

2008 Estimates

2020 Summit

This week the PM announced his 10 members of the steering committees, last week Senator Allison grilled his representative in the Senate about just what the purpose and scope of this talkfest will be. Below is the conversation emanating from the Estimate Hearings held last week.

Senator ALLISON—I want to ask about the 10 topics that were chosen for the summit. Was there a rationale behind those choices?

Senator Faulkner—I am certain that there was a rationale. I will assist you as best I can in relation to this. The idea of the 2020 Summit obviously is to harness the best ideas across the nation and to apply those ideas to the 10 core challenges that have been identified by government in order to secure our long-term future through to 2020. So, in broad terms, that is the rationale for the 10 summit areas.

Senator ALLISON—Some of the topics are quite broad, such as sustainability, which I guess could mean anything to anyone, but there are also some missing elements under these topics, like education. Can you explain why it is that education or even skills training did not warrant a subject of their own?

Senator Faulkner—The first identified of the critical areas is future directions for the Australian economy, including education, skills, training, science and innovation as part of the nation's productivity agenda.

Senator ALLISON—So education is included under economy?

Senator Faulkner—The critical area 1 is as I have outlined to you in answer to your previous question.

Senator ALLISON—But the only item under that is the availability, as I understand it, of quality teachers. Is that because that is the only issue in, say, schools education, which the government sees as an issue?

Senator Faulkner—Let me provide for you the information that I have. Certainly it is true that one point to be examined by the Australia 2020 Summit will be how we ensure that our children have the highest quality teachers, whether in early childhood, school, TAFE or university, including dealing with the crisis in maths and science related disciplines across the education system. Another key point is how Australia attracts and retains the most talented, creative and highly skilled people, including researchers and scientists, entrepreneurs and professional and skilled workers. Another is how we foster innovation in the workplace, encouraging the transfer of ideas across businesses and economies. You may be aware that the information that has been made available for the Australia 2020 Summit includes these words:

In implementing the government's human capital agenda, the objective is to build a world-class education system that can transform our workforce into the best educated and most highly trained in the world. This in turn is aimed at boosting long-term workforce participation and productivity. This program has begun with the immediate priorities of expanding training places to tackle the skills crisis, as well as providing a universal early childhood education, a rigorous national school curriculum, improved information technology and trades training infrastructure for the 3.3 million young Australians who are at school.

Senator ALLISON—If we stick with schools for a moment, is there anything that would be off limits for discussion at this conference?

Senator Faulkner—It is a very tough question to answer. You would appreciate that at these sessions there is a government chair and then a co-chair. I think the broad approach is to be inclusive, not exclusive. The aim of the summit is to try and tackle long-term challenges and look for long-term responses. My understanding has always been that creative and lateral thinking is very much to be encouraged, and will be very much encouraged, at the summit.

Senator ALLISON—Can I give you an example of a long-term challenge—it has been long term for a while—and that is funding arrangements for non-government schools. Will that be a subject that is countenanced at the summit?

Senator Faulkner—I cannot say specifically what those present are going to raise directly, but it seems to me that it would not be inappropriate for those attending and debating these sorts of long-term options at the summit to raise those issues. The idea is to be inclusive of issues and ideas, not exclusive. I am certainly not able to give you any further or better information on that, Senator, and I doubt that officials are able to. What I can outline to you—and I hope I have—is the broad approach and the spirit in which the summit is being conducted.

Senator ALLISON—Are the government's election commitments able to be discussed, or are they so non-negotiable that there is no point in debating them? For instance, could questions be raised about the proposal to provide computers to all year 9 to year 12 students and the worth of that?

Senator Faulkner—The government is very committed to progressing its election commitments in that area. I am not sure that chairs are going to be prescriptive about these sorts of things. My expectation is that you will get a free-flowing discussion on a whole raft of issues in the 10 areas of interest to the participants. I am not sure that I can give you any better advice on this. The questions that you ask are, to be honest, verging on the hypothetical. I think I have given you the best advice I can in relation to the way the summit might work and the approach of the government, which, as I say, is to be inclusive and to look at very much a future agenda, a forward agenda, the generation of ideas and creative thinking about the critical issues that have been identified.

Senator ALLISON—I agree that the questions I am putting to you are hypothetical, but for many people there is a question mark about what is likely to be an outcome from this. There has been plenty of commentary. Will this be another talkfest where the real issues will not be broached? That is my reason for asking you those questions. A couple of other areas that I thought would have been of interest to many people would be immigration and our treatment of refugees in recent years. Would that be included in any one of those topics?

Senator Faulkner—I would have to look specifically at that, which I am sure officials will quickly do while I broadly respond to your question. The idea of the summit, as has been said I think by the Prime Minister, is to harness and harvest ideas that develop from the community and to shape them into concrete policy ideas. The Prime Minister has been very clear in saying that he does not believe that the government itself has a monopoly on policy wisdom. We have been really clear about saying that. As I say, trying to harness the ideas, energy and talents of others in the community is of critical importance.

I might say to you, in relation to an area of the summit, one of the 10 key areas—this is the one that you previously identified—is ‘Population, sustainability, climate change and water’. You might note that the proposal is for the summit to examine how we plan future population growth at national and regional levels given the constraints of water shortages and sustainability.

