

## **Futures for Australia and the Pacific**

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This special issue of *Futures* contains the major papers from a colloquium on Futures for Australia and the Pacific held at the University of Melbourne in October 1989. It brings together - perhaps for the first time - the considered work of some of the country's most thoughtful and forward-looking scholars.

Two major themes emerge from the colloquium: the need to adapt to changing global conditions and the associated need for Australia to begin to engage in broad-spectrum futures scanning. Both have now become structural necessities. Other themes include: the continuing dominance of the business-as-usual fallacy; the seeming lack of political will to make long-term decisions; the inertia of existing political and decision-making systems; and the need for a new basis for informed optimism and vision. Emerging from all this is the recognition that the 1990s represent a critical period of reassessment for the country.

These ideas emerge in various ways. Humphrey McQueen draws our attention to a little-known novel on Australian futures written in 1947. (1) He uses it to explore some of the distinctive features of the country and to make some constructive suggestions. Barry Jones considers Australian science and technology in its wider Asian context and looks in particular at the potential role of more efficient energy technologies. He argues for economic restructuring and major changes of attitude - including a serious attempt to get to grips with long-term issues.

Phil Ruthven takes a wide-ranging view of necessary changes in business activity in the wider Pacific context. Like Stuart Harris (below) he sees a "window of opportunity" as the Pacific Rim grows in economic importance. But he warns that Australia is not well placed to participate in this growth and risks losing its autonomy in the next decade unless it can read the signals and rapidly adapt.

Stephen Hill advances a fascinating and incisive thesis about the ways technologies have been institutionalised within Australian culture. He draws on a wealth of historical evidence to show how the country came to be "stranded" between a "trailing edge" of historical culture and a "leading edge" of largely uncritical technophilia. By showing how technical systems can be understood as "cultural texts", he makes a case for envisaging futures that are continuous with past and present, rather than naively divergent from them. He concludes that for Australia to be able to create its futures it must learn the cultural lessons of its past.

Readers of *Futures* will be familiar with the notion of future discounting. But Noel Gough has looked in some detail at how concepts of futures are misread and sometimes abused within the context of Australian education. He thereby provides a valuable insight into similar processes in many other areas. So long as futures concepts are treated in such ways, institutions and societies alike will continue to impede their own development. Finally, Stuart Harris provides an authoritative overview of economic and geopolitical issues for Australia and the Pacific. He notes a general unwillingness to face up to change and argues for a recognition that, regardless of its colonial origins, Australia is situated firmly in the

Asia/Pacific basin. Its futures clearly lie there. But which futures and who is considering them?

Long-term options for Australia are difficult - but not impossible - to discern. Yet present policies are seldom informed by what is already known. They amount to little more than a passive drift with circumstances. This occurs not because anyone positively intends it. It is the result of a combination of factors: chronic short-termism in business, government and academia; a lack of visionary leadership; a failure to implement long-range processes of strategic planning and the pervasive influence of a powerful, yet often naive, marketing culture. The latter has an ambivalent role. It can be regarded both as a provider of material wealth and a prolific source of misinformation about the nature of the world and its inhabitants. The resolution of such contradictions will become increasingly vital in the years ahead.

The long-running difficulties experienced by the Australian Commission for the Future in its attempts to achieve public credibility are symptomatic of this wider dilemma that, contrary to prevailing conventional wisdom, cannot be solved through any available economic or technical means. Each of the following papers points toward the need for underlying shifts of perception, as well as the discovery and application of new sources of innovation and vitality in the culture at large. However, the fact that the perennial sources of such changes are obscured and marginalised by the dominant interlocking ideologies of pragmatism, utilitarianism and economic rationality is, perhaps, less palatable and therefore tends to be ignored.

Attempts to stimulate such desirables as "creativity", "enterprise", "participation" and "choice" are impeded to the extent that they overlook the ways in which the present socio-economic order undermines them at deeper levels, imposing hegemonic and repressive restrictions upon what would otherwise be a far wider range of possible futures. Veronica Brady goes further. She argues that the ethical basis of individual and social life has been lost: "we seem to have no clear or coherent...notion of the word "good" unless in the plural "goods"...functionalism, rather than agreement about values, drives our society." (2) It is hard to avoid the conclusion that there are systemic defects in the prevailing worldview.

