

It's more important that new public policy ideas are good, rather than 'creative', points out **Tim Wilson**

**I**n a democracy everyone has ideas for new public policy initiatives. But not every idea has equal merit. This is particularly the case when the ideas are solely marketed as coming from a certain group in society, as they are in a recent spate of books written by 'youth leaders' purporting to share Generation Y's perspective on politics and society

The first installment came from NSW Labor Party activist, Ryan Heath, and his book *Please just f\* off: it's our turn now: holding baby boomers to account*. The tone and substance of the book should be apparent from the title.

The second installment is the recently released *The Future By Us* edited by former Young Australian of the Year, Hugh Evans, and Former Young Victorian of the Year, Tom O'Connor. The book seeks to give a perspective of Australia in 2020 through the eyes of the next generation of Australian leaders. And the chapters are written by the youths that attended Kevin Rudd's 2020 Summit.

According to Kevin Rudd, who wrote the foreword, *The Future By Us*, is a book that 'inject[s] new ideas into the policy arena and [will] get us all thinking'. Unsurprisingly Rudd is prepared to give glowing support to a book written by a group of social and political activists who have reached their maturity in the public eye at a time around the election of Rudd's government. And they owe their prominence to Rudd and the platform the 2020 Summit provided them.

But rather than charting a bold new vision for Australia, *The Future By Us* is simply a book of platitudes, symbolism and half-baked ideas. What it shows is how shallow contemporary public policy debate has become and that contemporary policy alternatives are more focused on the symbolic nature of a gesture than actually achieving outcomes. It strikes this tone right from the start by opening the book with an acknowledgement of 'the traditional owners of the land where the idea for this book largely developed'.

Their policy pronouncements are full of the sort of rhetoric that works well in an undergraduate university debate, but isn't actually supported by evidence. According to Simon Sheikh's chapter, 'The End of the Stone Age', 'for too long we have ignored the opportunities to build a knowledge economy based on innovation—a big claim, by any measure. Sheikh's solution? Australia should develop a Silicon Valley that is the destination for innovative industries through a social networking platform equivalent to Facebook. Genius. But he cannot tell you how it will work, or even what such a platform would really achieve, apart from bringing innovative people together through the internet.

Sheikh is not alone in the weakness of his ideas. Chloe Adams, a former journalist, critiques Australia's media in her chapter 'The Marketplace of Ideas'. After the predictable diatribe against media concentration and the sensationalism of the media that you would expect from a former *Herald Sun* journalist who defected to the ABC, Adams celebrates one of the few areas of media commentary where sensationalism is apparently put aside to ensure the public is educated without bias—climate change.

According to Adams, the media 'carries a responsibility to engage the public and challenge their minds, a responsibility to act as a leader on important issues, to be balanced and credible, and to act without malice of bias... and to resist the urge to cater to the lowest common denominator'. Yet, surprisingly she resisted the temptation to criticise any number of over-hyped sensationalised apocalyptic climate change stories.

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Similarly Adams' unflinching commitment to unbiased commentary shines through when she writes that 'there is plenty of evidence to support the theory that the public can think for themselves... despite the best-selling newspaper in the country editorialising in favour of Howard in the 2007 election, he still lost his reign and his electoral seat in the process. With a little nudge in the right direction, and with adequate education, we could build on this further'.

To be fair to *The Future By Us* gang, not every idea is a bad one. The idea with the most merit is in the 'Health is More than Hospitals' chapter that argues in favour of electronic medical records to be accessed through health portals. But it is hardly innovative, or original. The chapter's author, Daniel Yore, doesn't consider the complex issues that face such a system—privacy, access, cost and whether the government should be involved in developing such a scheme in the first place—important issues that are the topic of intense current

