

# 2020 Hindsight: The Australia 2020 Summit as an Experiment in Participatory Foreign-Policy Making

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My job is to take us back to a year ago when we had a new Government, a sense of freshness, of possibilities; we had not really seen the acronym GFC and life looked rather different for us all.

I want to talk about the 2020 process as an experiment in foreign policy decision-making. There is a traditional model of foreign policy, which I will talk a little bit about and 2020 could be seen as a different way of trying to open up foreign policy processes in Australia. I want to analyse it and in particular evaluate it in terms of its processes, outcomes and its impact.

In doing this, I am not only drawing on the net, which is helpful, only to some extent. I have had the wonderful assistance of Emma White who is working on some research around 2020 with me. We have done interviews with people involved, participant surveys, we have gone through and analysed some of the outcomes. So we will be sharing some of that research with you.

In a way, I am trying to take us beyond some of the enduring images of 2020. These are things like Cate Blanchett with her day-old baby. I would argue that it is actually more interesting than that in that it sought to change the way we do foreign policy-making.

As Ian said, the idea was that the gathering should be of the best and brightest. That is probably the start of a range of bad media management of the process as a whole. The idea was to get in different voices in policy-making and in that sense it was taking it from the usual processes to the 100 or so people who were involved in my stream, which had the catchy title 'Australia's Future security and Prosperity in a Rapidly Changing Region and World'. That was variously summarised as 'Security', 'International' and 'World', so whichever of those I am referring to, that's what I mean.

So the broad idea the 100 people were given was to try and think about some of those issues – our place in the world, what are some of the security challenges, what are some of the things that we need to do to ensure the country prospers, rather than the alternative.

I will talk about the traditional model and then take you through to look at the process, the outcomes, the impact, before concluding with what I think we can learn from the 2020 experience.

Some of the things we have drawn on are the surveys we did for the people who are in the stream; we have looked through a lot of the secondary sources: what people have written about 2020. Most of the media, as you know, was pretty negative. We have analysed the interim and final reports and we have also interviewed the co-chair, Michael Wesley, who led the stream.

What am I putting this in contrast with? If I am looking at what other traditional foreign policy-making structures it is something like this:

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The one you could cavil with a little bit is the idea that DFAT is the nerve centre of foreign policy. It is one of those things that may be evolving over time. Prime Minister and Cabinet, the national security apparatus and all sorts of others would see themselves as very important in the process.

You could argue there are some challenges to that. There are quite a range of things that are making it harder for any particular part of Government to be on top of the range of potential security challenges and events that have to be considered; the intersection between domestic and international is strong etc. There is a lot of things that may be saying to you 'let's think of opening that foreign policy space'.

Going back a year, the Government probably just wanted to look outside traditional sources. It was a new Government; it wanted to have a wide range of input, a number of people talking to it. You could say cynically that it was trying to build a connection with a number of opinion-makers in the community; you could say even more cynically that it was a way of keeping the Public Service on its toes, saying 'you are not are only source of advice, there are other things as well'.

The people I knew who were very much involved in the process, such as Glyn Davis team at the University of Melbourne, were very genuine about wanting to open public debate. They saw this as a really important thing that they could contribute to. It was not just having the usual structures, but having additional public participation and how important that could be.

The Summit was probably a political cost to the Government rather than a benefit, so it shows there must have been something else going on. It wasn't just a cynical exercise. There was some assumption that it would have a benefit.

If we look first at the processes: How did this happen? There were these 1000 participants divided into 10 streams. The one I knew about was 'Australia's Future Prosperity and Security in a Rapidly Changing Region and World', but there were also ones on Health, Indigenous Issues, Productivity, then there was the 'cool' stream, the Arts stream, you really wished you were invited to their parties; so a range of people doing very different things.

It wasn't done as the 1983 Hawke Economic Summit was. That was by invitation and people represented organisations. It was done by public nomination process and people came as individuals, not representing any particular bandwagon or organisation, just as themselves.

