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TITLE: The anatomy of a good idea: from the sublime to the subprime

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I've been trying to come up with a brilliant idea about the future of Australian governance to take to the 2020 Summit this weekend. Even when your day job is deep thinking, this is an interesting challenge. I've reflected that the 2020 Summit itself is a good idea for three main reasons (and no, not just because I've been invited, although that probably helps).

Firstly, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd is asking for participants to take the long view of Australia's future, which is always the hard thing for leaders trapped in the electoral cycle to do. This bodes well for slow-burn issues like social justice and environmental protection.

Secondly, Rudd is asking Australia to accept that just gathering 1000 volunteers in a room and asking them to volunteer their talent and energy for Australia's future is a good idea. Sure, it has a touch of school prize day but there is a real sense of nobility in that request, touching on conceptions of a citizen's duty and volunteerism. As such, it should at least inspire some truly brilliant Chaser sketches pillorying such notions.

Thirdly, perhaps from all the public submissions and the list of 1000 names, an extra message will be that good ideas can come from all sorts of people, all over Australia. (I'm a farm girl from Coonabarabran NSW and I'm going to the summit armed with a red-hot idea about parliamentary scrutiny of delegated legislation. True story.) Of course, it makes you wonder how will 1000 people map out our future in two days? There will be lots of invisible legwork before and after, plus it will require real engagement by those unsung heroes, the staffers and public servants who will take away the fruits of the harvest and turn them into policy. But we, the people, will also need the ability to sort the wheat from the chaff.

Here's a handy guide to start the debate. A good idea is plain, certain, tangible the "who, what, why, where" is agreed upon and unambiguous. Excision of islands from the migration zones fails this basic sniff test pretty soundly. Sounds goofy, was goofy.

A good idea is fit for purpose. For example, no one disagreed with the aims of the Northern Territory emergency intervention, but the extra issues like the acquisition of land didn't seem to fit the objectives.

A good idea should also have integrity some sort of fit between the idea and the mandate of the person having it otherwise you risk arousing feelings of hypocrisy and alienation. Previous indigenous affairs minister Mal Brough did seem to earnestly

believe in the intervention, but because the issues in indigenous populations had been so dire for so long, yet were until then largely ignored by the Howard government, the intervention was seen as an exercise in election politics, not genuine concern.

A good idea can be held accountable who will be responsible, where will money come from, how will it be spent? A good idea should include consulting the affected stakeholders who know the most about their own lives. Again, the Northern Territory intervention springs to mind as a negative example.

Some good ideas struggle to reach fruition because they are aimed at the most vulnerable and silent, and therefore the least powerful of our society. Ideas like that need a champion, usually a leader out to build a legacy. Overseas development aid and an Australian charter of rights would be examples of those.

A good idea should be evidence-based. I'm with Rudd on this. It should be the evidence that leads to the policy, not a hypothesis which turns out to have lots of unintended consequences (the classic example is cane toads, but the list in this category is long; ask any retired public servant for their favourite example). Something else to look out for in evaluating an idea would be a simple question like, "Is it legal?" Two words AWB affair.

And less simply, but ultimately most important, "Is the time ripe?" Victor Hugo says there is one thing stronger than all the armies in the world, and that is an idea whose time has come. Climate change would have to fit that bill, although the time probably came, and went some years hence. Plus we all need some plain dumb luck. Wish me some on Saturday.