

[This is Stilgherrian's submission to topic area 9 of the Australia 2020 Summit, written 9 April 2008. To contact Stilgherrian, please go to stilgherrian.com.]

Managing continual, rapid change with a clear framework of values

To say that our society's pace of change is rapidly accelerating is almost a cliché — yet it's the truth. Young people now entering the workforce have never known a time without the internet or mobile phones — unless they recall their infancy.

Children entering school today will emerge in 2020 taking for granted the technology they'll grow up with: mobile, high-speed data networks; pocket-sized devices which allow them to converse with anyone, anywhere, in sound and vision as well as words. Their media and political diet will be moderated as much by friends and acquaintances as by “professional” politicians and media producers — perhaps even more so.

And the generation following them will be comfortable in a world which few of us can even imagine.

It's clear that our steam-aged constitution and parliamentary institutions will not cope.

Already young people (and some not so young) create and manage social networks with a speed that's breathtaking. This will become the norm some time next week, or so it'll feel. Australia's democracy must grasp these tools which already transforming our world — not tentatively, but with bold confidence.

If we are to experiment, our experiments must look forward not a year or three, but a decade or two. Otherwise the lessons of the experiment will be outdated before it's even finished.

To cope in any rapidly-changing environment, two elements are essential:

1. A clear understanding of the aims and the rules of engagement.
2. A clear, flexible mechanism for evaluating our progress and adapting our methods to new conditions.

Constitutions are hard to change. If we are to update Australia's constitution — and if this Summit ends without recommending a comprehensive review then, I believe, it will have failed — then we must ensure that our core values are locked in for another century. They must include the fundamental human and civil rights which Australia has already recognized internationally but has failed to enshrine in law.

A so-called “bill of rights” is essential. It should be written in clear and unassailable language. Anyone who resists writing into law what we've already agreed to as fundamental rights can only intend to deny those rights to someone.

To protect those rights, and to ensure that our democracy continues to reflect them, we need a mechanism to continually check that they are not eroded. That implies some permanent institution, one whose own existence is guaranteed and well-protected against any potential political interference in the future.

In a more rapidly-changing future our lawmakers and administrators will need ways of working more rapidly. A formal institution would help ensure that we don't trade off our rights for temporary expediency, either accidentally or as the result of incipient despotism.