Another aspect was the Youth Summit that was held before. There were a number of school summits, there were community summits. It ended up falling on the Passover Weekend so there was, for example, the Jewish Community Summit immediately before to make sure that people could go along. And people came at their own expense. It was a way of trying to mobilise people who were interested in some of these ideas.

Talking to Michael Wesley about the process – he was co-chair of that stream along with the Minister for Foreign Affairs – there were 1800 nominations received for the 100 places – although it wasn't really 100 places because you had to take into account the protocol guests. The Prime Minister said that Opposition Leaders, State Premiers, Governors would all be invited. It ended up that there were 89 places in the International stream filled through the nomination process. You also had to include representatives from the Youth Summit.

The two basic criteria that we used were level of expertise and the demographics. In this stream in particular the feeling was that geography was an issue – there was so much foreign policy expertise in Canberra, Melbourne and Sydney and you could not have everyone in that stream from these places. It would not be seen as appropriate by the people who live in the rest of the country. They were also looking at a broad range of expertise and interest. The recommendations made by the co-chair then went for a final decision and Michael's summary was that around 95 per cent of the recommendations he made were accepted.

If you look at where people came from – this is research that Emma did – looking at the 100 and tracing their backgrounds, she has done a data base.

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As you can see a lot of people fell into more than one of the categories of academia, public sector, NGOs, business, research and inter-governmental. They might have been in Government for some part of their lives, then gone to academia and are currently with an NGO.

The complaint that there was a lack of diversity is hard to justify against this information. Someone such as John Roskam, from the Institute of Public Affairs, had a view in the press that it was the usual suspects. Peter Costello in his take a year on said they were a hand-picked group. I find this not well supported by the evidence. In fact, it was a surprisingly diverse group. A lot of the people who were there had not, I suspect, been involved in similar processes before and it had opened a space for them. In the sense of them being hand-picked, the public nomination process did result in them being chosen, but I am not sure what the alternative is.

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You have here a Sudanese community worker, a silk from Melbourne who works in the Pacific Islands, the Minister, the head of the Sex Workers Union, and the last person is from an international nuclear non-proliferation NGO. I don't regard this group as the usual suspects in any sense. It was fascinating to have discussions with the head of the sex workers union and a retired general, talking about the Pacific and trafficking issues – people from very different perspectives talking about an interesting issue that mattered.

So how was it done? How did they manage 1000 people? It was held over a weekend. There were a certain number of plenary sessions. There was one at the start of the first day when the Prime Minister spoke and rallied us all, the Governor General spoke and made us feel that the future depended on our deliberations and it was all terribly high pressure. Then Michael Wesley spoke.

We then broke into our individual streams of 100 and our stream had a quick-fire succession of individual sessions. We had to write down some of the key ideas we thought had to be covered; we moved from that into a group of 10 and from that into 25 and from that into the 100. So we had a strongly facilitated process moving from some of the individual ideas we might have had through to larger groups discussing those.

From that we generated a number of themes and people self-selected into the themes they wanted to focus on for the rest of the discussion. The other streams organised themselves differently. There were professional facilitators, which was wonderful, so it was highly organised and the proceedings were recorded which was very helpful for the final report.

One of the issues that has been brought up was whether there was a push for participants to give particular views that the Government would find more attractive than others. The strong response we got back was that people felt they were respected within the group – 68 per cent agreed or agreed strongly that their ideas were respected and only three per cent felt that they weren't. Overall, the feeling about the facilitation process was good.

That is not to say there weren't issues. We asked participants whether they thought there were things that could be improved. People were unhappy with the lack of time, there were criticisms of some bits of the facilitation and that the write-up did not 100 per cent reflect the complexity of the discussions. Some people were concerned that not enough traditional defence issues were being discussed. But overall, there was a positive feeling.

We were able to contact 84 of the non-protocol participants and out of those we got a 40 per cent response rate which was an excellent response.

