

The 2020 Summit: 'Population, Sustainability, Climate Change and Water'

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The 2020 Summit was a party. Most of us had a great time, as you do at a party. We met new and interesting people, were entertained in the Great Hall of Parliament House, and had a lovely dinner on the Saturday night. So whether you think the Summit was a success depends on whether you were expecting anything more than a party.

There were times at the 2020 Summit when I also thought it was the ALP National Conference. It did feel like a meeting of the Party faithful. There was rapturous applause whenever a speaker touched a favourite ALP hot-button issue: the Republic, aboriginal reconciliation, refugees and university funding. I support a Republic, but the groupthink reaction whenever such things were discussed was too overtly political for my liking.

I was in the group of 100 that discussed 'population, sustainability, climate change and water'. My particular area of expertise related to this topic is population economics. So you might appreciate that I was not overcome with excitement by the following solitary sentence on population in the Final Statement of Outcomes: 'Australia will have a population policy, and immigration program that works truly in the national interest and that is a model for the world' [sic]. Exactly *what* population policy, and *what* immigration policy, was hardly discussed, let alone agreed upon. Hence, they didn't appear in the final statement.

It became clear on Day 2 that the aim was to produce a Final Statement of Outcomes that represented a consensus among the group on a given topic, rather than a statement capturing the range of ideas that were discussed. It was to be a political document, and that rendered it banal and virtually meaningless. Another example from my group: 'Further investment could be directed into research, development and deployment to enable a low emissions energy revolution.' How it might be 'directed' is, of course, the crucial question. And what does a 'low emissions energy revolution' mean? 'Revolution' is a big term that needs a little unpacking for both taxpayers and consumers.

Groupthink was the dominant force when it came to discussing climate change and sustainability. I soon realised that my views, which are mainstream among

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fellow economists, were contrary to the groupthink view of the other participants (there were very few economists, for better or for worse). For example, the group seemed to agree with the quip of Barry Jones (yes, the iconic Barry Jones) that trying to do something about climate change while also growing the economy was 'like trying to be fat and thin at the same time'. I enjoyed the humour but the audience applause seemed to be more for the message. Earnest discussion ensued as to whether it really was possible for consumption to grow in future while simultaneously taking meaningful action on climate change. People who were incredibly well informed about environmental and scientific aspects of climate change — much more so than I — were apparently unaware that the Stern Report, and all other economic analyses of climate change, shows that even quite dramatic action on climate change would merely slow the growth of living standards — not throw it into reverse.

I sensed a predilection among the delegates for central planning, picking winners, and bigger government financed by new taxes. Indeed, there were about as many new taxes proposed as there were delegates at the Summit. There were to be new taxes on petrol, cars, junk food, alcohol, and even a tax on all government departments to fund the creative arts. Plus a lot of 'tax incentives' where some taxpayers get a benefit that is paid for by other taxpayers — tax incentives for philanthropy towards the arts, for greater use of public transport, for climate-friendly households.

There was also a lot of messing with the way we live our lives, and with the school curriculum. One group wanted to mandate that people with desk jobs get up and do 30 minutes of exercise each day. In an already crowded school curriculum, there were calls to mandate creative-arts subjects and Asian languages, despite the fact that mandating subjects like these has long been rejected by the experts in curriculum development. I thought that if anything ought to be mandatory it should be Economics 101. Indeed, whether it is suggestions about mandating subjects in the curriculum or that Australia be the world's leading green economy, there was scarce evidence of an appreciation of opportunity cost (what subjects in the curriculum ought to be scrapped?); or comparative advantage (why should Australia be the world's leading green economy when it has the world's largest per-capita coal reserves?); or the implications of near-full employment (promoting green technologies at the expense of what other technologies or goods and services — medical technology? education? hospitals? police services?). It was even argued that the Summit was a cheap event because everyone paid their own travel and accommodation — invited to 'attend in a voluntary capacity' is the term on the official Summit website.

I'm afraid I saw the Summit as having the disadvantages of a large annual conference without the advantages, such as the ability to explore topics in depth

in small groups. It was impossible to subject any ideas to proper analysis and lengthy debate. It's not that good ideas did not emerge — they did. But they were invariably old ideas, and were not subjected to scrutiny.

Was there a net national benefit from the Summit? I doubt it. There was definitely net political benefit for the Government — it gave the impression that the Government was listening and it was a worthwhile investment in galvanising support from opinion-makers and community leaders.

It would be churlish not to add that the organisers worked incredibly hard and did a fantastic job on what must have been a logistical Rubik's cube.