

## **Recovering the Future: A New Agenda for Australian Futurists and Foresight Practitioners**

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The current trajectory of development was designed, finessed and then imposed almost universally by the USA and its allies. But it is beginning to look like one of a number of stupendous 'mistakes' that have occurred over the last century. These might appear to be strange words from one who is in fact deeply sympathetic to that beleaguered nation of broken dreams and ever more dangerous nightmares. But at some point reality cannot be denied and, consequently, the truth must be faced. The two vast mega-problems of our time – peak oil and the prospect of runaway global warming are both direct consequences of that trajectory and, more importantly, of the worldview, values and modes of self-understanding that it supported and promoted. The increasingly obvious - and perhaps unavoidable - outcome is that of a ruined planet, a decimated humanity and a natural order compromised beyond all hope of repair – at least within any timeframe meaningful to us or to our descendants.

Hegemonic interests are blind to the future

To be a futurist or foresight practitioner in such times is obviously a difficult and demanding task. It may help to understand, however, just how severely the odds have been stacked against this work and its core purposes over recent decades. During the 1960s a plethora of alternative developmental paths were aired, discussed and, in some places, actually tried out. But the ascendancy of global capital and the ideology of economic rationalism both stood solidly and persistently against any alternatives whatsoever to their endless pursuit of expansion and growth. Today the success of these hegemonic interests means that we stand on the edge of a civilisational nightmare. Within that compelling but diminished frame all human impulses and needs are subjected to the imperatives of increasingly efficient and powerful technologies that reach into the deepest recesses of our lives. As each year passes so more jobs, vocations and professions lose their economic foundations to a digital revolution that is bereft of social conscience and admits of no limits whatsoever. It follows that standing in opposition to the mainstream economy has meant that making an honest living has become much more difficult than it might otherwise be. It is therefore not surprising that relatively small numbers of foresight practitioners have succeeded in finding viable niches for themselves outside the realm of corporations and business in general.

These are, however, times when we need to take courage and be prepared to assert our autonomy and sense of purpose. Large slabs of the very economic system that sought to be universal and all-powerful are, in fact, crumbling before our eyes. This has not only led to the impossible outlook sketched above. It has also created other systemic difficulties – such as that of unsustainable debt – which, thus far, it has been completely unable to resolve. It has progressively diminished our options for the future while, at the same time, stealing resources and the very fundamentals of life from our children and future generations. This

is not a system for the long term. In fact it is overdue for the system to devolve into something very different.

Extremity is not 'normal' and future discounting is a precursor to Dystopia

A number of shifts in self-understanding, values, practices and organisational behaviour need to be defined, explored and put into place as quickly as possible. To make any of these happen, however, suggests that new ways are found to help wider populations to understand that we are, right now, living at what can only be defined as *an historical extremity*. That proposition makes greater sense when viewed in the context of the collective impacts of humanity upon its world, the staggering amounts of fossil energy being burned and the consequent grave risks that we are collectively creating. In other words, future discounting is no longer merely an academic issue. It is now closer to being *a systemic driver* toward the decimation of our species within a few short generations.

Although it's a common assumption I've come to question the view that people are best influenced through the judicious use of positive and optimistic views of futures. For one thing they have been few and far between of late. For another, they have little real-world credibility. Opening up to Dystopian, overshoot and collapse futures is a challenging but vital step. Without it the 'bigger picture' remains elusive. Without this awakening and opening up, we simply won't grasp what is at stake.

Failure to learn and continuing error

One of the most damaging misperceptions that became normalised over the last three centuries was the pre-eminence accorded to the human economy. One can see how it arose back when nature seemed 'inexhaustible' and, when not merely seen as a kind of backdrop to human activities, it was viewed as a bountiful source of various resources: food, energy, building materials and so on. Then, when the 'environmental crisis' became unavoidable during the 1960s and 70s, the dominant system worked overtime to ensure that denial and evasion were adopted as social norms. Earth Day 1970 would have been a good time to change course and initiate a range of adaptive system-wide responses. But that did not occur. Tokenism was a deceptive forerunner to 'green washing' and the outright environmental vandalism that followed.

When the first Russian and American rockets placed people and objects in orbit, and then later took men to the moon and back, the dominant response was an all-too-typical triumphalism – 'look at how powerful we are'; 'look at how we have conquered space.' How empty those vastly over-stated sentiments appear now. Few seem to have realised that those pillars of flame that drove the rockets out of the atmosphere represented an orgy of overconsumption of scarce energy resources, a sign of the entropic trap towards which humanity is now sliding. Each such launch was in fact made possible not only by engineering skill and cultural hubris. It burned literally millions of years of stored solar energy in mere moments. This is the real tragedy and disaster of late industrialism: it simply did not know – or care to know – what it was doing or why. It promoted

the view that humans – or rather a small segment of temporarily affluent humans – were able to venture way beyond cultural and environmental limits without penalty or cost.

