

## Opinion

# Did the twee summiteers really map the future?



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**I**t is now 12 months since 1000 people gathered in Parliament House for the Australia 2020 Summit. The Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, selected them as “1000 of Australia’s best and brightest people ... to help shape the nation’s future”.

In reporting on the summit, the co-convenor Glyn Davis boldly declared it was the largest genuine community consultation held in Australian history. He emblazoned the words “THINKING BIG” in capitals across his report.

As one not among Rudd’s 1000 “best and brightest”, I thought I would go back and read the deliberations of this assembly. I wanted to get an idea of how the recommendations of this assembly without peer in the nation’s history have influenced us; what pitfalls we have avoided and what changes we have implemented as a result.

I first decided to look at the recommendations on dealing with the financial crisis. But I could find no mention of that crisis – not in the chapter on “The Future of the Australian Economy”, nor indeed in any other chapter. I looked for discussion on the reform of international finance and the global financial institutions. But that was not mentioned in the chapter on “Australia’s future prosperity in a rapidly changing world” or anywhere else.

I wondered whether the summit had warned the great neo-liberal experiment of the past 30 years was failing. As one essayist wrote this year: “From time to time in human history there occur events of a truly seismic significance, events that mark a turning point between one epoch

and the next.” I wondered how the Summit had seen this epoch-changing event and its effect on the world.

There was nothing like that in the deliberations. I don’t want to be too critical of the summit. It is just possible the grandiose language of Rudd’s essay about “neo-liberalism” and “epoch-changing events” was, shall we say, a little overdone.

It is just possible this rhetoric was drummed up for base political motives – to suggest that his Australian political opponents were in some way tarnished by financial collapses in the US and Britain. But I detected no concern among the hand-picked-over under-regulation. In fact, they were more of a mind to be critical of too much regulation – calling for “more accountable regulation”, demanding regulators be held to “performance indicators” and calling for a “review of regulatory regimes to encourage private investment.”

The summit was big on reviews. It wanted an independent agency to review regulation; an independent audit on education, health and infrastructure; a comprehensive review of tax. In the communities and families area, it wanted a poverty strategy, a childhood intervention strategy, a migrant resettlement strategy, a retention workforce strategy and a review of governance structure for the community sector.

Reviews and strategies backed up by independent commissions were the main ideas of the 2020 Summit. Reading the report one can’t help but notice how few specifics there are. Such specifics as were mentioned were down paths we

have explored before, such as constitutional amendments on the republic and indigenous rights.

The Government, when it gets around to responding to the report, will not have much trouble dealing with it. It can just adopt the process – set in place the reviews and strategies to decide the outcomes that it wants.

Did anything new come out of the 2020 Summit? I’ll own up that my eyes glazed over before I read every one of the words on the 400 pages. But if there are some wall bangers in there, they have gone unnoticed over the past 12 months.

Sometimes, we are told, the process is just as important as the outcome. And the summit gave the opportunity for the Government to select and brand those it decided were Australia’s 1000 “best and brightest”. Positions were highly prized and there was strong lobbying to get an invitation. Curriculum vitae will ring for years with the mention that this or that person was a summit delegate.

More importantly, those to whom the Government extended its recognition can be expected to be grateful. From the Government’s point of view, this is the most important outcome.

When we arrive in 2020, will we look back and say that there, in Canberra in April 2008, we mapped out the future? You be the judge. But somehow I don’t think the 2020 Summit will be a living document. Not then. Not now.

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