

Big ideas and new ways forward

Bryan Gaensler



As one of 1000 Australians who attended the 2020 Summit earlier this year, I recognised the unique opportunity we had to make a difference. In the Productivity discussion group, three clear themes emerged: national productivity can be maximised by equipping Australians through world-class education and training, by deploying our human capital efficiently and fairly, and by connecting Australians through new collaboration and synergies. While inevitably there were too many agendas and too little time to evaluate and synthesise them, the Summit was an amazing, ambitious and inspiring experience.

Living under a system of representative democracy can be a frustrating experience for its citizens. The media and the local community are awash with ideas on how to do things better, but politicians inevitably have their own agendas and often don't seem to listen.

So when Kevin Rudd announced a plan for an 'Australia 2020' Summit, at which Australians would come together to identify and find solutions for the nation's long-term challenges, the electorate expressed both cynicism and excitement.

Being one of those people who often makes pronouncements beginning with, 'Now if I were running the country ...', I welcomed the opportunity to put my name forward for the Summit, and to see whether my ideas might have any traction. The nomination form was simple and succinct: a brief listing of qualifications and experience,



and 100 words on why one wanted to participate. I filled out the form, briefly flagged the issues I wanted to raise, and sent in my nomination. At the end of March, the letter arrived from the Prime Minister — I had been selected as a delegate, and had been asked to participate in the stream entitled 'The Productivity Agenda — Education, Skills and Innovation'.

And so, on the weekend of 19–20 April, 2008, I was one of 1000 Australians who converged on Parliament House in Canberra, all realising that we had a unique opportunity to make a difference.

Thinking caps on

The schedule was hectic: 13 hours of formal sessions spread over a day and a half, cycling between three formats: plenary sessions at the start and end of both days, to set the scene and to engender a feeling of community among the participants; stream sessions, in which we split up into 10 groups of 100 and mapped out the overall issues to be tackled; and discussion groups, in which our stream was split up further into four groups of 25 (I was put into the discussion group on 'Science/Innovation/Digital') in which we nussed out the specifics of ideas and implementations using whiteboards and butchers' paper.

All sessions were transcribed; most were filmed. We were cautioned that all of this would be very much on the record.

The heavy media focus on the event created intense pressure to deliver useful outcomes. But across all the streams, the mandate sometimes



seemed too broad given the limited time available. For example, my stream, Productivity, needed to consider early childhood education, skilled migration, high-speed broadband, high school curricula, tax incentives for private sector R&D, university research funding and workforce participation, along with dozens of other important topics.

What eventually emerged from the discussions on Productivity were three clear themes: national productivity can be maximised by *equipping* Australians through world-class education and training, by *deploying* our human capital efficiently and fairly, and by *connecting* Australians through new collaboration and synergies. While on their own these concepts might seem like mere sound bites, they proved a powerful framework for tying together complex issues and for identifying the best way forward.

A level playing field, or lost opportunities?

Egalitarian principles underpinned the Summit. Billionaires and school teachers sat side-by-side during the meal breaks, eating their boxed lunches. The glossy handbook merely listed the participants and their home states, without any titles, affiliations or biographical sketches.



While this added to the feeling of camaraderie, it meant that unless the person holding the floor happened to be a ‘big’ name like Lachlan Murdoch or Hugh Jackman, it was impossible to determine whether a speaker spoke with authority on their subject matter, or what their underlying agenda might be. The discussion that ensued as we all tried to clarify the subtext or implications of various pronouncements exhausted much of the limited time we had for real debate.

What’s more, it quickly became apparent that the assembled expertise of the participants had some serious gaps. At one point during the discussion, there was broad consensus that a national broadband system should be a top priority for Australia in the next 5–10 years. As we tried to formulate a concrete recommendation to pass on to our session chairs, we wrestled with the issues of how fast this network should be, and how much it might cost. Amazingly, there seemed to be nobody in our stream who had any experience in

telecommunications, and who might be able to give our ideas even the crudest reality check. This and other similar incidents indicated that the selection of participants would have benefited from greater focus on the overall balance of knowledge, skill and experience, such as would occur, for example, on a company board or the list of plenary speakers at a major professional convention.

From my own perspective, I saw the Productivity stream as an opportunity to highlight the importance of basic research and

From my own perspective, I saw the Productivity stream as an opportunity to highlight the importance of basic research and development, and to argue that our universities and national research facilities need to be funded at (or beyond) OECD levels.

development, and to argue that our universities and national research facilities need to be funded at (or beyond) OECD levels. I presumed that my stream would be full of

other scientists and researchers who would want to make a similar case. However, I soon began to wonder if I was the only active scientist among the 100 participants in my stream; other university academics in attendance were there for their work in areas such as industrial relations or childhood education.