The same view also meant that Earth Day, and many similar events that followed, were little more than empty charades, token moves in a symbolic game played against vastly more powerful social, cultural and economic forces. So instead of paying closer attention to the health, the vital statistics of planet Earth, the uncompromisingly anthropocentric forces driving the economic system continued unabated. What is truly amazing is that this charade continues to this day. All over the developed world there are legions of highly educated and reasonably intelligent people hunched over desks with multiple computer screens. Some of them are trading stocks and shares. Others are trading derivatives and other ‘unreal’ entities within a bubble of vast complexity and even greater fragility. If the recent Global Financial Crisis (GFC) proved anything, it proved that those who are operating the system and, indeed, those who were charged with its oversight, are out of their depth and unable to explain or control the beast they created.

In an alternative world there are still large numbers of such people hunched in front of multi-coloured, data-driven screens. But far fewer of them are monitoring the human economy *per se*. Rather, a resurgent ‘World watch’ community is checking rainfall in the Himalayas, temperatures in the polar regions and a million data points elsewhere. The state of the global system is being actively monitored and communicated. In this world it is clearly understood that the indices of the global life-support system are of vastly greater significance than the latest figures on the stock and currency exchange markets.

### The energy trap

I am not going to reprise the range of issues surrounding peak oil. The point I do want to make, however, is this. If we are at all interested in setting up sustainable energy systems then the current wholesale wastage of fossil energy in affluent consumption needs to end. Furthermore, in place of that consumption a large proportion of the remaining energy that’s still ‘safe’ to use needs to be devoted exclusively to building a sustainable energy infrastructure. Here, quite obviously, are two mammoth tasks. The first is to persuade governments, energy companies and, indeed, the wider public, that we are so close to a number of climatic tipping points that the only sensible thing to do is to phase out coal immediately, move to the highest quality sources of energy and then be ready to sequester much of what remains. This is perhaps the greatest test that contemporary societies have ever faced – self-denial of the fossil fuel ‘drug’ to which they’ve become addicted over an extended period. To successfully achieve this will require levels of self-denial that are completely alien to the economic rationalist ideology that has driven development over recent years. Success also depends on higher levels of cooperation between competing nations and cross-cutting worldviews than have ever been proposed or accomplished before.

Even were that to happen, the consumerist juggernaut is, in many ways, rather like the proverbial super tanker whose course cannot be quickly changed. For more than a century the US has driven a process of mass illusion. It created a vast number of 'marketing geniuses' that drew deeply and progressively upon emerging cultural and psychological insights. These have been used to condition and manipulate whole populations and to spread around the world a dysfunctional, fragile dependence on a particular way of seeing and behaving. As is well known this involves the manufactured 'need' for novelty and the construction of the self through the over-valuing of possessions and relative status. This near-universal consumerist way of being has had pervasive effects that work directly against the ability to frame and enact the very choices now facing us. Moreover, the agents and agencies of consumerism continue to infect virtually all means of communication and all types of commerce. Try spending more than five minutes online without being deluged by ads. There is simply no escape from the constant drumbeat of commercial messaging designed to maintain and support a system that directly contradicts fundamental human interests.

So when I say that, on the whole, and with certain exceptions, 'business does not get it,' what I'm suggesting is that this whole misleading and de-humanising infrastructure exists as a result of corporate power and exclusivity. If this seems over-stated ask yourself this: why do casinos deface the skyline of many cities and for whom are they continuing to be built? Despite a perverse and deeply unfortunate legal convention to the contrary, corporations do not, and cannot, be considered in any way to have 'equal standing in law' with human beings. If recent history has proved anything, it has surely proved that. Lewis Mumford nailed what he called the 'myth of the machine' back in the 1960s. He also identified a process that he called 'the removal of limits.' So for organisations to still be pursuing growth, expansion and global domination of any variety whatsoever, means that these understandings and insights have been repeatedly ignored, repressed and set aside. How stupid can they be?

Now the planet itself is providing direct and plentiful evidence of the impacts and system-wide effects caused by a rampant species that neither knows itself or its world well enough to preserve either for the long term. We have known for a long time that the rapacious juggernaut sometimes known as 'wild globalisation' has, in fact, been consuming the future. But it seems that few affluent people really want to know about this. Currently it is mainly the poor who are suffering the consequences but, at some level, the affluent must also know that their own futures are also compromised.

