

Why Rudd's 2020 Summit Missed the Mark

When I first heard that a summit was being planned I felt that it could be good news – a sign, perhaps, of new options for Australia after the long and depressing Howard years.

How wrong can you be?

When I looked at the summit outline two things were immediately apparent. First, there was the list of ten conventional categories clearly reflecting the bureaucratic origins of the exercise. Second, there was nothing original – such as any attention futures concepts, methods and capability. As a result my initial hopes for the summit nose-dived right away. Far from being ready to put my name forward, I realised that there was really no point. And so it proved.

When the weekend of the summit arrived, and like others perhaps who'd considered applying, I felt a certain sense of disappointment at NOT being there. Perhaps I'd been mistaken. Perhaps some chance meeting might have opened doors, aired new ideas. Yet when the early reports came in I knew that my initial decision was correct.

Clearly much was attempted in minimal time. Despite the presence of an army of facilitators there was no way that these multi-themed groups would ever reach a genuine consensus or produce a coherent set of proposals. As time went by stories emerged about how some voices had been extinguished while those of the powerful found expression in the final statements. Suggestions of young delegates, for example, regarding the need for more serious climate change responses, were simply thrown out.

On balance one has to say that it's probably 'a good thing' that the summit was held. It created a certain amount of publicity and was a PR success for the new government. Rudd could claim to have listened to a sample of Australia's 'brightest and best' without, as many have observed, being committed to doing anything at all about their suggestions.

In the run-up to the summit Rudd was quoted as saying that he was interested in finding a few truly innovative new ideas that he could run with. If that was indeed the case (and some cynics have questioned this) then I have to say that he went about it in a very strange way. If you really want new ideas, is it reasonable to expect bureaucrats to be in charge of the process? Do you draw so heavily on celebrities and the representatives of mainstream Australia? Or do you look in those out-of-the-way places where originality, new ideas, creative possibilities emerge? I'd have thought that a greater focus on the latter would have been more productive.

One stream of work where these attributes exist can be found under headings such as futures studies, strategic foresight and social foresight. [1] As one who has been active in these areas for some years I found these omissions from the agenda of the summit unsurprising. It is unfortunately characteristic of government, bureaucracy and big business. For the summit to be set up in the way it was meant that, right from the start, there was little or no chance for the contributions of those who've arguably thought longest and hardest about the futures confronting Australia to be recognised

or heard. I'm not bitter about this – it's the way things are. Still, it remains a lost opportunity.

The 2020 summit followed the general pattern established by M. Roux's Australia Davos Connection (ADC) in which annual meetings are convened that attempt to convey a gloss of concern about many aspects of 'the future' while actively marginalising work that deals in depth with these questions. 'The future of X' and 'the future of Y' can certainly be interesting and productive if you happen to live and work in world x or world y. But it is well known that extrapolative approaches of this kind, and especially those that begin from conventional taken-for-granted assumptions, are really quite unhelpful, serving mainly to 'spin the wheels'. They're about the appearance of addressing change, not the reality of so doing. They're not set up to work with complex pictures of the near-term future or come to grips with how these interact with the here-and-now in various subtle and even invisible ways. (In fact suggestions put forward to ADC for an elective stream dealing with the 'how to' of futures enquiry were vigorously rebuffed.)

Yet there is a straightforward way to cut through this complexity. It hinges on the understanding of how foresight works for all normally equipped human beings in everyday life. Once we are clear about this it is not difficult to see how this in-built capacity to deal with the 'not here' and the 'not yet' can be enhanced and applied not only to organisations for strategic planning purposes but also to societies as a whole. [2] So the most singular failure of these stereotypical so-called 'summits' is that the powerful role of foresight at a range of levels is never on the agenda.

There's another dimension to the failure of this approach and format. While the term 'summit' clearly makes a symbolic claim to embody a 'high-level' approach, this is not in fact the case. I am quite serious when I suggest that the term 'yesterday's foothills' would be more accurate. The pattern established over several of these events is banal in many respects and represents a view of 'the future' for those who really don't want to think about it very much at all. So what substantive elements are missing? There are several. First, such events fail to honestly confront the evidence about how the entire global system is responding to what the earth scientists call 'human forcing'. What this means is that human activities over time have pushed the system beyond what has been normal over several hundred thousand years. So dramatic are the changes that have already been wrought that the term 'Anthropocene' has been proposed to describe them. While complex in some respects, the essentials are quite straightforward and amount to a kind of 'background story' – what I call 'the story that connects' – which provides the framework for all human activity. [3] Ignoring this is not only unwise it is actually stupid because effective responses are thereby blocked while the ever mounting costs are deferred and displaced into the near-term future.

