

## **'A view on the 20:20 Summit'**

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**<http://www.unisa.edu.au/hawkeinstitute/cwl/default.asp>**

Arriving back in Adelaide, picking up the newspapers and listening to talkback radio about the 20:20 Summit, made me wonder if I had been at the event I was hearing cynically dismissed by so much of the media. For all that only 1000 Australians could be there, and for all the imperfect processes of managing a huge conversation, I found the Summit an inspiring and creative event. I felt like this kind of conversation, in a big room with a big group around a big agenda and holding a long time line in view, is what we need more of – and one that many politicians would run a million miles from.

The Prime Minister clearly did not.

Sure, the Summit conversations will not change Australia overnight and it will be politically managed, but it was exciting to be - for the first time in my 25 years of public life - at a significant national event with more women than men in the room (that was not a women's conference), where Indigenous issues made up a big part of conversation in every stream, with one stream entirely devoted to these issues and probably at least 100 Indigenous Australians in the larger Summit population, and where so many young people seemed to be everywhere, oozing talent.

And it felt good to be part of a talk about the future, where public discussion of ideas and a long term view was not only welcome, but *required*.

It was fantastic to see a different crowd in residence on the Hill even if only for two days: a noisy, motley mob, who ate unpretentious food, and milled about in continuously reforming little lunch and smoko groups.

I had morning tea with a Buddhist monk and the head of Child Protection in the Northern Territory simultaneously. I had a very stimulating conversation with Bob Katter about Indigenous issues. I walked up the hill to the summit with a farmer from Victoria and I walked away from it in the company of a heart specialist from Brisbane. I caught my car to the airport with a careers counsellor from a Queensland farming organization, and I flew home next to a church leader. I got to ask Mike Rann what social inclusion really meant. It was that kind of mixed up show, and given that the event was dripping with goodwill, conversations were lively and to the point, and they took us out of our comfort zones. I spent very little of the time with anyone I knew.

The crowd looked a bit like a group I might see at the parents evening at my local school, or in my supermarket: all ages, and all styles of dress and look. (That said, I live in Parkside, not Port Adelaide). But this group were long way from the suited up mob who usually clip-clop those parliamentary corridors.

For me, the event pulled oxygen into Canberra – perhaps ever so briefly, and perhaps with limited long term effect – but the effort was important: a citizen's conversation about our country, what it faces and what it needs to be talking about and doing.

The Summit saw serious discussion on issues that lifted our sights in several ways:

- ⌚ from medium term concerns to larger, long term issues - like how we should be governed, how we need to rethink local, state and federal relations to manage health, education and water, what we can do to deal with inequality, and how climate issues are going to reshape how we live;
- ⌚ and away from a narrow talk about the economy to talk about larger social aspirations – a decent and functioning society *and* a decent economy.

I was part of the stream titled ‘Strengthening communities, supporting families and social inclusion’. It was led by Tanya Plibersek and Tim Costello. These two people are fine leaders and I know it sounds schmalzy, but I felt lucky to be around them, to see their passionate leadership and their complete absence of performance: they wanted to get on with things, and they wanted us to also, and they weren’t calculating political appearances, press present or not.

We saw Julia Gillard, Jenny Macklin, Tanya Plibersek, Penny Wong, Maxine McKew and Nicola Roxon on the podium and in the groups. They are an impressive group of relatively young leaders in this new government and they look a long way from the grey-faced, past-their-prime, factionally-hobbled usual suspects. They were funny, smart and young. And that’s just (some of) the women who are leaders in the new government. They are impressive.

There were those who arrived in the ‘Strengthening communities’ stream with multiple copies of their single idea and proceeded to treat the event like a Labor/Liberal Party conference caucus. And there were those who turned sour when their idea or cause did not end up in lights. But most people did not act like this. Most actively engaged in lively discussion – around themes like violence, children, homelessness, the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous life expectancy, preventative health, and the need for community services that are properly funded and community members who actually link up. Those looking for detailed responses to complex problems like the sexual abuse of children would have been – and were – disappointed: this was not going to happen at a meeting of 1000 people dealing with such a broad canvass.

I didn’t see most of my ideas make it in the hastily drawn together summit communiqué – but there were many good ones there, including a few that had not had much (or any) discussion in any group I was part of. The final Summit documentation is yet to appear and it will probably be long.

