

Creating a Foresight Capacity for Education, Business and Government

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Short-term thinking - a dysfunctional cultural habit

My 18-year-old son is about to go to university in the UK. When I looked at the prospectus for his institution I found that there were no less than five separate courses covering different aspects of history. It came as no surprise that there were none on futures. This simple fact clearly illustrates the skewed worldview of Western cultures as we approach the Third Millennium: the past is real, the present is challenging and complex, but the future does not exist. Ergo: the way forward is via the past.

There is a partial truth in this. Most futures workers readily admit that to say anything sensible about the present - let alone the future - requires a deep understanding of historical process. However, they also understand that the future is not the blank empty space presupposed by empiricists. It is more accurately a realm of will, of action and of power. It is a matter of endless fascination to me that Western industrial cultures have been obsessed with building the future through the development and application of ever-more powerful technologies yet, on the whole, they have missed the human and cultural significance of futures work. Hence, they continue to stagger blindly into the real future without the many powerful insights available through disciplined futures studies. Instead of understanding and using foresight as a social capacity, such cultures continue to perpetuate a collective incapacity to engage with the forward view. To see how this works, I want briefly to look at the three big cultural formations: education, business and government.

The rhetoric of education is that it is preparing young people for living in the early 21st century. The reality is that it is doing no such thing. If this were otherwise, then educators would be constantly demanding the very best insights, the very latest understandings from the futures community. (I will return below to how the near-future context can be studied.) Look at any teacher-preparation program in any university in Australia and most other countries and you will only find hints of real futures thinking here and there. You will not find a sustained engagement of quality education with quality futures. Such an engagement does not exist at the present time. What does exist in Victoria is the absurd notion that by labelling the public school system 'Schools of the Future', this somehow conveys a magical futures orientation. However, we know that this is not the case. The SOF label is political window dressing pure and simple. Teachers, students and the whole community are therefore being deceived en masse. Let me be clear: the capacity to re-orient schools to the future certainly exists; it has been tried and tested. But it is simply not being used.

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What about business? Here the picture is more complex. Some businesses do take the future seriously. In fact some large multinationals have been using sophisticated futures tools - such as scenario planning - for a very long time. Some leading executives also possess deep insight into the nature of the cultural/historical transition we are living through and are applying their understandings to the necessary reconceptualisation of business for a very different era. Yet it is fair to say that these broadly progressive forces in business are very much in the minority. Most businesses in Australia are doggedly short-term in their thinking; they are not aware of the shifting sands they are built upon or of the emerging challenges of the early 21st century. One has only to turn on the tv or look at any popular publication to see the familiar fantasy of materialist consumption being peddled wholesale. Yet this is one of the most regressive campaigns possible. It arguably distracts and mis-directs whole populations away from a more engaged and authentic (ie. post-materialist) way of life.

And government? I can well understand that those involved in government at any level: local, state or national, will spend much of their time feeling overwhelmed by the demands of the present. But the upshot is that the prevailing short-termism of the culture is reinforced by some of the very people who could sponsor a shift of perspective. To be sure there are occasional spasms of futures interest: a commission here, a planning workshop there, a snapshot of the future in this field, a study group on that. But all this is piecemeal. It does not cohere. There is no attempt at disciplined 'big picture' thinking - particularly since the last election when this is widely believed to be one of the factors that contributed to a Labour defeat.

So in their every day operation these three powerful social formations: education, government and business, actively inhibit the development of a forward view. Each implicitly or explicitly have interests in discerning ways ahead in their own limited fields of interest, but on the whole they are not using available futures concepts and tools. Even the 'best' corporates only use tools that they find congenial and largely ignore the rest. So how can we deal with this collective blindness? Well, we don't need another Commission for the Future. While I don't believe the resources expended upon it were entirely wasted, it is clear that it failed to connect with the real strengths of the futures field; it also failed to even begin to articulate a shared vision of a viable future for the country.

