listed only in passing among topics for the Governance stream, yet the applause of participants in the final plenary gave it unexpected national prominence.

Looking back over the discussions, now summarised and published, there is surprising agreement around a small number of key issues. These themes were repeated by numerous speakers in many different sessions. They reflect shared understandings of the policy challenges, and provide therefore some clues about the national path ahead. It is worth singling out six particularly significant areas in which Summiteers found themselves agreeing.

Climate change has moved from scientific argument to inescapable reality, as we face a common fate on a crowded planet. Climate change now frames almost every policy discussion. It will be the background consideration in every policy choice, the unstated context of all our lives.

The Summit suggested the climate change agenda will take two parallel forms – abatement and adaptation. From prevention where we can, to adaptation where we must, we have little choice but to change fundamental things about how we live, what we eat, where we live and how we interact with the world around us.

Federalism proved a key theme for Summiteers. In a surprising number of policy areas, participants urged a rethink of arrangements between national, state and local governments. There was a scepticism about federalism rarely heard in earlier public discussions, an impatience that is new. Summit participants wanted a sensible and consistent set of governmental responsibilities across Australia.

Thus there was strong expectation of a *single national market and national economy*. There was much talk of a single economic union, to be achieved by reviving the long abandoned agenda of national competition policy.

There were arguments for new forms of social service delivery. This was most forcefully expressed around the *health system*, with a strong sense that the current division between acute services and prevention is wrong. More broadly, the Summit

heard often the desire for more innovative, personalised, ways to make public services available.

A welcome development among Summit discussion was *optimism that change is possible in Indigenous Australia*. This is assisted by a rising generation of younger Indigenous leaders, and by resolution of unfinished business through the national apology to the stolen generation. Disadvantage remains a daily experience for many Indigenous Australians, yet a significant number of participants embraced the possibility of improved life chances for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders.

Finally, the Summit expressed a *strong wish for greater civic engagement*. Discussion noted that many Australians feel isolated thanks to dependence on cars and limited opportunities in suburbia for meaningful participation. There is a desire to create new communities, in part through new technology, to build more not-for-profit organisations, and to encourage creativity as a national trait.

Some described this as a list of issues for a prosperous nation, which would have been very different a decade earlier. In just 12 years, we'll know how well the Summit guessed our future. Participants wrote their aspirations for Australia on postcards. These were sealed in a time capsule that will remain in Parliament House, to be opened in 2020.

These are broad themes. But most of the discussion focused on ideas – hundreds and hundreds of ideas, some practical, some eccentric, all worth further thought:

- A volunteer gap-year program, linked to HECS, so community volunteers receive a subsequent discount on tertiary education

- Integrated child care and child support centres

- A single, national agency for approving major infrastructure projects

- A Prime Minister's Grand Challenge Prize for solving big national challenges of a global nature

- Building partnerships between industry, business and schools to create mentoring for success by top 100 companies

- Merit-based 2020 Scholarships in areas of national skill shortage

- All children to be taught a foreign language in schools so that by 2020 Australia is no longer the worst-ranked OECD country for second-language skills

- The creation of a Health Equalities Commission to drive reform direction in the Australian health system

- A lifetime participation account for every Australian, into which government and citizens can make payments for education, trading, parental leave and superannuation contributions

- 24 weeks of paid, universal parental leave
- A Green Tick, similar to the Heart Foundation Tick, to educate consumers about the environmental impact of products
- Options for Indigenous children to obtain high-quality schooling, including boarding schools, hostels, away-from-home foster families to stay with at weekends, mentors for support, private scholarships and community schooling
- A national poverty strategy and a National Disability Insurance Scheme
- An opt-out system for organ donation
- Investment in the north and north-west so Australia can become the 'food bowl of Asia'
- A national clean energy portfolio of flagship projects in areas of 'natural advantage' such as agriculture and renewable energy
- Climate proofing low-income households
- Competitive national broadband
- A National Preventative Health Agency to ensure a new national prevention effort is co-ordinated and evidence-based
- Recognition of Indigenous people in the constitution, along with a charter to protect all human rights
- The abolition of private donations to political campaigns
- Subsidises for museums, theatres and film festivals to make them available for free to school students
- A formal patronage system for the arts
- A labour-mobility initiative for the South-West Pacific, including East Timor, so Pacific residents can work in Australia on fair and equitable terms
- A regular report on the United States-Australia alliance, so the public can know what is happening within the relationship

