

Australia 2020 - A Challenge to Substantive Symbolism and Action

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I hoped Australia 2020 would articulate a vision of a future attractive, approachable and broad enough to inspire our nation to live and work towards building a better world. What an opportunity to make a difference! And what a shame not to use it well.

My nomination proposed that we foster a culture shaped by the stories and experiences of poor and marginalized peoples. I suggested that this type of human story might encourage Australians to wake up to the consequences our anxieties, appetites and expectations visit on the rest of the world, and, so, motivate us to reduce our ecological footprints and celebrate living simply. I suggested that listening attentively to people we find threatening might inspire us to respect our differences and devise non-combative responses to conflict. I was encouraged, then, when delegates were invited to prepare for the summit by reflecting on how we had changed our minds about something of vital importance. Just the type of reflection likely to pave the way for cultural change.

It was a sobering/inspiring weekend. The extent to which change is needed, our fraught histories and complex challenges were sobering. The vision, opportunity and commitment to change were inspiring. The overwhelming majority of participants, government and opposition MP's longed to reshape Australia into a good and safe country for all Australians. People spoke of social, ecological and individual well-being rather than individual wealth. Most of us wanted to be a good international citizen, using our position to influence more powerful nations and corporations and build partnerships with and advocate for more vulnerable peoples. We recognized that this was not just the responsibility of governments - all Australians (individuals, families, communities, schools, businesses etc) are involved.

Dissident voices were heard. Both domestically and internationally there were those determined to defend and increase the wealth and power of individuals, companies and countries that were already powerful. Absurdly, there were those who thought Australia could do both at once: reduce our ecological footprints by producing and consuming more; alleviate poverty and build peace through military and diplomatic efforts to 'secure the interests' of the most privileged. As once summiteer put it: 'They want us to eat more and loose weight!'

I found the symbolism of indigenous women, Matilda House and Sana Nakata, welcoming us to country and conversation deeply moving. Sana Nakata: "I grew up between two Australias, one belonged to my father, the other to my mother. One was the history of dispossession, the other was the history of the dispossessor; one a Torres Strait Islander history, the other a white settler history. For too long the multiple histories of Australia. have had to fight it out .and that has never made any sense to me." Sana challenged us to re-energise our commitment to all Australia's peoples and "imagine with confidence that change is possible."

Sadly, there were some people who did not seem to get the point. One member of a plenary panel implicitly denied the culture and custodianship of Australia's first nations, describing the story of white settlement as the only story, a story of courage and triumph in taming a 'savage country', a story with no shadow side. This was the only time that audible disapproval came from the floor. I suspect it was involuntary. I growled and ground my teeth myself. Not something I make a habit of. Only later did I realize that, having lived overseas for twenty-five years, this man had not participated in our national conversation or heard the stories that stretched our imaginations to feel the pain of the other side of the frontier. Tears flowed when two other non-indigenous panelists named the national apology as their defining moments. Tanya Pilbersek described watching members of the stolen generation bent, heads in hands, shoulders racked by sobs, slowly straighten as the apology eased the weight of the past. And Tanya knew that these words had power to heal. Australian-born Samah Hadid was also invited to the apology, "I sat in the great hall behind the stolen generation, just knowing that I was part of a nation-building exercise. For the first time, I felt really Australian too. Never underestimate the importance of symbolism in this country!"

My stream was "The future of Australia in a rapidly changing region and world." There were some people keen to increase Asian (Indian, Indonesian, Chinese, Japanese) language literacy in Australia. Everyone agreed that was OK and off they went to get creative ideas flowing. Unsurprisingly, these folk were either business-people involved with China or India, or academics in Asian Studies Departments of Universities.

Others advocated a closer more respectful relationship with Pacific Island nations, reframing our relationship one of fraternity rather than benevolent but self-preoccupied concern. Our neighbours would not be compelled to settle for receiving Australian charity but would be welcome to come and work here, study here, and build regional cooperation. They called that "A Rights Based Approach to Labor Migration" - not contentious. Lots of good ideas.

But I joined the group on security - and that was pure frustration. There were many of us who argued that Australian security could not be separated from global equity and security (we needed to build a fairer and safer world for everyone, war would not do it, and malaria, climate change, etc were major threats). We wanted to understand prosperity in terms of sufficiency rather than excess, and respectful relationships rather than dominance. It was exciting to hear a public psychologist, Kate Barrelle, rephrase several of my proposals with a clarity that eluded me. She explained how deploying hard power enforces compliance by 'putting a lid on' resistance. Resentment wells up beneath this lid creating a 'pressure-cooker.' Increasing military or economic force increases the pressure which erupts in seemingly random spurts of violence until, when something gives, widespread violence explodes. Barrelle proposed that we promote a form of ethical theory and practice based on empathy and self-critical reflection in order to encourage individuals and institutions to base decisions on the likely social and ecological consequences of their actions.