Is this a council of despair? Certainly not. Once such defects are clearly identified they can be corrected. Unwelcome outcomes can be consciously falsified. The first step in solving problems is to acknowledge their existence. However, when such problems are embedded in the coding of a society's reality principles, in competing residual value systems and in the self-interest of dominant groups, such acknowledgements can be difficult to obtain. (3) That is partly why critical futures work has become indispensable.

On the other hand, there are many potential sources of cultural innovation and vitality, most of which have scarcely been tried. The recent superficial "greening" of politics in Australia (a result of public concern about environment/greenhouse/ozone issues) is one response to a much deeper crisis: a crisis of confidence and, indeed, of Western civilisation itself. As powerful feedback processes from the global system continue to impact upon the superimposed systems of human culture and society, so, perhaps, the discourse-transforming power of some presently marginal group will help to shift the whole pattern in quite new directions. Similarly, the coexistence on this largest of islands of (at least) two utterly different cultures contains not merely the seeds of conflict but of very many adaptive innovations and changes. Only the over-confident could imagine that the spiritual depths of

aboriginal cultures have been plumbed by any person of European origins and found wanting. Again, the proximity to Asia prefigures an influx of Eastern cultures and traditions. The process has already begun through immigration and proposals such as the Japanese Multi-Function Polis (though, as Stephen Hill notes, the latter may be a mixed blessing).

What seems to be implied by these suggestions is *a change of frame*. That is, a willingness to identify and name those aspects of the dominant worldview which have become redundant and to engage in the process of re-establishing value and meaning according to different assumptions and values. (4) That may sound abstract, but it is not. The "stories" by which most Australians live are ethically under-dimensioned and manifestly inadequate to deal with the problems they face. It is not surprising that many young people fear for the future. The futures which emerge from competitive individualism, greed, loss of value and meaning, unrestrained growth and environmental destruction are unavoidably dystopian in character. Many other paths are possible but, for the reasons given above, they are yet to be seriously explored.

One important initiative that could be taken would be to initiate a broad social process which supports credible visions of sustainable and convivial futures. These need to be more than castles in the air. They need to be informed by a clear understanding of the social, historical, economic, cultural and technical forces that are outlined here.

Universities have a huge unfulfilled potential. They are peopled by talented scholars and specialists of many kinds. Yet there remain far too few places where substantive futures work can be carried out. Universities could, indeed should, become influential institutions of foresight, interpreting their missions in the light of the best available information and by utilising the most up-to-date futures scanning and strategic planning procedures. (5) Such work is already routine within parts of the corporate sector. Yet futures work in the public interest remains rare. This is a major oversight, and one that needs to be corrected.

The papers frame the dilemma very clearly and set out many paths to explore. They suggest that the time has come for some fundamental changes of direction. The key shift, the one which will affect all which could follow, is one which facilitates a movement out of unreflective immersion in a taken-for-granted, derivative and now-completed past, toward an challenging, emergent and yet-to-be created future. I want to re-emphasise that this process is not primarily a technical or economic one. It is based on shifts of perception, of value, purpose and meaning. It requires only a modest outlay of resources. The whole process could occur more rapidly as organisations and individuals alter the focus of their attention and implement a range of institutions of foresight. (6)

So the underlying message of this special issue is unreservedly positive. At the beginning of the 1990s Australia still has the time, the wealth and the capacity to determine its own futures within the world community. However, as several speakers noted, if the opportunity is not grasped the initiative will pass on to those who, even as we continue to think and debate, are alert to the new dynamic and are directing their efforts accordingly.

One thing seems certain. Regardless of the impact of present changes in Europe and elsewhere, the Pacific Rim will be one of the major growth areas of the twenty first century. An innovative, multi-cultural, environmentally sensitive and forward-looking Australia can play a constructive, and perhaps a moderating role in this process. It can help to usher in a

"post-materialist" era, an age of "intellectual property", of spiritual richness and cultural maturity. It can discover (or rediscover) its own unique meanings and purposes and share these with the world. To do so it will need to understand and revise the significance of "past", "present" and "futures" in its social, cultural and economic life.

If the colloquium has helped to clarify even part of this agenda it will have been well worthwhile.

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### **References**

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