In summary, I would rate the processes highly. In terms of having good people in the room and the way they were managed worked very well. The question then is how did we do on outcomes?

Depending on how you see it there were a range of outcomes. My stream had five different themes, then there were 42 specific policy recommendations under those five themes and apart from that there were 260 different ideas that came out through the initial process of writing down everyone's ideas in the room.

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I have put the five themes up so you can see them. Over the course of the two days we were trying to get ourselves down to the one overarching statement; the five themes and the specific policy recommendations that go with the five themes. The five themes are Languages and Literacy, Non-Traditional Security, Pacific, Good International Citizenship and Partnerships with Great Powers in the region.

Out of the 260 ideas there were a range of recommendations that did not fit within the five themes. On the whole they fitted in quite well. If a question was a question pushed into those five themes, were they pre-set by the Government in some way? I think not. They were generated from what was discussed.

Some ideas were a bit domestic and were really better fitted into other streams. That happened across all the streams. There were recommendations that could easily have been put in multiple streams. Probably the biggest one that missed out was capacity building. It was one of my personal favourites, saying whatever the future holds we have to build capacity. It was hard to get up as we tended to focus more in discussion on particular issues, less on the capacity to deal with the issues. That may be a natural human way of approaching things.

One way of judging this is by asking whether they represented new ideas. On the whole, I would probably say not, but that is not necessarily a bad thing. My way of describing it to people at the time was to say that a new foreign policy idea would be 'let's invade New Zealand', but it isn't a good idea. I felt a lot of the things we talked about were good ideas, but not necessarily new.

Something like languages and literacy was not new, but very important and something we are demonstrably failing on and getting worse on. So putting it up as something that needs more attention is a reasonable thing to do.

Another way of seeing it is looking at what wasn't discussed, and the group decided not to look at traditional security issues, the focus should be really on new security threats. On the whole I would say the group showed a remarkably positive orientation. There was very much discussion of security within Asia rather than security from Asia. The tone was engaging with the world rather than being frightened of the world.

Were things reflected in the final report? The feeling from participants was yes. There were two reports – an interim report that came out more or less straight away and people felt that was very abbreviated – a long, complex discussion might turn into a few lines. The final report, which came out a few weeks later, was much more detailed and included all the 260 ideas from the individuals.

The biggest issue that people talked about was lack of time. People were very annoyed about having to sit in plenary and watch a Sky News relatively soft interview session when we should have been working in our groups. That energy was strong. People really wanted to produce something that was a good reflection of the talent of the people who were in the room.

So overall, outcomes were positive. I am interested that the media portrayal was a lot less positive than that. There were a lot of concrete suggestions that were made and if you think of what you got over the course of weekend that is not too bad a return of outcomes for the relatively small investment that was made.

What impact has this had? This is the time to talk about it because we are a year on. We now have the Government's response which you all have in front of you. It takes you though in detail about what the Government has said.

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There is a mix of different things. There are 10 pages of ideas that have been taken forward; two pages of ideas to be considered further and one page of ideas that have essentially been rejected. If you think of it in those terms a lot more of the ideas from the stream were taken up than the opposite. This seems positive.

Specifically, the Government has taken up policy ideas from each of those themed groups. Some of the things from Asian literacy, the security themes, some of the Pacific themes, most notably covering seasonal workers – this was discussed at length.

Another way to ask the question is to say that while a lot of the recommendations were taken up, has it had an impact more broadly on the culture? On that it is less clear. If I was going to say would the people have thought the Defence White Paper focus was the way to go – maybe not. There was much more of a non-traditional security approach and a focus on international citizenship rather than what was coming through the Defence White Paper. Apart from anything else that probably tells something about the participants. If you have community-level participants – people selected through the nomination process – they may have a different orientation.

One of the useful things that Emma has done is to look at the foreign policy orientation of the people who were in the foreign policy stream versus DFAT officers. Wesley and Gyngell did that a few years ago – looked at what their orientation was, how they saw the world, and you do get quite different results. The question is, how much impact is the 2020 Summit going to have on people with a different orientation?