Towards a national foresight strategy

I now want to present elements of the case for a national foresight strategy. I find it amazing that although we are so close to the new millennium, the debate about 'the future' in Australia seems to be focused on the flag, the queen and the republic. While the notion of sustainability

has certainly arrived and found some support, the Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) process was widely judged to have been a failure and there is presently nothing to take its place. The sun shines today - so why worry about tomorrow? It is a familiar pose. But it is only a pose, a substitute for a viable strategy. As writers such as David Tacey and Ken Wilber make clear, beneath the slick surface of contemporary life are powerful mythic and psychodynamic forces, and many unacknowledged terrors.¹ A key source of existential angst, especially for the young, is the repression of the future which, though it be widely denied, is very, very central and important to everyone.

A national foresight strategy is needed to give Australia a sense of purpose and direction. It is needed to provide a necessary warning function and a framework in which a host of wealth-creating and problem-solving activities can be located. It is needed to give people - particularly young people - hope that the world can be better, even though it faces some very major challenges. So what can be done? Due to space limitations I want to make a few suggestions in relation to the three sectors mentioned above.

Education is desperately lacking in forward-looking leaders, that is, people who understand the near-future context and are actively responding to the signals it is providing. While we have plenty of leaders who have achieved a limited kind of success through helping one school or institution thrive in present-day competition with others, this 'industrial' notion of leadership is no longer good enough. There are all too few leaders who are leading in a way that is genuinely responsive to the near-term future. Leaders of the latter variety are lacking partly because unlike some leading universities abroad, Australian university departments with their medieval fiefdoms, insecure departmental structures, self-important administrators and labyrinthine internal politics, have so far proved incapable of drawing upon high quality futures work and integrating it fully and widely into in-service work, professional development and Masters programs. (An interesting side-effect of their myopic conservatism is that they are about to be circumvented by distance education developments on the internet - but that is another story.)

I have worked directly with many schools, principals associations and educational organisations throughout Australia and I can report 'from the field', as it were, that there is an immense *latent* demand for high-quality futures resources, support, opportunities in schools and school systems. The demand is latent for two reasons. One is the relative 'youth' of the futures field and a perceived scarcity of suitable resources. However, with the publication of **The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies** and other educational resources, it is easier to get started than ever before.² The other is that the many possibilities for refreshment and renewal through futures approaches are currently obscured by universities and departments of education whose real interests lie elsewhere (in system maintenance and control,

budgetary and other pragmatic concerns, and short-term politics) and whose psychology refers back to the era of high industrialism. But if you spend time with any group of committed teachers, any school principle who really cares about the young people in his or her charge, any progressive educational worker who struggles daily to find a way beyond the stifling constraints of bureaucracy, then it is very clear how and why futures approaches are so relevant and productive.

There are some indications of progress. A new school subject for years 11 and 12 called 'Futures' is on trial in Queensland. In Adelaide, DECS has put a lot of effort into an explicitly future-oriented charter. The Futures Study Centre conducts seminars and distributes teaching materials throughout the land. What is now needed is a shift of perspective on the part of educational hierarchies. They need to understand that futures study, futures research, futures work in education is neither an overseas import nor merely a flashy piece of curriculum content. I see no credible alternative to the view that *high quality futures work is a core component of education itself*. It makes no more to sense to have education without futures than it does to have engineering without physics or geography without landscapes or maps. Once this shift of perspective is attained, the latent demand for futures work in education will increase rapidly and, dinosaur-like, the formal institutions will once again be caught on the hop because they will not have the people available to service the growing demand. So a big part of the solution is for active, progressive, futures-oriented people to form creative alliances and to work together across disciplines, across boundaries and across institutional fiefdoms. In so doing, they will help the educational process at all levels to develop a sense of purpose and direction that it presently lacks.

Business needs to decide what kind of world it is living in. Is it the cornucopian world of high industrialism, with no real systemic problems and no limits to material growth? If so then it makes perfect sense to crank the handle, push the consumerist line and go for growth at all costs. Personally, I see this as part of a deeply-held and collective fantasy which pervades and undermines much economic and wealth-creating effort. The dominant approaches to business, industry and commerce that became 'normal' during the period of high industrialism could only succeed because they disguised many costs as 'externalities' and thereby displaced them onto future generations - who will clearly inherit a divided and compromised world.