Senator ALLISON—Of course it is one thing to come up with ideas but quite another to develop policy as a result of those ideas. Do you anticipate that those who come will already be able to present you with research that backs up their proposals or will the government then hand all that over to the Public Service and say, ‘Off you go. Figure out if this is workable or not’? Lots of people have ideas, but it does not necessarily mean they are good ones.

Senator Faulkner—Of course, but I think what the government is trying to do here is ensure that at this particular forum we look past short-termism, if you like, to really try to confront these very significant challenges that Australia has for the future. That is conceptually what lies behind the summit. That is, I think, what the Prime Minister has made very clear in his public statements about the importance and significance of the summit itself.

Senator ALLISON—That is interesting. I will press you on that point because I think this is central. It seems to me that ideas are quite different from where we are heading, where we want to be in 20 years time or in 50 years time. Surely ideas are about how you get to a particular point. Will the summit be guided by Australia wanting to reduce emissions or wanting to reduce consumption of water domestically or whatever by a certain time frame—and here are some of the ideas that you might get there with?

Senator Faulkner—As I have said to you before, I think the words that were originally used by the Prime Minister about the summit, about it being about harnessing and harvesting ideas, are a very good summation of it—a very good summary of the approach that the government is taking. It is obviously particularly interested in those ideas that are capable of being shaped into concrete policy actions. That is a clear imperative, as I understand it, of the summit. I am doing my best to faithfully recount to you what my understanding here is of the government’s approach. No doubt the officials at the table will dig me in the ribs if I have strayed at all, but I think that is a pretty fair summary of where we find ourselves.

Senator ALLISON—What of the role of the Prime Minister himself in the summit? What will that be?

Senator Faulkner—I beg your pardon?

Senator ALLISON—The role of the Prime Minister in the summit—what will it be?

Senator Faulkner—This is being very much driven by the Prime Minister—that is what I would say to you in the first instance. It is effectively an idea that he has generated and developed. I can only say to you, in terms of a more formal role, that he is going to co-chair the summit with Professor Glyn Davis from Melbourne University. It is an absolutely critical role that the Prime Minister is going to have, one that is integral to the summit in both a process sense, as co-chair, and also in terms of providing drive and energy and enthusiasm for the summit to work as we would want it to work.

Senator ALLISON—Will ministers be there for those areas related to their portfolios?

Senator Faulkner—Yes, the plan is for members of the executive to co-chair the 10 key summit areas. Certainly there is an expectation that other cabinet ministers will attend.

Senator ALLISON—And departmental secretaries or other staff from departments?

Senator Faulkner—I am not sure of that, but I will ask officials whether they can assist, where the planning has got to that point.

Ms McRae—My understanding is that Australian government departmental heads will attend.

Senator ALLISON—They will be one of the 100 in each of the 10 areas?

Ms McRae—My understanding is that they will form part of the 1,000.

Senator ALLISON—Will there be a communique at the end of the process?

Senator Faulkner—I think 'communique' is not the terminology that I would use, but I do understand that there is a plan for options papers to be produced in each of the 10 areas. This would be more substantive in nature than just a summit communique.

Senator ALLISON—Does an options paper suggest that you might have contrary ideas—that you might have disparate approaches? Surely 100 people are not all going to agree.

Senator Faulkner—It suggests more to me that there may well be different views as to priorities, as opposed to conflicting ideas. I am giving you there more of a personal view. Perhaps officials can assist you with that.

Dr Morauta—The wording of the press release talks about producing, 'following the summit, options for consideration by government'. I do not think there is a comment there particularly about the relationship between them.

Senator ALLISON—Will it be a public document?

Senator Faulkner—As I understand so.

Senator ALLISON—Will it be produced at the time of the end of the summit, or will it take some time to pull together after that?

Senator Faulkner—Can we assist Senator Allison with timing?

Dr Morauta—Not immediately after the summit, but not too long after it.

Senator Faulkner—Does that assist? That is perhaps the best we can do on that question.

Senator ALLISON—Perhaps a matter of days?

Dr Morauta—No, I think it is probably more likely—the chairs will have to work it up so I am really not sure—to take a week or two.

Senator ALLISON—For the final version, will they go back to the 100 people who were involved?

Dr Morauta—I do not think the detail has been worked out yet.

Senator Faulkner—Senator, I cannot advise you on that and officials cannot assist you either. Some of these processes obviously will become clear as the steering committee, when it is in place, starts to work through these sorts of logistical issues. The broadbrush is as we have presented to you but specifically, with regard to the last question you asked, we are not in a position to answer at this early stage.

Senator ALLISON—Can you provide the names of the 10 members of the steering committee?

Senator Faulkner—Not at this stage, Senator.

Senator ALLISON—Is that because they have not been selected?

Senator Faulkner—I believe so, Senator, but I will check with the officials. They are in the process of being selected, Senator.

Senator ALLISON—Will this be made public?

Senator Faulkner—Of course, Senator. Officials advise me that this is likely to be finalised within the next fortnight or so.