

A new kind of government

I write this on the flight from Canberra to Sydney, only an hour after the conclusion of the Australia 2020 Summit. I took away a freshly-printed report outlining the ideas from Australia's "best and brightest" and feel pleased to have rubbed shoulders with some very inspiring thinkers.

We gathered as a group of 100 in the Governance stream, a sub-set of the total 1000 delegates. Our group were split into four sub-groups of 25 and I found myself in the *Constitutional Rights & Responsibility* sub-group, among fellow academics, politicians, advocates and researchers from think tanks and non-government organisations, concerned citizens and students.

For me, the republic, a bill of rights and reformed federalism are all 'no brainers'—probably still controversial but boxes to be ticked so we can move on—onto new ideas to reinvigorate governance with specific methods to bring people to the forefront. But I began to feel isolated as I proclaimed the virtues of my key interests: inviting randomly-selected citizens to deliberate in mini-publics (like newDemocracy's forthcoming Citizens' Parliament), in order to give typical Australians a stronger voice in political decision making. The constitutional lawyers would interrupt any mention of citizens' juries or citizens' assemblies to insist on a pedantically precise definition for the term *citizen*. It was going to be a long weekend.

My wildest ideas were clearly not going to be embraced by this group, for example a group of 1000 randomly-selected citizens to consider the ideas from the 2020 Summit or, heaven forbid a randomly-selected legislature. I began to note the way in which specialists censor themselves, speaking only of incremental change or not daring to flirt with anything seen as unrealistic. The conversation was too often about what was achievable in the short-term. The co-chair, Maxine McKew, expressed her disappointment when we regrouped amongst the 100 to report back. Only three people thought we had offered a big idea yet the sub-heading for the 2020 Summit was "Thinking Big".

I noticed that we were following the stages of group development: *forming* and *norming* and we had begun to experience the *storming* phase: frustration with the process and each other. Lobbying occurred. People were negotiating a way forward and process designers were working behind the scenes. I hungered to work with a group that shared my concern for the voiceless.

The next day we entered the *performing* stage as we coalesced around the idea that enthused each of us: the republic, a charter/bill of rights, open and accountable government and civic engagement. I was able to switch groups and, in the latter group, we worked frenetically to extract the essence of our collective dreams, to accurately express our combined aspirations and goals. We were pleased to offer several wonderful ambitions and big ideas although the detail was eventually lost in the final presentation

and written report. *Democracy day* disappeared and *participatory budgets* and *citizens' assemblies* and *juries* simply went missing.

However, what surfaced in the final presentation was the top ambition of the civic engagement group and it appeared in a slightly different form in the final document:

... the need to strengthen the participation of Australians in their governance: a revolution in community and government interaction through grassroots and non-traditional community engagement...

The Prime Minister in his closing remarks noted that the idea of *collaborative governance* (the phraseology we had preferred and put forward), was a new one which could involve “rolling dialogues in relation to policies and programs”.

As the plane descends I'm left with the feeling that we worked well together, that we shared many wonderful ideas across ten wide streams and that this navigation, indeed, may really be in the hands of an unusual government. This one seems to be daring enough to *dare us* to imagine a very different future from that which we thought awaited us. One delegate (from a resource-strapped welfare organisation) told me that he did not know how to relate to this new government. He'd been trying for so long to get inside the doors, only to find them slammed shut, that he wasn't sure what to make of one that warmly invited him in. Let's hope that the doors remain as widely open and the air as cool and fresh as that which we experienced these past two days.

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