Others had different ambitions and proposed different approaches. They argued that tough diplomacy and military interventions were necessary to 'secure Australia's interests.' Although they never explicitly stated what Australia's interests were, they seemed to be determined to defend and

increase the wealth and power of already powerful individuals, companies and countries. End result: we got nowhere and the final statement spoke of pandemics, terrorism, people-smuggling and organised crime - things we had mentioned only to say they were not our prime concerns. While I am disappointed that we did not arrive where I would have liked us to, I can also celebrate how far we moved the discussion from where it began. We didn't dream big about justice during this part of the summit, but at least we tempered some dreams heading in the opposite direction.

More positively, most other parts of the summit identified climate change and inequality as Australia's overarching moral, intellectual and technological challenges. Many self-evidently good ideas were audaciously simple. Few were genuinely new. But that dimmed neither the joy nor, I believe, the importance of putting good old ideas firmly back on the table: truly public housing and public transport, public health promotion and illness prevention, universal disability insurance to meet needs without resorting to litigation, equity in health care and education. Delighted laughter accompanied Tim Costello's bold reintroduction things both sides of politics had excluded from public debate, all under the guise of low or negligible cost proposals. Tim Fisher outlined proposals for rural Australia with enthusiasm he could not contain. He looked like a small boy jumping out of his skin, physically overwhelmed by joy. Cumulatively, these and other proposals declared a counter-cultural economics possible and viable. Public services do not have to profit private business. We are not primarily motivated by self interest. We can take less from those weaker than us, and we can give more than we have to. We can do much better than we have done. We can be better than we have been. What will restore high ideals to our national conversation.

That does not mean that we all agreed on how to get there. While most streams were careful not to confuse ecological, social and individual well-being with material wealth, the economists focused on increasing Australia's GDP and keeping inflation low. I met a woman passionately committed to reducing poverty in Australia and passionately convinced that reducing the minimum wage and increasing executive salaries was the only way to do it. Intriguingly, she sought inspiration and guidance from Augustine, a Church Father whose writings her husband's seven figure income left her free to read.

"Where there is no vision the people perish." Kevin Rudd's opening address reminded delegates that life-giving ideas are born of hope and generate new possibilities – an idea as old as the prophetic and wisdom traditions of the Hebrew Bible. Those of us who recognised the biblical allusion heard Rudd say and ask much more: Do our visions of the future compare with biblical visions of Shalom? Are our ethics those of Jubilee? The Summit is over but the national conversation will continue. We are all part of this conversation. To participate constructively, people of faith must speak in language and of dreams that touch the heart and soul of our nation. We must venture beyond the rather narrow sphere in which 'religious expertise' is most often sought into areas that sorely need inspired vision and prophetic critique but our criticisms will be ridiculed and our insights and motives impugned. Walter Brueggemann describes as the church's vocation as catching a glimpse of how God has said the world shall be but is not yet, articulating that vision for our own generation, and living in ways that anticipate it and breathe it to life. Are we ready for the task?

Six suggestions I've not heard mentioned by the media—or anybody else:

1. **Promote ethical theory and practice** throughout government, civil society, schools and communities, encouraging people and institutions to base decisions on the social and ecological consequences of our personal and collective actions have for other people and the environment. Require government procurements and national exports to consider the social and ecological consequences of the way purchased goods are produced and exports are used. (This is Kate Barrelle's suggestion, mentioned above).
2. **Promote counter-cultural economics.** Conventionally, although both partners benefit from most individual business transactions, the cumulative effect of millions of transactions each weighted slightly in favour of the stronger partner draws resources from the poor to the rich. Change the culture of business and investment to reverse this bias and intentionally favour weaker groups. Both partners will still benefit from each individual transaction, but the cumulative effect of millions of transactions will promote equity and justice.
3. **Build the future with Australia's Future and superannuation funds** by combining socially responsible investment criteria with counter-cultural economics. Ensure any attempts to secure our future national and individual financial prosperity do not come at the cost of our well-being by undermining social cohesion and equity or by privatising public infrastructure and institutions.
4. **Balance skills migration:** Cap the number of doctors, nurses etc permitted to immigrate from a low income country to the number of Australian-trained doctors of comparable seniority working in that country.
5. **Non-violent defence.** Offer training in non-violent conflict resolution, peace-building, and restorative justice to Defence Force personnel. Recognize that this requires even more courage, risk and discernment than traditional warfare.
6. **Cultural Apprenticeships.** Offer young Australians the opportunity to live with poor communities in low income countries for two years in order to share the life of the people, learn language and culture and, as far as is possible, learn to see the world from their perspective. This could only happen on the condition that poor communities welcome this initiative and are appropriately compensated for their hospitality. Cultural apprentices should understand that their role involves learning, not teaching, should respect local cultures and customs, and be careful not to undermine local livelihoods, employment opportunities or leadership structures. Waive HECS debts for tertiary graduates and provide comparable benefits for trades-people and other participants.

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