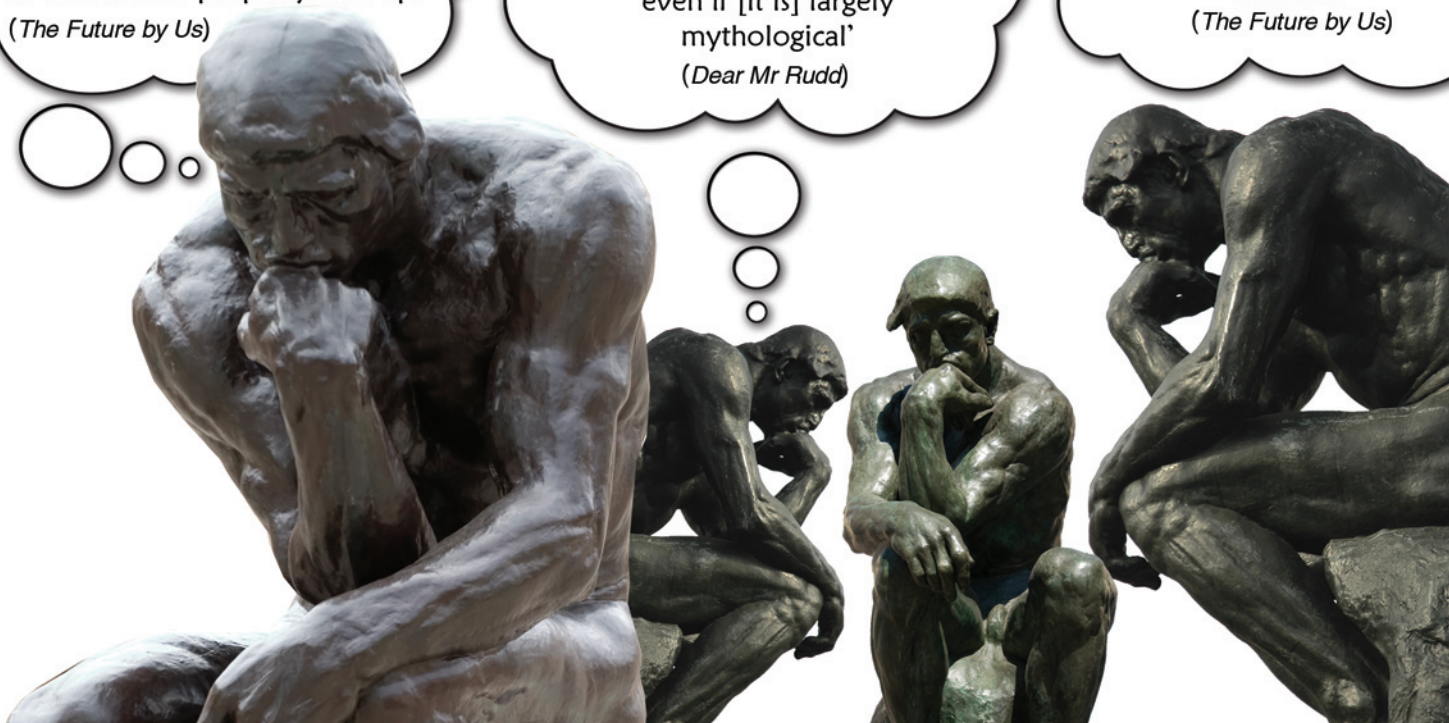
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An investment market specifically for 'mums and dads' to invest in 'intellectual property start-ups'  
(*The Future by Us*)

Follow the 'ASEAN way' of cooperative foreign policy, 'even if [it is] largely mythological'  
(*Dear Mr Rudd*)

Compulsory personal carbon emissions accounts  
(*The Future by Us*)



debate over the medical record sharing systems being developed by software firms like Microsoft.

The rest of *The Future by Us* does little more than demonstrate the ignorance, blindspots, and peculiar prejudices of the writers. They call for a bureaucratic reserve that would fulfil a strikingly similar role as the bureaucrats who serve in developing countries through the AusAID project. They demonstrate their privileged upbringing by calling for a 'GQ' (Global Intelligence Index) to measure global awareness and bilingual skills in the same manner that IQ measures intelligence, seemingly unaware that this would do little more than provide every rich, university-educated child whose parents could afford summer holidays in France an even better start to life. And they propose that high school kids should complete compulsory media studies to see through the apparent of media bias that allows right-of-centre political parties to be successful.

Following the book's publication coeditor Hugh Evans did an interview with an Australian men's magazine (also called *GQ*). According to Evans the au-

thors worked 'extremely hard to ensure the ideas put forward were pragmatic'. The journalist, William Storr, responded by arguing the book 'lacks a youthful fire and fury. There's a lack of grand and shameless vision.'

