

Summing up the Forum: what future the Lucky Country?

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Abstract

Professor Emerita Ann Williamson summarised the presentations given at the Forum.

Thank you very much for having the faith in me to be the person to summarise the Forum. As I am also the person between you and a drink, I will try to be succinct. The day has left my mind buzzing with ideas and new knowledge, and I've been challenged to really stretch my limits in many ways. I'm not an economist and one or two of the talks really demonstrated that to me.

Interpretation of our rather challenging topic of “the future of the Lucky Country” has ranged broadly across speakers. Many of the presentations have been strong on the issues relating to whether a prosperous and sustainable Australia is possible. Several presentations pointed out many of the future problems we face in these areas. Fewer presentations talked about solutions to these problems. Perhaps that reflects the state of the art on these issues.

We have seen prosperity broadly defined. We have seen it defined in terms of wealth, as you'd expect, but also health, both of people and the environment. Sustainability was also broadly defined, not just in terms of sustainable climate, but also sustainable growth, and, interestingly, sustainable well-being.

Our speakers tackled some of the serious problems in achieving both prosperity and sustainability outcomes that we face now and into the future and which cross many aspects of society.

We have had a couple of salient, well-argued talks about the limits to growth from Graham Turner and Brian Czech, that focused on the issues arising from unfettered economic growth. One of Graham's books likens it to a runaway train — and from their presentations, we can see why both speakers would take that view. On the other hand, we have seen some tempering of the anxiety we might feel about the Australian economy in the presentation by James Morley. He advanced an argument that Australia may become a safe haven, and foreign investment and migration are not only justified but will actually help us maintain the prosperity and sustainability nexus.

The presentations also ranged into some of the specific difficult challenges to future prosperity and sustainability. Eddie Holmes talked about biosecurity, an issue that scares all of us. He pointed out the insidiousness of influenza and many other communicable diseases in a highly physically connected world and talked about their impact on our health and biodiversity. By so doing, he highlighted problems that just don't get enough discussion. In a Forum about the future, climate change of course was included, in a fascinating discussion by John Quiggin. Less often recognised, the issue of social fragmentation was raised by Hugh Mackay. He pointed to increasing social isolation, loneliness and

anxiety that threaten well-being and threaten our social harmony, cohesion and our way of life into the future.

So, we have identified a broad range of problems that are likely to jeopardise our future prosperity and sustainability. Identifying problems is an important first step to resolving them, but do the solutions to our prosperity and sustainability lie in just fixing these specific problems? Will we solve our problems of prosperity and sustainability if we stop economic growth, regulate migration and investment, stop travelling so much, only use renewables and be nice to each other? Well, probably not; in fact, it is highly unlikely. Having raised these issues, though, we need to think harder about what does create prosperity and sustainability; how do we bring these potentially competing aims together to achieve the kind of balance that we want in Australia's future?

At the Forum, we heard some talks that put forward some interesting ideas for how we might work toward solutions. Two speakers gave us some frameworks and tools that should help our thinking on how to achieve the prosperity and sustainability relationship we seek. On the premise that "if you don't measure it, you can't manage it," the U.N. sustainability goals that Sam Mostyn talked about and the Australian Environmental-Economic Accounts that Jacky Hodges introduced provide methods for evaluating our progress towards sustainability. Both speakers pointed to the challenges that we face in achieving goals in both cases. These types of benchmarks are really a vital part of the solution. We must have them in order to plan our course towards these goals, to know how well we're doing on the path and whether we are being successful and effective in achieving our prosperity and sustainability

goals. We need these tools and we need to use them.

Some presentations made arguments for some solutions. To paraphrase and draw these together, we saw solutions that talked about the limits and the impact of our activities through interesting ideas such as the circular economy and recycling from Ashley Brinson, and managing greenhouse gases, which was our last wonderful talk from John Quiggin. As our speakers demonstrated, there are eminently possible ideas here, but they need political will to be achieved. Similarly, the ideas put forward about steady-state economies from Brian Czech could be achieved with enthusiastic and supportive leadership. Graham Turner described the concept of duelling loops of influence where he pointed out that achieving sustainability through greater use of renewables, stabilising population, reducing household consumption and reducing the working week will benefit the environment without reducing GDP or individual wealth. This has certainly made me, and I am sure others, pause to think because while there are some real challenges in achieving them, the question is whether we can be clever enough to make them happen.