I think I was most stimulated by ideas from other streams.

It was good to see the productivity group give children’s development, and parent and children’s centres a big tick, and to recognise that public policy needs to recognise and support people moving through jobs, education, and household changes. However, education is about more than productivity and I felt there were some important people with Big Ideas missing from this discussion especially those with expertise around work – people like David Peetz, John Buchanan and Sara Charlesworth.

I thought the health group came up with some very important ideas focussing on prevention, supporting a ban on marketing of junk food to children, simple things like more easily recognised healthy food and better workplace-based health programs.

The future of the economy group focussed on government and how to get it functioning better. This was one of probably the most widespread ‘ah-ha’ realisations of the summit – that our current forms of government are failing us in every area of significant public policy: health, education, climate. This was a Big Idea that most wanted to see grow legs - along with the endorsement by

acclamation for a republic, for closing the health gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, and for a new approach to climate change, including through new initiatives around building sustainable cities and transforming the ecological footprint of the built environment, down to micro strategies like personal carbon footprint tools. All do-able in a rich country like ours.

There were of course many differences: perhaps most ventilated in the post-Summit media in relation to Indigenous issues. Does any sane, reasonably well-informed Australian really think the key issue in Indigenous policy is deciding between ‘symbolic’ gestures (like a treaty or constitutional amendment) and practical measures to deal with child abuse, health and housing? Yet that is what the media wanted us to buy as the main issue here. Given how the Prime Minister’s ‘Sorry’ has hit home, and how important most people think it is to get social policy right for Indigenous Australians, we need to do both. And we need to make them both a priority after the lost years of the last decade.

In the *Strengthening Communities* stream, the crunching of many individual ambitions into a single statement meant many individual perspectives took a bruising, as they did too when we had to choose top ideas through a wacky voting system that meant many good ideas with lots of support hit the cutting room floor. However, the ideas of a national development index, with an annual progress measure and policies to shift it, had wide support, as did more investment in community infrastructure, especially for early childhood education and care, as well as a greater effort to reduce violence in our communities and an hypothecated tax on house purchases to fund public housing and end homelessness. The idea of social support services being delivered through community hubs had wide support, as did the banks’ offer of micro-finance for low income earners. There was also support for a national disability insurance scheme and paid parental leave.

Many of the summit’s Big Ideas are ideas that bear Rudd Government fingerprints: they are already out there. But they will require wide public support to be delivered. The billions of dollars needed to properly renovate early childhood education and care or provide decent paid parental leave will require political courage and public support. They will require a multi-term plan. The Summit created momentum for them, and I hope they help extend the horizon and creativity of policy-making in the years ahead, and give momentum to ideas whose time has well and truly come.

It was a momentum-creating event, and I hope it runs a few of the cynics over as it unfolds.

## My Summit Ideas

Just for the record, my ideas for the summit were all about how to make work 'work' better for Australian communities, for social inclusion and for equality. I had four suggestions which I put out on 9<sup>th</sup> April 2008:

1. **Share the work around:** deal with the twin evils of overwork and underwork (and growing inequality between the two) by sharing the work around by capping long hours at the European standard of 48 a week (including overtime). Give tax breaks to companies that introduce initiatives that reduce working hours. **Pay for overtime:** stop unpaid overtime.
2. **Improve leave arrangements**, and support workers who combine work with care, by:
  - a. granting a paid holiday and paid sick leave to all, including casuals, now 26 per cent of workers
  - b. introduce a government funded minimum period of 14 weeks paid maternity leave at minimum wage with top up to usual earnings through bargaining (only a century late!) plus 3 weeks paid paternity leave (on a 'use it or lose it' basis);
  - c. allowing workers to set up time banks, which they control, where they can bank all forms of leave and time to give them more control over working time (facilitating their care, education and life interests), as well as the opportunity to negotiate changes in the hours and place of work.
3. **Improve quality, accessible, affordable care options** by:
  - a. Providing two years free early childhood education and care (of around 18 hours a week) to all children 3-5 years, especially Indigenous children.
  - b. Increasing social networks through services for children under 3 (and their parents) through integrated 'one stop shops' of childcare, health and community service, co-located with schools.
4. **Build better communities** by better integrating housing, jobs, education, community services, transport and care services, in new developments which include quotas for affordable housing.