But most of the ideas in *The Future by Us* are frustrating because they are neither idealistic nor pragmatic. They are just inane. And they are written within the boundaries of what the authors believe to be politically acceptable. Storr pointed out that the book was not written by little idealists. The book was written by little Rudds.

But should we expect anything better from young people? After all the ideas offered by their elders are no better. At least two books have been proffered from the founts of wisdom of baby boomers—*Dear Mr. Rudd: Ideas for a better Australia*, edited by Robert Manne and *The Ideas Book* edited by Phillip Adams. Both suffer from the same root problems of *The Future By Us*—group think, paternalism and a certainty that Australia is intellectually bereft.

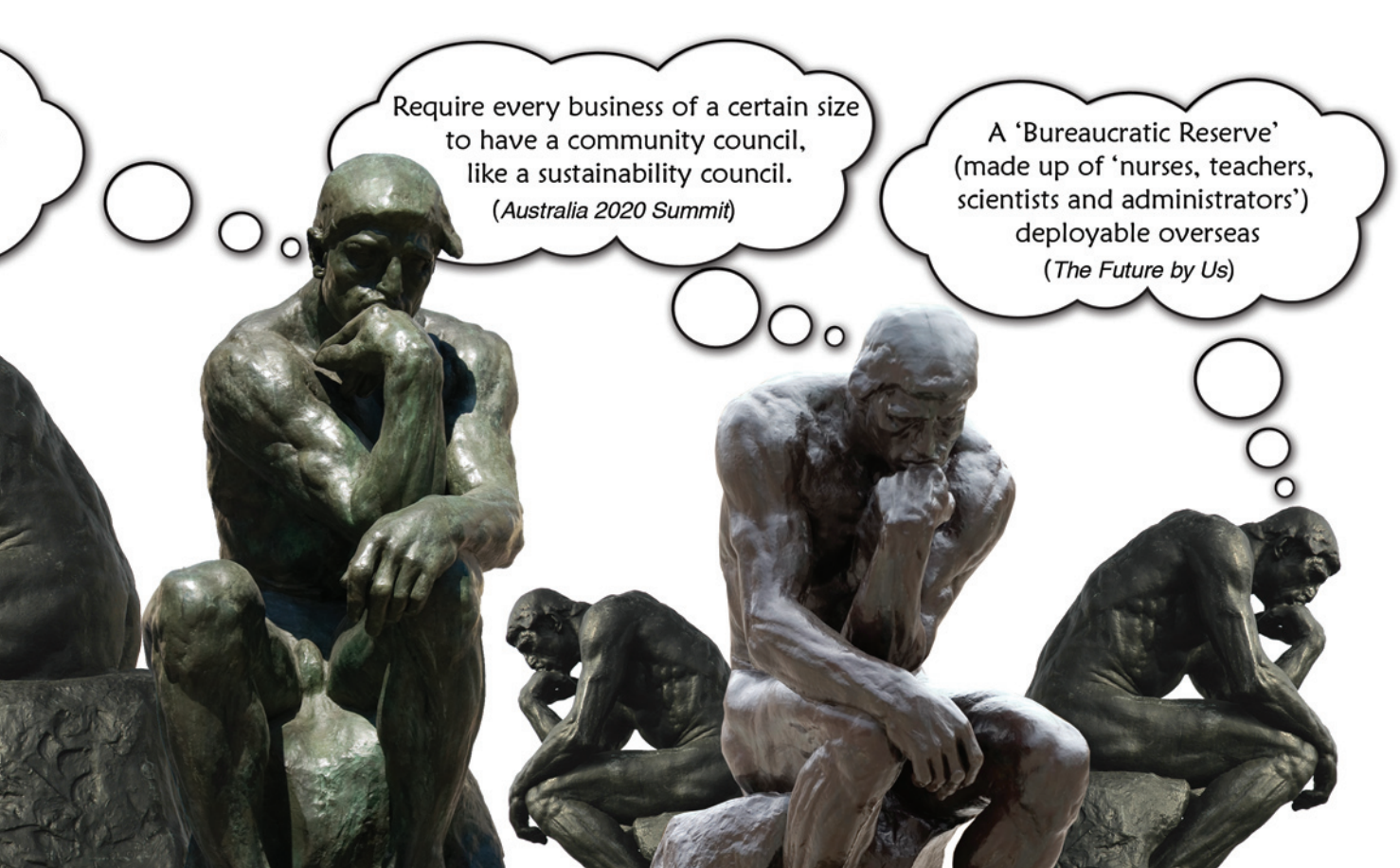
*Dear Mr. Rudd* and *The Ideas Book* argue Australia has been on an