I would say, looking at the policy statements, that there has been some impact. If nothing else maybe it has supported people within traditional structures who like some of the ideas that came out of 2020.

Even broader than that is what it has done for public debate. It is nice if some of the ideas are taken up, but for me the really energising thing is the wider community impact and what that does. If it means that people think that there is a national debate and they can be part of it. That is really something. The example in my family was my daughter who was five at the time. Her school was one of the representatives that did their own 2020 Summit They talked about all these issues, they prepared their report and the Deputy Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, came to the school and collected it – with a photo opportunity of course.

From their perspective, that was them being part of a process, having ideas and it being welcome for them to have ideas and to think about the future they are going to be inhabiting. So quite beyond the policy outcomes I would put that sense of empowering people in the political process as important. I may sound naïve, but I really think that is important. We have an apathetic public who thinks that foreign policy is only done by an expert group and they have no say in it and I don't think that means a strong system.

You will tell that I think there were a lot of positives about the 2020 Summit and I am a little surprised at just how negative most of the media reporting was. Most people's enduring images are fairly negative and that seems to me a disservice to the enormous energy and enthusiasm that these people brought to the room, and their genuine willingness and interest in contributing to the debate.

Part of that is that each stream had its own processes, so a lot of the public criticisms of the process have come from the Government stream which was entirely differently organised. It had everybody in pre-set discussion groups which they could not move from. They did not get to talk to each other, there was a sense the groups may have been stacked. Comparing what they experienced with what we experienced in the foreign policy stream does not make sense at all. They are very different.

If you look at the deliberative democracy theory which Emma has been looking at in some detail, it stacks up well – at least through what I experienced in the foreign policy stream – as doing the sort of things you need to top-structure the deliberative policy-making process. Some of the recommendations were accepted, but even more broadly than that it had a lot of positive effects on the national dialogue. To me that is the enduring legacy.

Overall, I would rate the process as quite positive; outcomes as moderately positive; impact somewhat on policy, but more on national debate, and overall that is pretty good scorecard one year on. So looking at 2020 in hindsight I would give it a cautious but optimistic response.

## QUESTIONS

**I am very conscious of the mechanisms that exist in the bureaucracy. When I look at the Summit I find it difficult to accept that it is an experiment in making foreign policy. More a way of raising public consciousness, but there are clearly limitations in a large number of people coming together over a short period of time with their own ideas and trying to get them down on paper in a coherent fashion. Would you comment?**

I agree entirely, it is a necessary limitation on the process. It isn't fully deliberative. Perhaps the best way of seeing it is more as a contribution to the agenda setting.

In some ways it was a hybrid process. It was neither a fully deliberative democracy situation, and it wasn't just experts where you could assume that there is the same level of knowledge. I am not sure what to call it, but I think it is something about influencing the agenda setting.

**In that survey 22 per cent said that they did not think their deliberations would have any effect, but a higher percentage thought that the exercise was worthwhile. How do reconcile those two statistics?**

I think those figures can work together. Some of the people there were activists – they had a particular thing they cared about. They may not feel they are going to achieve their objective tomorrow, but they still thought it was a worthwhile aim. Takes the case of the person from the International Campaign Against Nuclear Weapons, I don't think they felt we were going to get to a nuclear weapons-free world tomorrow, but I think they felt it was positive that some of the things they cared about made their way into a document in a discussion like this, and might have an impact in the longer term.

I think they will be very pleased about what has happened since 2020 and some of the efforts Australia is making on non-proliferation. So it can be a worthwhile process even if it does not meet all of your objectives.

When we did the survey in February, the Government had missed the deadline it had set for its response, so that might have been reflected in the survey responses, people had been worried that the Government would not respond, that it would not have any impact. It was just timing.

**How was the summit received internationally?**

I have no idea. We really only looked at Australian coverage. It was probably viewed with some curiosity. It would sound a little odd in a lot of places that you would do this, but it would be really interesting.