Three speakers painted a picture of the benefits of technology. We heard from Hugh Durrant-Whyte, from Toby Walsh, and from Mary-Anne Williams, all of whom see that technology has a major place in solving our prosperity issues now and into the future. This is not a place for my particular soap box, but I think we do need to pause to think here. These presentations place a real emphasis on the positive aspects of technology, arguing that it is the future. Mary-Anne Williams, however, provided a comprehensive description of the risks of Artificial Intelligence (AI),

but then we moved on and the problems these risks present were not discussed further.

I think we glossed over a major concern about the introduction of technology and the use of AI in our world. For AI and new technologies to achieve the benefits predicted, they must be convincing and satisfying for people to use. They must fulfil a human need or purpose and be designed to make tasks easier rather than more complex or difficult. Consider technology failures like Google glass or the Segway, or technology interface complexities like the proliferation of passwords. These are all examples of clever technologies that fail or that people resist using because their interfaces with the user do not take into account how people work or prefer to operate in the world. People will not use technologies that they find difficult, confusing, or that they feel they cannot trust to work reliably. People are going to need to feel that AI is sufficiently trustworthy to use. Certainly, trust in AI and new technology will not be developed by the early introduction of imperfect technologies. Why should users trust technology that doesn't work the way they expect it to or requires them to learn many new skills to operate it, or doesn't work at all. Introduction of driver-assistive technology and automated vehicles is a clear case in point, where acceptance by drivers and purchasers will depend on the extent to which they trust its reliability and whether it really makes driving easier.

We need AI and new technologies that are not just designed to be clever but to be useful and useable by their target population. I think we have some way to go here. I know Toby Walsh has said this too, but I think we need to take this further than he did in the Forum. Talking about AI as a holistic concept is probably not the way to go. Not all

applications of AI and new technology are good or of benefit to users. I think there's a very important debate to be had here. We are seeing the need to pause and consider the implications of particular AI applications before they are introduced to the community. The recent experiences of two major air crashes involving Boeing 737 Max 8 aircraft with consequent tragic losses of many lives is surely telling us this. In both cases, Boeing's automation software that operated without pilots being aware was a major cause of the crashes. Keeping pilots "out-of-the-loop" has been recognised as a threat to safety in aviation, yet Boeing allowed these aircraft onto the market. Similarly, we are seeing medical devices being beta-tested in patients without fully assessing their function and how they are used. There are many other examples of technologies being introduced too early before proper testing to ensure their safety. It is time to draw back a little and resist the temptation to be persuaded to introduce AI and new technologies before we can be convinced that they are of benefit for human users.

What does all this mean for achieving prosperity and sustainability? One question is whether it is possible to have these two dimensions come together. Some people are arguing, yes, it is possible for Australia to have sustainability and be prosperous, but others are saying maybe it isn't. Certainly, both Brian Czech's and Graham Turner's talks suggest that these are competing goals. Many of the talks alluded to the need to involve and motivate our decision makers. I think all the speakers mentioned policy, decision makers, government to a greater or lesser degree, the last talk by John Quiggin in particular in the context of needing people with decision-making power to act. Many

of the problems that were highlighted in the Forum require this sort of action. I was very pleased to see our first speaker, Hugh Durrant-Whyte, arguing in that direction. As the New South Wales Chief Scientist & Engineer, he is eminently well placed to do that. Many of the talks highlighted options that should become at least short-term targets for policy and decision-makers in government.

Many targets could be achieved right now. The establishment of an Australian Centre for Disease Control, as argued by Eddie Holmes, is a prime example. Having worked in public, workplace and transport safety-related fields for many years myself, I have often wondered why we don't have an equivalent of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control. The rise of communicable diseases, many with very serious consequences, certainly indicates a need. John Quiggin also pointed out the urgent need for action on managing greenhouse gases and showed us a way of achieving that right now. Similarly, it is possible to strengthen recycling policies and provide incentives to do so right now. We just need political will to do so. Other problems will probably take medium- or longer-term policy action such as controlling growth and managing new technology but, again, it's going to need the decision makers, and the people who actually can make things happen in our society to seize the problem and solve it.