If one looks at the financial journals, papers, literature, one finds a sophisticated set of abstractions about profit, growth, return on investment that are radically disconnected from the world of people, life and ecological well-being. The market itself is the central abstraction and growth is the central value. But the market has no mechanism whatsoever for responding to, let alone caring about (an absurd notion) the future. Nor does it have a mechanism for

establishing limits to economic activity. This is not the place to embark on a critique of economics; however this widely influential and high profile field is, in my view, defective in many of its key assumptions and is ripe for renewal. The shibboleth of growth needs to be tipped from its pedestal and the ecological foundations of life, work and commerce acknowledged and protected. Fortunately books such as Paul Hawken's **The Ecology of Commerce** are widely read, and progressive business practices are spreading.³ But I suspect very few business people really understand just how compromised our planet is and how difficult it will be to sustain future generations if materialism and growth continue unabated.

It is well known that governments are mainly interested in short term issues, with the next election serving as the ultimate boundary. It is also becoming clear that in an interconnected world the autonomy of national governments is being undermined. For example, the global casino operates daily with minimal government supervision. Moreover, I don't think it will prove possible to ever persuade national governments to think long term. It is like asking bureaucracies to be caring: that it not what they are for. Instead I suggest that *certain functions are presently missing from the institutions that surround government*. Specifically, I refer to: environmental scanning functions; critical trend/event analysis functions; scenario-building functions and early warning functions. These could all be gathered together under the heading of 'foresight'. At the national level, a function which is presently lost and divided between many, many different arenas and applications should be re-constituted under the heading of a Department of Foresight or Futures Studies. Like other key functional areas (such as health, defence, trade etc.) this department should be charged explicitly with taking the long view, regardless of what type of government is in power. At the state level there is scope for a variety of futures projects and commissions. There is a well-established tradition of state foresight work in the USA, and this experience could form a useful guide in Australia.⁴ At the local government level the aim should be to engage local communities in processes of consultation, dialogue, reflection and visioning to assist them in helping to determine their own futures. There are many examples in the literature outlining some of the practical and methodological options.⁵

When the Commission for the Future was established in 1985 it lacked a clear brief, failed to develop any methodology, and was progressively reduced to opinionising and inspirational forays into various aspects of public policy. While well-intentioned, it was what Barry Jones himself called 'a qualified failure'. Yet I have always maintained that the important thing is to *learn and apply the institutional lessons of the CFF*. I have summarised these elsewhere so will only say here that a combination of local knowledge gleaned within Australia and wider knowledge about successful strategies and structures elsewhere make it entirely possible to design and implement a world-class institution of foresight for Australia.⁶ This is what any responsible government of whatever political persuasion should aim to do as soon as

possible. An alternatively path forward would be through the formation of an Australian Foresight Institute (or similar title) which would work co-operatively with each of the key sectors to bring into being foresight arrangements best suited to their different requirements and needs. The AFI could be funded through a combination of local government grants, business sponsorship and support from charitable foundations. Research funding should also be sought through the usual channels (although, it should be noted that, like most universities, the Australian Research Council still lacks a category for foresight or futures studies). A basis for targeted and relevant research on Institutions of Foresight is already in place.⁷

The path to social foresight

I have elsewhere described how it is possible to consciously move from a society that is driven by the past and sees its future only as a problematic 'empty space' to one that engages with the forward view and is responsive to the near-future context.⁸ Briefly, the steps are as follows. As I see it they correspond to what I call five 'layers of capability'. The first is to recognise the raw capacities and perceptions of the human brain/mind system. The 'higher order consciousness' which they support (and which we tend to take for granted) provides the grounds, the basic wherewithal, for thinking about the not-here and the not-yet. Second is the way that futures concepts and ideas progressively enable a futures discourse. It is here that schools can help the young to develop the symbolic capacities to engage with the futures dimension and begin to explore its many implications, both personal and social. Third are the futures tools and methodologies which extend the analytic reach of the discourse and make it possible to carry out extended high-quality explorations into many different future states and options. Fourth are the organisational niches where futures work can be embedded for a wide range of purposes, including those outlined above. As this occurs, so foresight can be routinely applied in many organisations. Finally, the social capacity for foresight is a property that emerges from these layers of capability.