EMMA WHITE: Even when we did broad-based searches there did not seem to be a lot about it, so it may have had little or no impact overseas.

**It seemed that a lot of the policies adopted by the Summit were already being implemented by the Government. To what extent were the ideas new?**

I think it is partly due to the time lag between the Summit and the publication of the report. If you look at the example of the nuclear issue, really significant things happened between the Summit and the final report.

Would it have happened without 2020? Quite possibly, but we will never know. A year on, a lot of the recommendations have been adopted, and you can see it as part of the success of the process, but it's hard to tell. I would very interested if someone ever does really deep research to find out how much it has influenced. It is very hard to get that information.

**Do you have any information from the other Summit streams on what effect their recommendations might have had?**

There was probably a higher take-up generally from the international stream than most. If you look at the big ideas that are getting funding, quite a lot of them are coming from the international stream. Of course the bionic eye is coming from health and all sorts of other things. There are a range of things from the other streams but international got more than its fair share.

This could mean there was a confluence between the people in the room and the things that the Government wanted to do anyway; it could mean there was some sort of influence. It is hard to know.

The full document is on the website and you can download as many of them as you like.

EMMA WHITE: I might just add that some of the other streams I looked at – Governance for example was quite problematic in its structure and processes. It did not contain a list of however many statements etc that participants put down originally, so it is difficult to go back to build comparisons.

So I think one of the strengths of this stream is that they did put those ideas and statements in, so you can make some comparisons and see how the final policy recommendations reflect those original statements.



**What is the profile of those who attended your stream? How many of them were foreign policymakers. What kind of people did Michael Wesley recommend? What was the age profile?**

There were quite deliberately no policymakers from the Government. Foreign policy officers were running around with recorders. That was their job for the weekend, and I believe they had to volunteer, they were not paid. The protocol guests were the Secretaries of DFAT, Defence and the Head of the Army. Anyone below that level was there as a volunteer.

We have a table in the survey with all that information. I would say the overall composition of the stream was pretty mixed. A lot of people who were labelled public sector had had some public sector experience during their careers. The whole point was not to bring in people who were part of the formal process.

The age profile followed the demographic. Because one of the media problems early on was when the co-chairs were announced for the 10 streams, they did not reflect a gender balance very well, and the Government was roundly criticised for that. So they were very careful that the profile of the group fitted demographic exactly. The over 80s were slightly under-represented and the under 10s were not represented, but seriously, they gave that information out, so you could see very clearly that the group demographically fitted the age, gender and geographic profile of the country as a whole.

It would have been a younger and more female group than you would generally see.

EMMA WHITE: Three positions were held for Youth Summit representatives. Their definition was that they were school students – I don't think they were even university students. It was a separate Summit held a week or so before in Canberra and it was quite a similar process, chaired by Hugh Evans.

**From what I saw of the policy responses, the outcomes were not far from the mainstream. Can you comment?**

What has happened as part of the process is that some of the ideas have converged towards the middle ground. One of the suggestions from the Youth Summit that didn't make it into the final report was to link overseas aid and defence spending, so any money we spent on defence, we have to spend the same amount on overseas aid.

That would have been quite revolutionary, it went through the Youth Summit, but did not make it through the 100 people in the mainstream. So you have probably seen a certain amount of collapsing of ideas into the things that are more agreed upon and saleable.

**I saw the Summit as an opportunity for public debate, to come up with the 'big idea'. Instead everyone came with their own ideas and were not prepared to listen to everyone else's. Can you comment?**

It did push people towards seeing themselves as having an agenda – 'I want my idea up'. I think there was confusion among some of the participants about what sort of process it was. If we all agree, and if an idea was accepted it would become real, so therefore they had to push, and be political and get their ideas to a certain point.

Whereas, if you saw it differently as a process on input, then you have a quite different take. We want to generate lots of good ideas and it doesn't matter if this particular one doesn't make the two-second grab on the news. I think it would have been useful to have that different one.

