

2020 Hindsight: An Ecologically Sustainable Australia

It is manifestly unfair to comment on the outcome of a national conference when the final report will not be released until May 30th, ten days after I write this editorial. However, the importance of the 2020 Summit held in Canberra the weekend of April 19–20 should not be underestimated. The Summit was an initiative of Australia's Prime Minister, the Honourable Kevin Rudd, and intended to generate "ideas and ambitions" to "help us shape a long term strategy for the nation's future — in relation to the economy, . . . , our environment, . . . [etc.] and ensure nobody is left out of Australia's future." (www.australia2020.gov.au/index.cfm). The Summit generated an Initial Report, on which this editorial is based, plus numerous press accounts and analyses, and more than 8500 submissions from the public clearly indicating how seriously Australians took the Summit and its potential for actually influencing long term government policy.

I am unlikely to surprise anyone when I say that I was more than skeptical about the merits of such a Summit and the likelihood of anything really innovative coming from it. In my opinion, bringing together 1000 people, no matter who they are, could only generate the mundane for the simple reason that achieving consensus on innovation (new ideas) diminishes exponentially with the number of participants. In the end, only the innocuous will be agreed upon. The word "innocuous" pretty much sums up the section of the Initial Report that reported on the environment (Population, Sustainability, Climate Change, Water and the Future of Our Cities), but given that the report is probably a fair reflection of how the majority think and where government priorities may be placed, it is worth comment.

Climate change is singled out as the greatest challenge facing Australia in the 21st Century. It risks the nation losing its "natural heritage, our rivers, landscapes and biodiversity. We have a brief opportunity to act now to safeguard and shape our future prosperity." (Initial Report, p. 13). If the challenge is so great and the time to act so short, why isn't action already being taken? For example, why hasn't land clearing been banned at a national level? A ban could be initiated immediately, with positive benefits for both biodiversity conservation and global warming.

The report then goes on using the standard clichés of aspiring to a "green and sustainable economy" and decreasing our "ecological footprint". All of this is to happen while "continuing to grow our economy and improve our quality of life". Targets will be set and achieved in specified times so that by 2020 "Australia will be making a major contribution to a comprehensive global response to climate change. . .". Consideration of the environment "will be fully integrated into economic decision making. . .". I could go on quoting from the report, but I think you get the idea.

What comes across strongly from the report and the Top Ideas generated is the notion that business can continue pretty much as normal so long as greater attention is paid to the more efficient use of resources and a reduction in green house gas emissions (although not explicitly put as such). Thus, there appears to have been no discussion, much less any consensus, on the need to reduce economic growth. Any reduction in consumption had to come through greater efficiencies. Giving hope, not everyone agreed on "business as usual". There was disagreement about clean coal versus renewable energy, the need to restrict population [growth] versus the more efficient use of resources, the use of Commonwealth money for public transport, and GM crops. The need for a population policy was at least mentioned, but then it has been mentioned for as long as I have been in Australia (40 years) and never acted upon, so do not be too hopeful on this one. There was also recognition of the need for significant behavioural changes to implement a new generation of environmental policies and aspirations.

All up, the debate about Australia's environment was pretty much what we read routinely in the daily papers. I've been around long enough to say that "I've heard it all before". Somewhat disturbingly, there was no indication that the people in the environment section as a whole had any special understanding or knowledge of the human impact on the Australian continent and its biota other than perhaps that presented by climate change. Few of the participants were people I associate with the ecological sciences and I suspect the concern about climate change was driven more by the current high levels of media coverage than any real interest or knowledge of the

subject. There was no evidence from the Summit of an understanding of the relation between biodiversity, ecosystem services and human welfare, including long-term economic sustainability, much less of any ethical responsibility to other species. Growth was accepted, if not as inevitable, than as a necessity and the clear, if unstated, Ambition of the Summit was finding ways to ensure economic growth (as distinct from cultural, intellectual, moral or any other form of less consumptive growth) would continue with minimal impact on the “wants” of people.

Even as world food supplies diminish, water becomes scarcer, the Earth becomes warmer, wilderness and forests disappear, fisheries crash, and the rate of species extinction accelerates, the Summit failed to give serious consideration to limiting human population growth and economic expansion. For the world as a whole, limiting population growth and consumption is probably impossible anytime in the near future given a plethora of cultural, religious and demographic constraints, not to mention sheer grinding poverty and ignorance. Australia need not be constrained in these ways and could show real global leadership by restricting both its population and its economic expansion.

Surely an Australian 2020 Summit and a government planning for the future needed to consider these options. If it was any species other than *Homo sapiens*, an ecologist or wildlife manager viewing the State of the Australian environment from afar would conclude that Australians had exceeded the carrying capacity of their environment and for the survival of the species either needed to be culled or have their birth rate reduced. We justify the need to cull kangaroos on Defence Department land in the Capital Territory, or at least to limit their birth rate, to protect ecosystems and other species sharing the same land, but we cannot even consider the need to do the same for our own population. Until Australians can make that behavioural adjustment and limit population growth, with the aim of reducing numbers over time, 2020 Summits will never lead to a sustainable future. There are just too many of us and some of us consume far more than we really need, while too many others have too little. Australia needed a Wakeup Summit with some serious ecological and ethical input, not a circus with a cast of 1000.

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