ideas diet. In their world, during the Howard years we've suffered from the intellectual equivalent of capital flight. On the evening of Saturday, 2nd of March 1996 all the good ideas simply left Australia because the environment was so hostile and the infrastructure supporting intellectual thought collapsed. Fortunately it returned on Saturday, 24th November 2007 in a blaze of 'me-tooism' of the same agenda that caused the intellectual flight in the first place.

As Phillip Adams writes in the introduction to *The Ideas Book*, 'Once upon a time, Australia was a terrific country'—and apparently, that time was the Keating government.

Indeed, at the heart of Australia's self-appointed ideas elite are not ideas, but agendas and a deep ideological frustration that people don't like what they have to say. In *Dear Mr. Rudd* Mark McKenna opines it perfectly when he states

can we cast our gaze beyond the vision of Australia's conservatives—individual liberty, home ownership and material prosperity—and strike a genuinely new



and more inclusive national settlement? Not a vision founded on political ideology or empty-feel good rhetoric, but one grounded in the difficult marriage of symbolism and substantive political, legal and social change.

And the following pages in both books offer insight into what they think such a marriage of symbolic and substantive change may mean. For Clive Hamilton in *Dear Mr. Rudd* that includes ratifying the Kyoto Protocol with an emissions trading scheme, but not where there is an 'excessive free allocation of permits' to carbon emitters.

In the same book William Maley argues that Australia should be following 'the ASEAN way' of cooperative foreign policy 'even if they are largely mythological or at best symbolic'. And for Harry Evans it means 'a minimum thirty days for committee scrutiny (of legislation) would seem... reasonable'.

But since Rudd has been elected, Hamilton's nightmare has been embraced, Maley's wish for Australia to embrace in an ASEAN-style grouping has been proposed and collapsed, and a \$42 billion stimulus package has been

rushed through the Parliament, not even past a committee, in less than Evans's prescribed thirty day time frame.

But since the election of Rudd we haven't heard the cries of horror at the same feverish pitch throughout the Howard years from these voices. During the Howard government there were lots of ideas proposed from deregulating the labour market, privatising government assets to intervening in abusive remote aboriginal communities. And by-in-large they were merely extensions of the previous Labor government's agenda. The difference was Australia's ideas elite didn't come up with them. And it demonstrates a group think that now pervades Australia's self-appointed ideas elite.

After reading *The Future By Us*, *The Ideas Book* and *Dear Mr. Rudd*, it is not that Australia's ideas elite likes ideas generically, it is that they like only their ideas, with a clear distaste for anyone else's. And while such an attitude is expected from battle hardened political warriors like Phillip Adams and Robert Manne, the attitude has already infected the next generation of Australia's ideas elite.

Daniel Yore's chapter on health policy in *The Future By Us* is a long criticism of 'the commodification of health' and the ills of 'neo-liberal macro-economics where the right to health is trumped by the shareholders' right to maximise profits'. And Anna Rose's outrage when 'at a conference recently, after outlining my vision for a national green-collar job creation program, I was asked why such a scheme was necessary since the market would ensure that we have enough workers in the fields we needed'. According to Rose this is 'econo-mysticism'.

Ideas are a powerful beast. They have the capacity to inspire. And ideas can be hope. In Mary Zournazi's chapter in *The Ideas Book* she correctly writes that hope 'involves a belief and trust in the world'.

But when individuals in society cling to ideas and declare that only theirs are valid, as do Australia's current and future self-appointed ideas elite, they are no longer about hope—merely an outlet for those who find democracy delivers them frustrating outcomes.

