

ESSAY

‘THE TIME FOR RESILIENCE IS NOW’:¹ RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE 2020 GAP SUMMIT ON NATIONAL RESILIENCE

Olga Bodrova

Recent environmental, health and economic crises have exposed Australia’s structural weaknesses as well as highlighting individual strength and community agility in the face of challenge and change. Olga Bodrova recounts the ideas and proposals from Global Access Partners’ latest public forum in 2020.

A RESILIENT NATION

‘The bumps in the road aren’t in the way, they are the way.’ – GAP Summit delegate

Over the last 20,000 years, humans have proved themselves to be the most resilient and adaptable inhabitants of Planet Earth. Since the end of the last Ice Age, we have explored and occupied every habitat, from the polar ice and equatorial rain forests to the open ocean and outer space. While other animals are limited by the relatively slow process of evolution by natural selection, we humans rapidly adapt to new circumstances through individual experimentation, reshaping group cultures and inventing power-magnifying technologies which transform the environment to suit our needs.

Humanity has weathered any number of cataclysmic events, both natural and manmade, from volcanos and earthquakes to plagues, famines, world wars and the threat of nuclear destruction. The historical

1. Fitzsimmons, 2020

impact of coronavirus is still to be seen, but GAP's Resilience Summit in September 2020² – held online for the first time due to the COVID-19 pandemic – summarised the quick lessons learned and suggested positive steps to ensure Australia is better placed to weather such crises in the future.

Australia had next to no stockpiles, plans or contingencies in place before the pandemic hit and escaped the ravages of coronavirus due to its 'girt by sea' geography as much as proactive policy. The economic and cultural effects of containment measures were more significant than its domestic health effects, but just as vaccines are inoculating us against COVID-19, so this experience can be used to prepare the country for an ever more uncertain and contested future.

While Australia, unlike the USA, the UK, Europe, Brazil and India, suffered relatively few cases and deaths, the nation was still recovering from severe bushfires when the borders were closed, and recent floods have also highlighted the exposure of modern civilisation to the wrath of nature. The fracturing of international 'just in time' supply chains rocked the foundations of 30 years of economic globalisation, outsourcing and cost-cutting, while the 'panic buying' of the pandemic's early days exposed the fragile nature of our society when basic staples are in short supply.

As an island nation at the end of long trade routes, Australia is particularly vulnerable to global trade disruptions, whatever their cause may be. Low-cost, just-in-time international supply chains rely on every aspect working perfectly, and COVID-19 both exposed their low tolerance for loss and

disruption and the speed with which domestic and international cohesion can fracture when stressed.

Similarly, Australian health care has increasingly focused on the chronic diseases suffered by its aging population and was unprepared for the sudden resurgence of infectious disease. The nation had just 2,000 intensive care beds when COVID-19 struck, a quarter less than the OECD³ average for a nation its size. Australia imported 90% of its medicine and nearly all its Personal Protective Equipment while maintaining no mandated minimum stock levels of essential items.

Policymakers had assumed that the market would provide for every need and circumstance in emergencies and everyday situations. However, COVID-19 proved that delegating national resilience – and therefore sovereignty – to international traders will only work until tested. The *laissez-faire* approach to emergency preparation has been exposed as inadequate in the most extraordinary global circumstances since the Second World War.

While state and national governments reacted quickly to the crisis, taking unprecedented actions to close international travel and domestic borders and impose sweeping restrictions on work and socialising, Australia may still need to learn the necessity of proper preparation and improved domestic capacity in its rush to return to normal. The swift and decisive action taken by the Federal and State governments⁴ shows that collective action is both possible and practical when required, prompting questions about why similarly bold steps cannot be taken to counter other grave threats to the nation, for instance, climate change.

2. Global Access Partners, 2020

3. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

4. Fitzsimmons, 2020; Koff, 2020; Porter, 2020

If resilience is the ability to adapt to a changing or unpredictable environment, we must also reinvent the fundamentals of our society to ensure it stays standing. As **Catherine Fritz-Kalish**⁵ noted when opening the Summit, change is the only constant in life. For Australia to be resilient, every citizen must have the skills, authority and will to adapt to unprecedented and unpredictable challenges and a strong enough stake in society to want to defend it.

NSW Minister **Anthony Roberts**⁶ praised State and Federal decision-makers for their 'strength, resilience and unrivalled persistence' in managing the cascading health situation, while Australia's Ambassador to the USA, **Arthur Sinodinos AO**,⁷ noted Australia's ability to withstand earlier threats such as the global financial crisis. However, he went on to insist that the concept of resilience should now be applied in a much broader way to maximise the talents of every Australian citizen, increase economic agility and social inclusion, and give everyone the stake in society required to motivate collective effort and cohesion. Ambassador Sinodinos stressed the need to teach 'meta' as well as technical skills, for example, including the ability to think critically in an age of information overload and misinformation, to be empathetic as well as creative, and to work together for common goals as well as for individual gain.