Were there other people at the Summit with whom I could develop my ideas, or who could perhaps join me in a small bloc to give more force to these issues? I don’t know. Other than asking around during the short lunch and tea breaks, or listening out for like-minded speakers during the discussion sessions, there was no way to find out what resources and expertise were on offer.¹ There was no mechanism for developing or consolidating ideas, except to throw them out into the overall discussion, and to see if they resonated with others. Some of what ended up in the final report was a reflection of who shouted the loudest or who repeated themselves most often.

Sitting among my fellow delegates, I became convinced that the pieces of something wonderful had, for one

unique weekend, been all brought together in the same room. However, I couldn’t shake the sense that we were lacking the chart which showed how to put it all together.

Truly world-changing ideas might have come from interaction and cross-fertilisation that never had the chance to happen.

The outcomes and the aftermath

More than six months after the Summit's conclusion, I am still trying to sort out my views on the event and its outcomes.

On the one hand, I came away exhilarated and inspired by the many truly incredible people whom I had a chance to meet. I felt the strong sense of responsibility that came from being asked by the Government to come up with big ideas and new ways forward. And I will always remember the Summit as something that very much reminded me what it means to be Australian — there was a sense of national pride that was, for once, not derived from watching a medal ceremony at the Olympics, but from being part of a national corroboree, a coming together of minds aimed at bettering our country.

On the other hand, if I look beyond the positive personal experiences that I took away and instead focus on outcomes, things are not so clear. I strongly believe that the issues we dealt with in the Productivity stream were of paramount importance to Australia's future success and prosperity. However, I wonder whether our group genuinely met the Prime Minister's charge to come up with bold new visions in this area.

Australia should aim, by 2020, to develop a bionic eye. The Governance stream advocated an ambitious overhaul of the entire federal system. And the stream on Regional & International Security envisaged a comprehensive national strategy for literacy in Asian languages and culture, which could form a basis for renewed global engagement in trade, security and culture. There were also many simple but elegant ideas put

I will always remember the Summit as something that very much reminded me what it means to be Australian — there was a sense of national pride that was, for once, not derived from watching a medal ceremony at the Olympics, but from being part of a national corroboree, a coming together of minds aimed at bettering our country.

What Kevin Rudd asked each stream to come up with were three 'Big Ideas' (one of which should be at minimal cost). In response, the Health stream proposed a JFK-like goal that

forward, such as a recommendation that organ donation become an 'opt out', rather than 'opt in' program.

My own stream, Productivity, was a mixed bag. The final report² generally suffered from 'ideas creep', in that we ended up highlighting 22 big ideas, rather than just the three we were asked for. In my opinion, some of the most important and innovative recommendations were:

- **Thinking big:** Accelerate Australian innovation by undertaking ambitious 'mega-projects' and establishing associated post-graduate schools in excellence.
- **Learning for life account:** Develop lifetime participation accounts for every Australian into which the Government and others can make payments for education,



training, parental leave, and superannuation contributions.

- **Golden gurus:** Engage retired people acting as mentors in all aspects of economic and social life.

However, these clear policy proposals had to share top billing with other recommendations: that we ‘celebrate teaching’, ‘foster open approaches to access and dissemination of knowledge’ and ‘empower employees by disseminating information about employment experience’. These are all laudable and worthwhile goals, but I am not sure they are the key steps needed to fundamentally transform Australia for the better.

Overall, the Summit was an amazing, ambitious and inspiring experience, and I certainly hope that such events are attempted again in the future. However, for this first Summit, there were too many agendas in the room, and not enough time to evaluate and synthesise them into a coherent vision.



of the Summit experience will be judged by whether bold ideas become successful policy in the years to come. ■

ENDNOTES

- ¹ An online collaborative wiki had been set up the week before the Summit, which was intended to allow participants in each stream to begin setting out and discussing the issues in advance.

- ² The final report for the Summit is available on-line at http://www.australia2020.gov.au/final_report/index.cfm

Bryan Gaensler

Professor Bryan Gaensler is an astronomer and ARC Federation Fellow in the School of Physics at The University of Sydney.
Email: bgaensler@usyd.edu.au

Any long-term conclusions as to the Summit outcomes will ultimately develop a political dimension: by the end of the year, the Government will formally respond to the Summit report, and will be free to cherry pick whichever ideas it sees as most appropriate to adopt.

Any long-term conclusions as to the Summit outcomes will ultimately develop a political dimension: by the end of the year, the Government will formally respond to the Summit report, and will be free to cherry pick whichever ideas it sees as most appropriate to adopt. The true value

However, the site only became fully active a few days before the Summit started, and there was limited input from the chairs of the streams. Thus the pre-summit conversation never really got started.