Also raised were a number of ambitious technology projects, following the tradition of the Snowy Mountains scheme. These included a proposal to eradicate trachoma in Indigenous communities, development of a bionic eye, and large-scale carbon sequestration projects, including the recognition of farms as carbon sinks.

These ideas are many and varied. Yet underlying much of the discussion was an assumption about the future role of government. Government will not disappear – challenges such as adaptation to climate change require leadership only national government can provide. Yet many recommendations assume that by 2020 government will be less important in our lives. There is an expectation, even an enthusiasm, for greater self-reliance. This was manifest in a renewed interest in philanthropy and in support for not-for-profit organisations to tackle problems until recently considered the preserve of government. Summit participants imaged a future that is more private in focus and organisation.

The Australia 2020 Summit suggested a nation keen for simple and clear national economic rules. It indicted an expectation that public services should seamlessly draw together state and Commonwealth provision. It looked to citizens to play a more direct role in shaping policy choices. Less regulation, more empowering, seemed the take-home message for government.

Conclusions

So what was the historic impact of the 2020 Summit? As Chou En-lai may have said of the French Revolution, it's too soon to tell.[17]

The 399-page Final Report of proceedings demonstrates the scale of issues tackled by the Summit. It includes long lists of proposals, but also areas of disagreement. The Summit conversation is not complete. While some ideas, such as comprehensive review of taxation, have been adopted already, the Cabinet has yet to respond systematically to ideas set out by participants. The most important test of the Summit – the translation of ideas into action – is still a work in progress.

Will the government be drawn into new policy territory by suggestions outside the usual political agenda? The Summit saw the Prime Minister and his ministers participating throughout the event, listening and talking to a wide agenda of argument and aspiration. Officials too, heard the bigger conversation. At the suggestion of Terry Moran, Secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, senior public servants from relevant departments served as 2020 scribes, and were responsible for writing up the detailed report of proceedings.

The long-term significance of the Summit, though, may be the contribution to Australia's democratic processes. The event demonstrated considerable public appetite for involvement in policy discussions. It was noticeable in sessions that people who argued an overtly partisan line found themselves – at best – heard politely and then ignored. Party political views were judged inappropriate in a serious discussion about ideas. There are lessons here for our party system and the future of adversarial politics.

The Australia 2020 Summit provided a forum for engaged citizenship. It was an experience that exhilarated many who participated, but frustrated others who found old slogans and institutions no longer command much interest. It was the strength of ideas that mattered. The 10 streams allowed scope for new voices and uncomfortable proposals.

The health stream, for example, turned responsibility for health outcomes back on individuals. Summiteers asked why the public should pay the cost for those who ignore advice about health risks. It stressed education and prevention over acute services. This is a very different health agenda from routine arguments about hospital funding and medical salaries. It asks instead about moral choices and personal responsibilities.

This form of participation can deepen and broaden democracy. Yet summits and other consultation mechanisms will never displace the role of elected governments. Nor will the Australian Public Service, so skilfully founded by Robert Garran, be replaced by wiki-framed laws and private provision of services. There are important roles for parliaments and a continuing need for professional public agencies and committed non-partisan advisers.

The Australia 2020 Summit suggests a nation now questioning existing political institutions and moving, slowly but surely, toward new expectations of government. Whatever specific ideas are now adopted, whatever the scorecard of implementation, the significance of the Australia 2020 Summit was not content but form – a democratic innovation that may provide a tiny glimpse of a very different future.