A common effort to improve our economy should also boost domestic employment prospects and create high-quality jobs, reducing the economic insecurity endured by many casualised workers. Foreign demand for primary materials powered an unprecedented 30 years of national growth up to the start of 2020, but Australian manufacturing withered away in that time, and our economic reliance on China has been exposed as political tensions have intensified.

Therefore, many Summit participants backed a renewed focus on smart manufacturing⁸ to diversify the economy and allow Australia to take charge of its economic destiny by adding value and commanding a premium in niche global markets. This transformation from primary and minerals producer to manufacturing powerhouse will require a culture that rewards risk-taking and entrepreneurship as well as competitive economic policy settings.

Strategies to improve Australia's industrial base, accelerate advantaged manufacturing and ensure adequate supplies of essential goods could range from preferential government procurement to improved skills training and new trade relations with allied nations, while improvements in defence must encompass the virtual as well as physical worlds.

In addition to these economic measures, NSW Resilience Commissioner **Shane Fitzsimmons**⁹ also stressed the need for authenticity, honesty and clarity from our politicians regarding the issues and challenges we face. He called for evidence-based decisions, but also clear and constant communication on what is known and unknown to ensure public support when harsh measures are necessitated.

Australia's succession of recent disasters has underlined the need for better cohesion, coordination and leadership in government to give citizens, communities and companies the confidence they need to endure and recover, but better communication must work both ways. Bodies such as Resilience NSW and the *National Resilience Institute* proposed by the GAP Summit could play an important role by channelling information on vulnerabilities, stresses and recovery requirements from the grassroots to decision-makers.

5. Fritz-Kalish, 2020

6. Global Access Partners, 2020, p. 10

7. Sinodinos, 2020

8. Willox, 2020

9. Fitzsimmons, 2020

The Australian Government's announcement of \$600 million in May 2021 to help Australia adapt to climate change and manage the disasters that come with it is welcome, and will help fund a new National Recovery and Resilience Agency.¹⁰ Two hundred and ten million dollars will be spent on an Australian Climate Service initiative,¹¹ and these new organisations could help Australia align evidence, policy and practice in a more agile and targeted manner.

However, these spending announcements have not clarified how the Government plans to bring together Australia's experts in policy and practical emergency management to address the complex, evolving threats caused by climate change, land clearing, water depletion and urban sprawl.

At the Summit, **John Blackburn AO**¹² backed the creation of a broader Institute that would address strategic threats as well as natural disasters. He argued that planning for future eventualities of all kinds should be a national as well as state priority. The world is now less secure and more confused than at any time since the end of the Cold War, but the opportunity to integrate consideration of all these threats under a single umbrella has not yet been taken.

GAP prides itself on implementing, as well as offering, practical solutions and is now working to create the *National Resilience Institute* called for by the 2020 Summit and a range of workshops¹³ organised by the Institute for Integrated Economic Research Australia (IIER-A).¹⁴

The proposed *National Resilience Institute* would undertake rigorous research on requirements, threats and capabilities regarding international threats and domestic natural disasters. This research would then underpin its independent, non-political advice to the community, commercial and political decision-makers. In step with GAP's Second Track process, the Institute would facilitate frank debate, share insights across silos and disseminate reliable information with the public as well as privately to improve shared awareness of current and future risks.

Just as the Second Track has employed strategies that evolved in international diplomacy to the domestic sphere,¹⁵ the *National Resilience Institute* could apply well-honed military preparedness strategies to civilian planning as well as capturing the success stories of the COVID-19 crisis. Above all, it would strive to ensure that national resilience remains on the political agenda beyond the end of the current pandemic.

As well as stressing the importance of leadership at every level for adequate planning for future contingencies, the Summit recognised the importance of cultural facets in a resilient society.

There need be no contradiction between recognising the contributions of diverse groups to Australian success and maximising opportunity and participation for all Australians, old and new, with encouraging a new sense of national as well as community unity. The fostering of a risk-taking rather than risk-averse business culture should go hand in hand with more proactive government action in tackling current social problems as well as potential threats.

10. Commonwealth of Australia, 2021a

11. Commonwealth of Australia, 2021b

12. Blackburn, 2020

13. GAP/IIER-A/Gravity Consulting *National Resilience* project, <https://www.globalaccesspartners.org/think-tanks/national-resilience>

14. *bid.*

15. Fritz, 2019

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE 2020 GAP SUMMIT ON NATIONAL RESILIENCE

Speakers and participants offered a range of actions for decision-makers, stakeholders and GAP alumni to progress across the Summit's three themes of Leadership, Governance and Resilience. These were headlined by the call for a *National Resilience Institute* – a permanent independent body funded by philanthropy, federal and state governments, and industry to demonstrate their joint commitment to work together for the common good.

