

EDITORIAL

WITHER THE COMMISSION FOR THE FUTURE?

In August of 1984, the Australian government announced that it was to establish a Commission for the Future. That it has done, a membership of seven being announced in February 1985, and its Director appointed in May. Two of its half dozen allotted staff and one or two consultants have taken up positions since then. A slow start, but the Commission is at last operational and, we are assured, busy addressing its terms of reference. These are:

- (a) To promote community awareness and understanding of developments in science and technology and their potential impact on Australia in the future.
- (b) To stimulate discussion and debate on the economic and social policy options available to Australian decision makers in responding to such developments.
- (c) To disseminate information about the implications of such developments — and related social and economic change — for personal choices in education, career, leisure and related matters.
- (d) To prepare or commission studies, surveys, research reports and information dossiers on matters related to such developments.
- (e) To report annually to Parliament, through the responsible Minister [the Minister for Science], on past activities and projected work program.

This development seemed likely to interest readers of *Prometheus*, and the Editors resolved to explore the prospects of a Commission for the Future in Australia by inviting some of those involved in futures work and associated areas to contribute short papers on whatever aspects of the Commission or its tasks seemed most intriguing. The resulting collection of papers should be worth the perusal of those interested in the notion of a Commission for the Future — and, perhaps, those who know little about the Commission. The collection does not pretend to be representative of views on the Commission; as Reinecke suggests, a deal of hostility greeted the announcement of the Commission and, of this collection, only Scott admits to major reservations. Others — notably Coates and Green — warn that the real challenge faced by the Commission may be not delving into the uncertainties of the future, but coping with the certainties of an

entrenched political system. Marien and Lupica explore the need for futures work, Braun stresses that it must be done well if it is to be done at all, and Tydeman provides suggestions of how it might be done. Masuda is altogether more theoretical, almost evangelical in his passion for futures work: Williams, a Commissioner for the Future himself, is, in contrast, practical and irreverent. Certainly an interesting collection, and hopefully a useful and constructive one.

In the rest of the developed world, the enthusiasm of the 'sixties gave way to the concern of the 'seventies and that to the pragmatism of the 'eighties, pragmatism which has driven many to seek the oblivion of cynicism. The 'eighties is not an age in which there is great curiosity about the future, not just because the cynics believe the exercise is futile, but because the passive would rather not know, and the active would rather not be responsible for telling them. Anyway, coping with the present is generally quite difficult enough. But Australia is different; Australia has a brand new Commission for the Future at a time when governments elsewhere are beginning to forget that they ever took a serious interest in such matters.

The past provides assurance for the future for many more than those who indulge in trend projection. It proclaims a natural order of things, a progression that will lead to a future neither too surprising nor too disappointing. Australia has no past of European or even American dimensions, and Australians have relied on the history of others to give them much of what sense of perspective they have. Until recently, little has been required; in a land of plenty it is not difficult to live for today, to drink and be merry. But God's Own is less like Paradise today than it was yesterday, and even Australian bravado now carries a tremulous note. The hangover is anticipated. There is now some concern about the future, about the survival of whales and rainforest frogs, about nuclear winter and the plight of the Aborigines, but mostly about where the next steak is coming from. Australia is a land rich from growing food, raising stock and digging holes: now, because it can do nothing else as well, it suffers the trauma of the fat man forced to diet. He, too, worries about the next meal.

The Honourable Barry Jones is Minister for Science, and but for him there would be no Commission for the Future. Jones is a strange sort of politician, knowing and caring much more about his portfolio than about politics, and suffering the political consequences in the loss of his responsibility for Technology. The Commission for the Future is very much a product of Jones' conviction that there is more that can be known about Australia's future and that it is ordinary Australians who should be told. Of course the Commission is idealistic; Jones is idealistic, aloof from the manoeuvring that characterises the political pragmatism of a Labor government which sometimes seems to have chosen consensus as an alternative to socialism. For his Cabinet

colleagues, who approved the venture in 1984, establishing a Commission offered a cheap and easy means of expressing concern about the future without incurring the inconvenience of responsibility. The Commission will survive as long as it does no harm. Whether it can do much good is a matter best left to the authors of the following papers.