

Rudd's summit misses the point of policy

Wolfgang Kasper:

Kevin Rudd's government was inspired early into its term to call upon Australia's 'one-thousand most intelligent people' to nominate themselves to be invited to a talkfest in Canberra to harvest ideas. Leading opposition politicians quickly approved.

The purpose of the 2020 Summit was not to give the newly elected government ideas about the immediate future. These have no doubt been decided by Labor's undertakings to those who spent heavily to help them into office. Instead, these ideas are for Kevin 9-11, the next administration.

But would any great democratic leader—Jefferson, Churchill, Adenauer, de Gaulle, Thatcher or Reagan—have dreamt up such a ploy?

This summit is designed to produce no more than sound bites from the 1000 unelected ego-trippers, pet project promoters, and seekers of government support who will attend.

In the cacophony of a thousand voices, Labor's 'idea harvesters' will probably only hear what they want to hear, and the whole charade will serve as a disguise for doing what the political leaders and their inner circle wanted to do anyway.

If the Rudd team does not have a plan how to go about leading Australia, they can find time-tested instructions in the standard textbooks of political, military and corporate strategy. The 'rational action model' offers excellent guidance on how best to develop and implement a long-range strategy.

First, one looks at past trends and forecasts of the most likely future. Care has to be taken that the forecasts are not coloured by wishful thinking and that distinctions are made between what has to be accepted as given and what may be influenced by policy. The leaders then compare the forecast with their own shared values and basic objectives. With the help of allies and advisors, they formulate alternative futures in the form of strategies (or policy options) and select one feasible strategy as their plan for action. During the implementation of the plan, circumstances may change. This requires tactical adjustments, which must, however, always stay within the strategic plan.

This is how governments do their budget cycles, how business corporations develop and implement their strategies, how military campaigns are carried out, and how orderly governments conduct their affairs. Following such a pattern of action ensures that the gov-

ernment keeps the initiative, avoids internal contradictions and ensures that the various policies are mutually supportive.

The logic of the rational-action model was applied in a study of Australia's medium-term prospects and strategic choices in the late 1970s, which became known as the *Crossroads* study. It helped to inspire the microeconomic reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, which launched Australia on the path of prosperity and confidence that we have been enjoying.

Policy planners must realise that not everything is feasible. A political community is, after all, not an organisation where the leadership commands. Political mandates are limited in time and extent by constitutional constraints, since the principals of the political venture are the citizens and the leaders are only their temporarily empowered agents. They therefore need to convince us to obtain much voluntary co-operation. Coercion is of course sometimes needed, but should be used sparingly. The communication between the political leadership and the autonomous, diverse citizenry, who pursue their own diverse, self-set purposes, requires clarity, stability, simplicity and coherence—and a modest number of programmes. A great variety of new, possibly unrelated projects, which the sound bite summit is designed to inspire, is anathema to good governance in a free nation.

Admittedly, it is easy to legislate and decree, but in a typical modern democracy, government can at any one time enforce, at best, three to seven per cent of all legal norms by compulsion if the citizens are confused or unwilling to comply.

The conception of the summit indicates that the Rudd team do not understand the need for economy and cohesiveness of action. What we need are politicians with fewer ideas about what to do, and not a fishing expedition among self-anointed elites to conjure up more programmes. The core tasks of government will be hard enough to achieve.

And there are major challenges ahead that require a co-ordinated and strategically balanced approach. For example: how will inflation be controlled, when labour-market re-regulation makes economic structures more rigid when more health and education efforts are collectivised, and when the costs of Kyoto compliance are imposed on Australian households (each having to bear estimated extra annual costs of a few thousand dollars)? What number and quality of immigrants should we envisage in the interest of prosperity, but also long-term social cohesion? How do we cope with the growing brain drain? What are the best policies to improve the living conditions of Australia's indigenous population? How will we uphold national sovereignty when more collective decisions are delegated to UN bodies?

There are many more such strategic issues, and none have five-minute solutions. Seen against the time-tested norm of a rational, cohesive strategy, the ideas harvest scares me.

I used to agree with Ronald Reagan who said: 'The most frightening words in the English language are: I am from the government and I am here to help you!' The new-age concept of Kevin's ideas harvest now frightens me even more: 'I am from the government, I have no clue what to do, but I am still here to help!' **R**



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