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[1] Vice-Chancellor, University of Melbourne and Co-Convenor, the Australia 2020 Summit. For assistance with this lecture I am indebted to Dennis Glover and, for comments on the text and assistance with the accompanying PowerPoint, Shane Cahill, Jillian Constable, Margaret Gardner, Shane Huntington, Jane-Frances Kelly, Jasmina Joldic, Mike Mrdak, Donald Speagle, Meredith Sussex and Patrick Weller.

[2] Leslie Zines, 'Sir Robert Garran', lecture in the Department of the Senate Occasional Lecture Series, Parliament House on 9 September 2005.

[3] Entry on Garran, Sir Robert Randolph (1867 - 1957), by R.S. Parker, Australian Dictionary of Biography, http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A080638b.htm

[4] See Davis, G., P. Weller, E. Craswell and S. Eggins. 1999. 'What Drives Machinery of Government Change? Patterns in Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom, 1950-1997', *Public Administration*, 77,1:7-50; and .Davis, G. 1998. 'Australian Administrative Tradition', 'Australian Machinery of Government', in J.M. Shafritz (editor in chief), *International Encyclopedia of Public Policy and Administration*, 4 volumes, Colorado : Westview Press, 158-60, 1325-26.

[5] Patrick Weller, 'Schooled in the Art of the Possible', *The Australian*, 17 January 2007, http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,20867,21070571-7583,00.html

[6] Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, media conference, 3 February 2008, http://www.pm.gov.au/media/Interview/2008/interview_0055.cfm

[7] See Biancamaria Fontana's introduction to Constant, B. 1988, *Political Writings*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

[8] J.S. Mill, *On Liberty*, 1859. To quote Mill, 'There is a limit to the legitimate interference of collective opinion with individual independence; and to find that limit, and maintain it against encroachment, is as indispensable to a good condition of human affairs as protection against political despotism'. (p. 7)

[9] Arendt, H 1965, *On Revolution*, Penguin: 218.

[10] See, for instance, Bishop, P and Davis, G 2002, 'Mapping public participation in policy choices', *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 61 (1): 14-29, March 2002; Althaus, C, Bridgeman, P and Davis, G 2007, *The Australian Policy Handbook*, Fourth Edition, Allen and Unwin, Sydney: chapter 7.

[11] After a series of exploratory reports during the early 1990s, the OECD subsequently published an array of consultation manuals to assist government. Among the most recent is a guide to the challenges of on-line citizen engagement. See http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/9/11/35176328.pdf

[12] Althaus, Bridgeman and Davis 2007, *The Australian Policy Handbook*, Fourth Edition: 106-107.

[13] See 'AMA anger over 2020 snub', http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2008/03/31/2203449.htm

[14] The Final Report of the Summit was delivered to government on 31 May 2008. It can be found at http://australia2020.gov.au/final_report/index.cfm

[15] As one senior official noted about media coverage of the Summit: '… the summit experience also tells us much about what drives and sells our media focus and what this means for our policy development and participatory democracy. We had very strong media coverage in the lead up to the summit - especially focussed on invitees and the topics to be covered etc. The coverage during the event was high … but especially focussed on the personalities and stars at the event. However, post the summit there has been relatively little analysis and comment of the ideas and outcomes and the way in which the summit built new enthusiasm for the public debate among participants. To many in the mainstream media the game has appeared to move on. … The question is whether the media's largely reactive approach to initiatives and ideas brought forward by government will in the end limit the ability to capture the public attention and the aim for an on-going debate.'

[16] See http://wiki.policeact.govt.nz/. With thanks to Martin Stewart-Weeks for drawing attention to this example.

[17] Assuming he really said so to President Nixon – or Henry Kissinger, depending which source is quoted – when the American leadership visited China in 1972. A summary of the various versions can be found at http://muse.tau.ac.il/maslool/boidem/118chou.html, a website with the helpful title 'Probably not totally apocryphal'.