The near-future context is not a mystery. In fact it is fairly clear. But it does not emerge haphazardly from guesses, wishes or the fuzzy speculations of media gurus, charlatans or opinionisers. Rather, it emerges from a disciplined collective process of study, dialogue, clarification and revision. Without going too deeply into the actual techniques involved, let me touch on some of the questions that give rise to this emerging framework.

- * What are the main continuities?
- * What are the major trends?
- * What are the most important change processes?
- * What are the most serious problems?

- * What are the new factors 'in the pipeline'?
- * What are the main sources of inspiration and hope? ⁹

My point here is that the answers to questions of this kind provide the raw material for understanding the character of the near-future context. It is not a simple matter. The view ahead shifts as our understanding develops and as historical events and processes yield new material. A global community of scholars, scientists, critics, researchers and so on is actively considering these questions all the time. What futures workers have learned to do is to constantly sample the resulting information and to find ways of organising and displaying it. Nowadays more and more information is available via data-bases of various kinds and on the internet. But the classic method of displaying results is still the best: people who have reached a certain level of understanding about a subject write books - and others read those books. The insights so gleaned permeate slowly (far too slowly) into wider social contexts.

Futures work of this kind is a scholarly and applied discipline in its own right and one which properly belongs in a number of contexts. It portrays an outlook which poses very major challenges for our species; challenges that, one way or another, will necessarily be faced by all those now in schools, colleges and universities. A few specific examples include: the emergence of new viruses and the re-emergence of old diseases; the need to wean advanced economies off of the path of unsustainable growth; the need to moderate, and reverse, the many impacts of humanity upon other species and ecosystems (particularly rivers, lakes, forests and reefs); the need to understand and deal with the systemic sources of international terrorism; the need to subject powerful new technologies to shared ethical controls; the need to regulate the international casino of currency speculation; the need to reduce and eliminate structural inequities in the global trading and financial system. And so on ...

The near-future context is dynamic and unstable. It cannot be left to 'take care of itself'. It requires the careful and sustained exercise of human judgment and the application of skills and capacities on a scale that has never been needed before. More than anything else it requires the development and application of social foresight, for only with foresight can we create the lead-time to deal in depth with the emerging challenges of an imperilled world.

Conclusion

I have outlined a strategy for creating an applied capacity for future vision. First, we need to acknowledge that the old, past-and-present-oriented world view, while providing a starting point, is inadequate for our needs as we contemplate the new millennium. Second, we need to look at the major social formations and ask: how well are they doing? Where there are clear inadequacies, we are entitled to propose a variety of innovations. (In fact social innovations

are one of the main outputs of successful futures work.) I have suggested some innovations for education, business and government. Others are covered in **The Foresight Principle: cultural recovery in the 21st century.**¹⁰ I next showed how a social capacity for foresight could be developed through five 'layers of capability'. Finally, I took up the question of how the near-future context could be constructed and studied in a disciplined way.

The point of social foresight was understood millennia ago when stone walls were erected at huge expense to protect cities against possible future threats and when granaries were constructed to provide insurance against famine. It is not a new idea; look before you leap; a stitch in time saves nine; and forewarned is forearmed. However today we are on the brink of a different era. It is one in which many old certainties are gone forever and many new realities and principles are being born. I am not a pessimist. But the outlook is far more challenging than most people are prepared to admit. If we could listen to the voices of future generations they would ask us to steer carefully and take the near-future very seriously indeed. If the near future is telling us anything it is about our real needs, our basic values, our humanity and our sense of responsibility to future generations.

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