Where from here? Aspects of a new agenda

Where does all this leave futures and foresight practitioners? The first thing to understand, perhaps, is just exactly how far prospects for a peaceful, equitable and sustainable future have deteriorated over recent decades. While alternative futures are still conceivable, they now fall within an ever narrower span of options. They are being driven in that direction by the very forces outlined above. To summarise: on the one hand we have the sheer power and

intractability of the issues facing us. On the other we have what some consider to be 'hard-wired' characteristics of our species that appear not to greatly changed since earlier classical times. These species characteristics include a highly developed capacity for self-centred behaviour, evasion of responsibility and self-deception. Yet this picture is not really one of 'gloom and doom.' We also have increasingly reliable knowledge and evidence about how both sets of forces are currently operating. Developments in Earth Science are giving us an ever-clearer picture of how the planetary system works. Developments in the human and cultural sciences have given us ever more insight into how human beings create and sustain their inner worlds.

Our task is to draw judiciously on both of these key areas and to fashion a new or renewed understanding of what we should now be attempting to do. This is a core, non-negotiable task.

As noted above, opening to Dystopia is a vital first step. We need to realise how this diminished state of being is being created day-by-day as the current human population and economic system continue to force changes in the Earth system that are shifting it into new system states. The second task, perhaps, is for each individual to make serious and strategic choices as to where his or her life efforts need to be directed. There's a vast array of options here but personally I would argue against working with any existing entity that was at all responsible for driving and sustaining the current system. This, in turn, means being very clear indeed about one's own identity, values and purposes. It's also essential to see oneself as part of a group identity and not merely an individual one.

Practical steps, suggestions

I will now briefly touch upon some other practical steps implied by the above.

It's important to discover who and where the highest quality sources and resources reside that can be drawn upon during this time of challenge and upheaval. What are the best uses to which these can be employed and directed? Where is the locus of leadership – is it symbolic, organisational, practical? And how can it be more widely shared and promoted?

Currently much of the best work being done on different aspects of what I call the 'global emergency' is by concerned individuals and groups, often on an isolated thematic basis. Many, if not most, of these efforts originate from fields and areas of interest that relevant to, but not directly associated with, the futures / foresight domain. Hence the latter is in danger of being relegated to a progressively less influential and effective role than it might otherwise achieve.

In order to be more visible and effective futures / foresight practitioners need to be clear and courageous. Instead of being swamped or sidelined by the digital revolution they need to make better use of Internet resources, social media and on-line sources of information and knowledge. For example, it's time for a new collective effort to up-date relevant entries in Wikipedia dealing with futures / foresight work.

In May 2013 an article in the Sydney Morning Herald depicted the field and its practitioners in a less than complimentary light. It made the assumption, however, that the main business of futures / foresight practitioners was indeed that of business. But that's not necessarily the case. A clear exception is in those cases where a company or organisation is ready and willing to change its *modus operandi* in ways that respond directly, unambiguously and appropriately to the rapidly deteriorating outlook. It's overdue for new roles and ways of sustaining strategic and social foresight to be developed and applied. Foresight work in the public interest is fundamental and necessary. This is so not merely to balance the vast preponderance of such work done for private gain. It's also essential because the value and worldview changes that are needed will emerge far more readily from that source than those focused on the bottom line.

Some years ago Australia established a Commission for the Future (CFF) but it was seen as politically inspired, it had few friends and it operated in a hostile, market-oriented, environment. Much was learned, however, from the achievements and mistakes of this organisation. Some of those lessons were later put into practice during the establishment of the Australian Foresight Institute (AFI). During this entire period a number of other Institutions of Foresight (IoFs) were also set up around the world. They all represent significant and valuable social innovations in their own right and need to be studied so that further knowledge can be gained about how best to design and operate these crucial entities. It is highly unlikely that any serious implementation of social foresight can be properly achieved without the further development of IoFs. Designs and plans need to be constantly under active development. Part of this work can be undertaken independently; some needs to occur in universities where new suites of courses that deal explicitly and in depth with these issues are on offer.

Australia requires *an appropriate organisational infrastructure* to support the emergence of social foresight. This means at least one new IoF, and possibly more. It or they would embody some variant or other of the global view sketched in above and networked at all levels – from local to international. Four factors suggest that these developments are not mere pipedreams. First, since the rise and fall of the CFF in Australia more such institutions have been created. As noted, they can help newer organisations avoid old mistakes and emulate successful practice. Second, the theory and practice of futures / foresight work has continued to evolve and develop. It is now more credible and has wider applicability than ever before. Third, a new generation of foresight practitioners is emerging in Australia, many of whom are more than ready to staff and lead new foresight initiatives along these lines.

Finally, a mainstream project to 'recover the future' is overdue.

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