I loved the concept of stewardship put forward by Sam Mostyn, which relates, in this context, to assuming responsibility to shepherd and safeguard shared valuables and resources. Sam's point was that Australia's progress on the U.N. Sustainable Development goals is lacking. While individuals can, and should, play a stewardship role, we need to lobby governments to assume stewardship

for areas covered by the U.N. goals: poverty, inequality, climate, environmental degradation, prosperity, and peace and justice. I know many people in the room have spent a significant proportion of their lives lobbying government on many issues related to sustainability, prosperity and well-being, and the shared experience is often that it's not so easy. I also know that's true. But stewardship can also extend to our personal responsibilities to create sustainability and prosperity in our communities. Sam Mostyn pointed out that prosperity can be defined in terms of happiness as well as dollars. This point dovetails nicely with Hugh Mackay's reminding us that we are not just bystanders in building sustainability. He argued convincingly that it's our responsibility to act, to fill in some of the holes that are appearing in our social fabric, such as loneliness, isolation and general social disintegration, and that we need to work on these. We have a role, as stewards, to take action, to build a more prosperous social structure as well as the prosperous wealth-related structure and sustainability.

Overall, I think that the presentations raised issues and questions that must be answered if we are to achieve sustainability and wealth in Australia in the future and they gave us some directions for action. But what of the question raised by the theme for the Forum? If we do manage prosperity and sustainability, will this change Australia's luck? Will we continue to be The Lucky Country?

I think it's worth pausing here to remind ourselves of the origin of the concept of The Lucky Country. There are likely to be many people in the room who, like me, were around in 1964 and they might well remember Donald Horne's best-selling book *The Lucky Country*. It was a bestseller: I think a

hundred thousand copies or so sold out in nine days. It's been reprinted continuously, it's still in print, and I believe Hugh Mackay wrote the introduction to the sixth reprint.

The term "lucky country" is often interpreted as a favourable comment about Australia, but Horne wasn't being favourable. In fact, he was being ironic. The beginning of his last chapter sums up his argument this way:

Australia is a lucky country run by second-rate people who share its luck. It lives on other people's ideas and although its ordinary people are adaptable, most of its leaders (in all fields) so lack curiosity about the events that surround them that they are often taken by surprise.

Horne's thesis is a bit tough to read. Certainly, when I first read it, I thought, "surely that's not true?" On reflection, I think Horne's argument was that Australia's prosperity relied too much on the luck of our history, our rich natural resources and our tradition of importing good, clever people rather than on "clever" innovation, technology and enterprise. Now, more than fifty years later, I think it is right to ask whether this argument is still apt; if it ever was.

The theme of the Forum was bold enough to pose the question of the future for the Lucky Country. From the presentations, I think there is evidence that challenges Horne's argument and suggests that Australia's current and future prosperity is not and will not just be based on luck. The

ideas and the debate we've participated in are testament to the fact that Australia and Australians can and will challenge themselves to build a better future. How we build a sustainable and prosperous Australia and the stumbling blocks that are in our way have been the objective of the Forum, and the discussion has ranged widely about strategies and solutions. Nevertheless, just as Donald Horne in 1964 challenged Australia not simply to rely on luck but to take action and to do better, our Forum, I think, has been an attempt to actually do the same: to put forward our ideas towards achieving a prosperous and a sustainable Australia in the future.

I think much of what we have heard also tells us that we need to take up the challenge of action and we need to encourage our leaders to adopt the available strategies and solutions and to act to make them happen rather than just let luck run its course. We need to ensure that our leaders are aware of the issues raised in the Forum, and encourage them to be part of the action, the decision making, the policy making to overcome the problems identified to be limiting our quest for improved sustainability and prosperity. I think these really are the essential ingredients to taking the irony out of the concept of The Lucky Country.

Reference

Horne, Donald, *The Lucky Country: Australia in the Sixties*, Melbourne: Penguin, 1964.

