

CEDA Big Issues Discussion Forum: The Biggest Economic and Social Challenges Facing Australia

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I just wanted to give a little bit more of a perspective on...build on some Phil's comments as to why we did it, and also talk a little bit about what we do from here and maybe some observations about some of the panel discussions, and really don't want to take too much time, because I think we'll gain more really from the insights from the members of the panel today.

But essentially, what we wanted to do here was to step back from the daily policy debate, and ask some of the big questions about what's determining Australia's long-term success. And it was interesting even in the panel discussion we had some discussion as to how we might segment these. Firstly, we looked at issues and opportunities which really hadn't been identified yet; in other words, those emerging issues or things which were really coming up the curve. An example of that, as I recall it coming out of the discussion was the use of genetics to cure diseases, so issues like that.

We looked at a second category of issues as well, where the issues are readily identified, but the solutions are not known. For example, some of the chronic problems associated with indigenous health and education; we had some discussion about those, and we'll have a little bit more reflection on that in the panel discussion I'm sure.

And the third category of issues really was those issues which were already identified, we felt the solutions were known, but there were some things that were preventing us from actually implementing those solutions. And they could be political, they could be structural, they could be institutional, but nonetheless, this was the area of...water might have been one example of that. Now this is all sounding a little bit like unknown knowns, known unknowns and known knowns, I can assure that'll be my last Donald Rumsfeld moment today.

But I think the other thing, finally was just to look at how we could use this sort of discussion, the input from our trustees and then subsequently the discussion with the expert panel as a way to try to inform and develop our research agenda over the longer period.

A couple of observations and Phil made one or two of them; you've got the results, so I'm really not going to spend a lot of time in actually going through those. But a couple of observations that we felt from the discussion at the panel; yes, was there a recency bias in the responses? As much as you try to look out over that 10 year timeframe, obviously the things which are most in your face every day, they

start to impact your judgement on what are going to be the critical things. It was certainly a tough process to try to agree on the rank order for the top 10, and you'll see even when we took the results of the voting from our trustees, and then overlaid that with the discussion of the expert panel level, there were some shifts, a couple of ones which I think are worth highlighting. For example, we had interesting federalism; the government issue of federalism really came up from number 57 when it was voted on by the trustees, right up there to number 4 when we had the expert panel discussion. Why? Well partially, I think it's a function of having more time to get into the discussion on the issues, but secondly, I think it also was we're in the fortunate position in the panel discussion of being able to think about well, if these are the key issues, how do we put some of the solutions in place? And often these kinds of government issues came up the issue of federal and state government relationships. So I think that accounted for why this came up so high on the ranking for the panel members.

Another one which was worth highlighting was health and government; that came up into the top 10, from just outside the top 10, and the area of communications and natural resources. I think again, that was somewhere around 19 from our trustees, but when the expert panel took a look at that, they actually increased the priority which we should attach to that.

I think the important thing will be what we do next; what'll we do with this kind of information? It was very gratifying to get the response rate we did from our trustees. I mean, it was a very long survey, let's face it; it was over 100 questions I think, and we had about 300 responses, so that's a pretty significant achievement. It shows that people are prepared to take the time to give us some quality input and we really did appreciate that.

Not all of the things that you see on the priority list will be things that we will subsequently pursue as part of our research agenda. Sometimes it's because there may well be other organisations that are better placed to be able to pursue these agenda items, but certainly it's very informative to know these are the kinds of things out there from primarily in the business community which people think are the predominant issues which need to be addressed.

I guess I probably just want to close, I think, on one comment which I thought came out of the survey, and it was something which one of our trustees said; it might even be someone in this room. So if you are here, you can put your hand up and maybe we'll give you a prize or something like that. Let me just read what that person said, because I think it does encapsulate very nicely why we did this and the importance of doing a project like this. "There's nothing permanent except change. Society, people and the environment are forever moving. It's in our best interests to understand these movements so as we can best make the most informed decisions on which action and direction to take."

All I want to say really in closing and then we'll go into the panel session, is really to thank Phil for all of the support from the IBIS world team, and for his personal support for this project. I want to thank all of the members of the expert panel, who gave up a fair swag of their time to a project like this, and the names are too many to go through, but the names are listed in the papers at the tables. I certainly want to thank our panellists today, Mr Nick Greiner and Catherine Livingston as well as Phil, and also BRW; it's been great to work with BRW on this project, Kevin Chinnery and Peter Roberts and I look forward to doing so again. And thank you most of all to our trustees for your great support on this project; thank you.

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