Second, those who design these events do not understand the ramifications of the rise of technoscience with its cascading social, economic, environmental and other consequences. While there's lots of happy talk about 'prosperity' and 'innovation' neither government nor business recognise the subversive aspects of technoscience – the way it has already 'hollowed out' much of the substance of social life, its progressive overturning of thousands of years of accumulated cultural value, its insolent invasion of so much of what it means to be human. Third, no attention

whatsoever is paid to what can only be called profound defects in the Western Industrial worldview that become more baroque and out-of-step with reality with each passing year. Despite ample evidence to the contrary, human beings are NOT masters / mistresses of nature; the economy IS what someone once called a ‘fully owned subsidiary of the ecology’ and any continuation of the standard model of economic growth is NOT in the best interests of anyone, despite vast amounts of heavy mythologising to the contrary.

By failing to pay attention to such powerfully dynamic underlying concerns, and by ignoring the advanced futures approaches that do pay them close attention, it becomes clear why these so-called ‘summits’ amount to much less than one might expect. As noted, the 2020 event held in Canberra April 2008 began unpromisingly and then fizzled out into claim and counter claim among those who were present, especially those whose contributions had been weeded out. But the implications are far wider.

Democratically elected governments in particular, do, after all, have a very serious problem. Whether it is fully conscious of the fact or not (and it is still mostly ‘not’) the world is currently heading into an abyss where the favourable global conditions that permitted the rise of humanity are slowly and irrevocably changing for the worse. In the kind of forward view to which I have been alluding we are, to change the metaphor, looking at the stirrings of a ‘perfect storm’ which at minimum is comprised of: climate change, regional environmental collapse, peak oil, economic crises and continued strife between different worldviews. [4] In this context the kinds of ‘new ideas’ being aired at these events are grounded in illusions of smooth continuity and are therefore, in many respects, counter productive. The pursuit of ‘clean coal technology’, for example, is a first class oxymoron, as is that of ‘green nuclear power’.

Questioning the nature of the worldview and economic system that maintains such beliefs in place remains impossible for any government or business employee wishing to maintain their job. Since the universities have deserted the field to embrace the current rush to market it is left to those who remain ‘on the margins’ to do so. That is, the very people who seldom attend high-end conferences. So we can expect more of these diversions as the current holders of financial and executive power further exert their efforts to maintain their position within shrinking arenas of freedom and choice. The Australian newspaper’s journalistically smart but civilisationally disastrous monthly *Wish* magazine is but one small aspect of a vast merchandising industry that we could well do without. [5] Yet cultural and commercial factors of the kind that foster collective blindness and impede effective action unfortunately remain unthinkable at these events.

In order to have the slightest chance of dealing with the ‘heavy weather’ that is coming our way, democratic governments and corporations alike need to relinquish the *modus operandi* adopted by the Bush administration as hurricane Katrina bore down on New Orleans. As putative ‘leaders’ they absolutely require the clarity that comes from intelligent forward views, from rigorous and disciplined futures thinking. They need to come clean about present day dysfunctions. As global limits begin to bite, and corrective actions become unavoidable, they will also need the active support of broadly informed populations – those who are currently still living in dreamland, imagining that their lifestyles have much more durability than in fact they

have. The basic suggestion here is that the implementation of social foresight can go a very long way toward providing that clarity and that support, as well as the lead-time to act appropriately.

Yet by the time this government, or any other, gets around to considering it, the stakes will have grown even more and the costs of NOT acting effectively in earlier times may well be regarded as the scandal of the century.

Notes

1. PDFs of a set of ten monographs dealing with different aspects of social foresight were produced at the Australian Foresight Institute during 2003-6. They can be found at:
http://www.swinburne.edu.au/business/research_reports.html
2. Slaughter, R. Futures beyond dystopia – creating social foresight, Routledge, London, 2004. Available on CD-ROM from:
<http://foresightinternational.com.au>
3. Steffan, W. (et al), Global change and the earth system: A planet under pressure, Springer Verlag, Heidelberg, Germany, 2004.
4. Meadows, D. (et al) Limits to growth – 30 year update, Earthscan, London, 2005.
5. Hyatt, S. (ed) A game as old as empire, Berret-Koehler, San Francisco, 2007.