It would also have been useful not to get to the one idea, the five themes and the things underneath it. It had a funnelling effect. To me, the most interesting conversations were at the start of the funnel where we had a wealth of different ideas and a wealth of difference behind them. I really felt I had learnt a lot from those discussions – the more we went into what is the one thing we can all agree on, it is going to be less rich by its nature. I think people did find that frustrating. That was the way it was done, it probably had some positives.

**Looking at the lessons learnt and contrasting that to the negative media reports, do you think there will be a 2030 Summit? Were the Government happy with it?**

I don't think there will be another. Maybe the next Government would consider doing it, but I suspect it would be tarred with this Government's brush – that it is something they did. So I can't see it being done again.

I don't think this Government will do it again. It feels like something you do early in your term, and that is it. But that is me speculating, I have no sources of information on that whatsoever, although I believe the NSW State Government is considering doing one.

It didn't have very positive media, or PR benefits. I got the impression that at least the co-chairs – the Minister who was involved in co-chairing one of the streams found it valuable. You have got to remember that these were people who were still relatively new in their jobs and they probably did find it at a basic level valuable to hear ideas and have contacts. That was a good thing in itself.

More generally – I don't know. Certainly a lot of the work was outsourced to the University of Melbourne and I don't know what that shows. Was that a preference for doing it externally or perhaps it could have been seen as a burden.

**Whose big idea was Asian literacy?**

There would have been 10 to 15 people who went home to their family and said 'my big idea on Asian literacy got up.' There were a lot of voices there. You could say that it might say something about the selection. There was a group of people who were coming in who were passionate about that.

One of the people I met was a schoolteacher who teaches Chinese language. He was really passionate about how we could get more students to learn Chinese. There were other people who were coming in from other languages – Indonesia for example. So that was one of the first groupings to coalesce. There were people who already knew about it, who could say what was tried 10 or 20 years ago, they had a strong knowledge base and congregated in their group and very quickly came up with concrete proposals.

Some of the others did not have such a clear vision, so something like the Great Powers discussion was a bit more of a grab bag, it did not have the same sort of cohesion and that showed up in the recommendations.

The hardest conversation on the literacy question was whether it was going to be language and cultural literacy generally, or just Asia. I will fess up to be a Spanish speaker who was saying that languages in general is good, but I deferred to some of the practical issues about how you make it work in a teaching environment. If you are trying to get schools to take on languages, you do have to set priorities.

**The internationalisation of people – what was the thinking behind that? Also relating to the Pacific, where is all that leading, will there be a breakdown of current barriers to migration to Australia?**

I can't remember where I talked about global citizens. Looking at the Pacific, I think that was another area where there was a pre-set group of people who knew a lot and really wanted to talk about it. That might be one where you say there was an agenda, because there were a few people who had been talking for a long while about what needs to be done. At the AIIA we had a National Presidents' Forum in 2006 where we were talking about many of these issues and things like labour mobility came up then.

So I would have said that among the group of experts who were very much focussed on the Pacific there was already a sense of some of the things that might be part of the solution. The interesting thing about how those work opportunity issues were discussed is that in fact a lot of work was happening both within the stream, but also outside the stream. So, for instance, there were discussions with Sharon Burrow from the ACTU who was in the international stream and who was talking about what would be some of the prerequisites for the rights-based labour mobility scheme.

But there were also people who were trying to talk to the rural stream who were saying really strongly that they should remember what the world looked like a year ago with skill shortages, and fruit rotting because there was no one to pick it. You have got the people in the Pacific who want to come and we have the fruit we want picked, we have got to have a solution. So it was being pushed from both streams at the same time. It made it look like a goer.

The Pacific group did come up with some controversial ones – the idea of confederation, which is pushing the envelope. I noted that came in as one of the things to be considered rather than rejected. The groups talked about a lot of those issues in depth.