National Resilience Institute

1. Establish an independent *National Resilience Institute* to conduct research, share data and advise on state and national policy.

The Institute should:

- a. Develop comprehensive, evidence-based resilience frameworks which involve all sectors, including academia, business and not-for-profits, as well as State and Territory governments to bolster national and community resilience
- b. Facilitate frank debate, share insights across silos and disseminate information to both decision-makers and the public to improve shared awareness of current and future risks to the nation
- c. Learn from military preparedness strategies to drive cohesive whole-of-government policies to improve disaster planning and management in partnership with local communities
- d. Capture the success stories of the COVID-19 crisis and ensure that national resilience remains on the political agenda beyond the end of the current pandemic

Leadership

2. Recognise the contributions of diverse cultures to modern Australia and increase opportunities for every citizen to maximise the nation's economic potential

3. Foster a risk-based, rather than risk-averse, enterprise and public service culture and incentivise the commercialisation of research, investing in new capabilities and frontier technologies, from hydrogen power to quantum computing, to create new sources of value
4. Engage Australia's diverse communities in an honest and authentic debate and win their trust and confidence by demonstrating care for their welfare
5. Discuss long-term issues of national importance in state and national politics, with a view to agreeing practical and sustainable bipartisan solutions

Governance

6. Maintain a National Cabinet of Federal, State and Territory leaders to accelerate and coordinate decision-making on major national issues
7. Develop clear communication strategies to combat misinformation, maintain public unity, and build the case for stronger resilience measures
8. Allow companies to take an active social stance and support the wellbeing as well as productivity of workers in a challenging and changed environment

Resilience

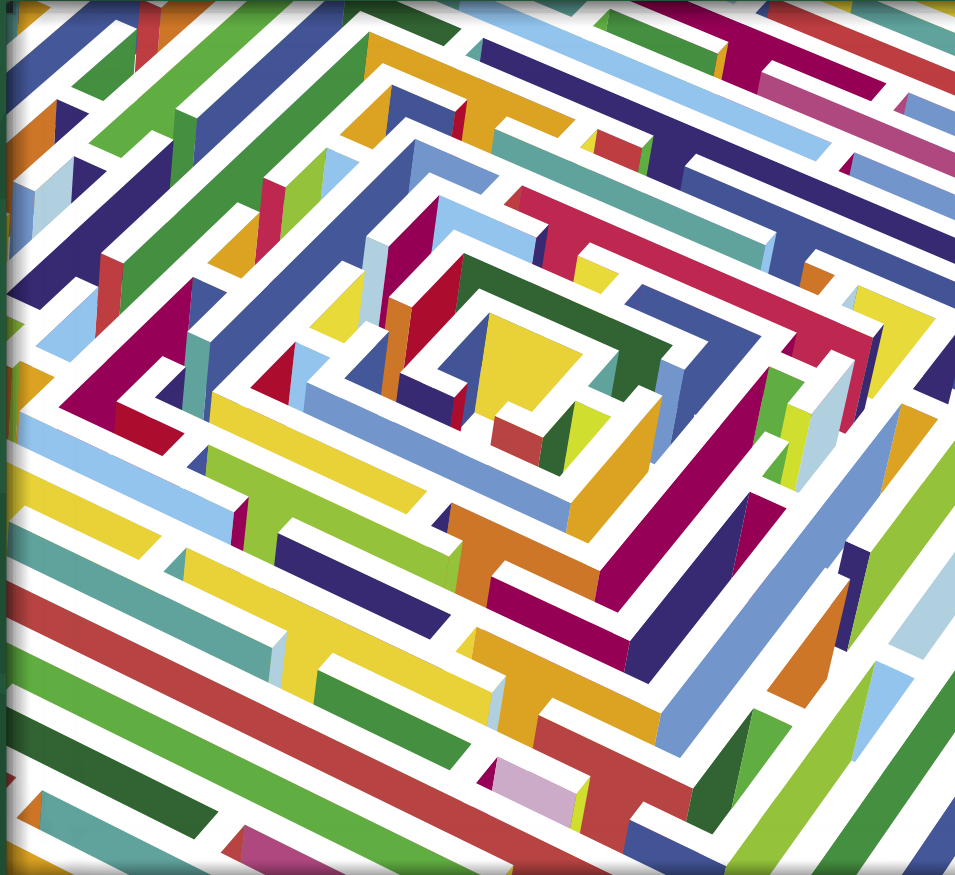
9. Boost domestic production of essential goods through preferential government procurement
10. Add value in supply chains, modernise workforce skills and build stronger trading relations with allied nations
11. Improve cyber-resilience, given the increased reliance on digital communications and growing threats from criminals and hostile actors
12. Develop a more resilient mindset in young people through tailored educational approaches

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