

## WHY A COMMISSION FOR THE FUTURE?\*

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In a book I very much admire, Langdon Winner's *Autonomous Technology*, the author canvasses solutions to what he calls technological drift, and others refer to as determinism. He selects two, describing them as empiricism and renewed diligence. The first approach is defined this way: "Programs of research would be established to study the various 'impacts' of new technologies and to provide citizens and policy makers with advance information 'intelligence' concerning possible alternative futures."<sup>1</sup> The strategy of renewed diligence is described thus: "The second aspect of the plan would seek to mobilise latent constituencies in the populace by informing them of their real but unrealised interests in impending technological changes". He delivers this devastating critique of both approaches:

One cannot help but admire the ever-recurrent ability of liberal thought to perform marvelous patch jobs to remedy its own flaws. Yes, the engine of change is running amok. But with more data, new studies, more funding, a renewed awareness, an alarm clock under the pillow, and a few minor adjustments here and there . . . we can return to normal.

There have been a number of critiques, most of them crudely expressed, of the idea of having a Commission for the Future. The most intellectually inept was in an editorial in the *Australian Financial Review* headed 'Commission for bulldust'. Barry Jones, in a speech to the Commission's first workshop in June, identified the motive behind some of the media attacks on the body, saying ". . . many people feel threatened by the idea that long held value systems may be questioned in debate."<sup>2</sup> Those insecurities have had their airing, yet the public perception of the Commission and its work appears more benign than that of editorial writers and columnists fighting that constant battle to fill space and justify their salaries. The more important potential criticism is expressed by Winner, and that springs from a concern that the Commission may do too little rather than too much.

In terms of funding and resources, the Commission is a modest intervention in the public discussion of ideas in Australia. Its

\* This paper was written while Ian Reinecke was employed by the Commission for the Future and represents the views of the Commission.

ambition, however, is boundless. It has been given the most formidable brief of any institution charged with generating ideas. The products of the Commission may be measurable in the number of seminars and conferences it sponsors, the amount of printed material it produces, the audio and video cassettes that bear its name. But its success can ultimately be determined only by how well it stimulates public debate.

Its greatest handicap may prove to be not those who oppose its existence because of fear that existing values will be scrutinised, but those who, but for a faint sense of hopelessness, would be its strongest supporters. Some, of course, would be content for the Commission to be, in Winner's words, a "marvelous patch job". Others aspire to a more significant role for the organisation, where prevailing notions are challenged, values questioned, common assumptions put to the test and options explored beyond the boundaries of current debate. Those who hold back from supporting the idea of the Commission for fear that band-aids that get unstuck were better not being applied, should consider the state of public discussion of ideas in Australia. We are far from the luxury of rejecting forums for debate.

The Commission's work will be judged over the next two years, closely observed by its supports and detractors, but its intentions at least should be understood at the outset. The Commission's progenitor, Barry Jones, has expressed its aims a number of times in the year or so involved in setting it up, but some of his most telling remarks were reserved for the Melbourne workshop previously referred to. Because they were not reported at the time, they bear repeating. Many examples of technological change occurred, Jones argued, without any attention to their social implications until after they had been adopted. He selected three from the last twenty years — the growth of cities, the contraceptive pill and the introduction of television. "The political process, through parliament, was quite ineffective in addressing these issues. . . . Nor were these matters discussed in community debate or election time", he said. The aim of the Commission was to communicate to citizens that they ought to have a judgement on matters of social significance and that they should have confidence in expressing it.

So that this message is spread beyond the community of people interested already in social issues, the Commission should work with mediating structures that delivered specific constituencies. Examples are local government, trade unions, churches, welfare and voluntary organisations, schools and business as well as the formal elements of government, such as state and federal parliaments. It is not the Commission's brief to be a policy or planning body; rather it will attempt to present options to people, expanding their view of what is

possible, instead of presenting the continuation of prevailing trends as inevitable.

Jones selected 14 issues which he believed the Commission should consider, headed by a need to address the questions thrown up by the transition of Australia to an information society. The equation of information with communications and computer hardware, encouraged by media coverage of electronic technology that avoided issues and acted as a bulletin board for the industry, should be challenged. The sorts of questions that should be asked by the Commission include these. Is information to be vertically integrated, controlled from the top and used to shore up existing power structures? Can there be a horizontal model with democratic access, strengthening the periphery relative to the centre, empowering the individual against the mass organisation, the one against the many? Other issues that should be addressed are the reduction of process through the use of computers, robots and numerically controlled machines, and the implications of those developments for education. Should our schools be increasingly specialised, computer related and science oriented? Is this the time for greater emphasis on general education, complementary to technology, aimed at promoting personal development, including literacy and the arts? Does the development of artificial intelligence foretell greater domination by technological elites? Can science be made part of the political culture, so that informed discussion can take place at community level? Can people develop individual responses to social problems, choosing options for themselves, instead of selecting from a limited menu of mass responses? These, according to Jones, are the sorts of issues the Commission should be addressing.

A number of important issues arise from discussion about the future of work. Are there individual choice that can be realistically made about work, or are these questions determined by such factors as community and class? Instead of the externally imposed discipline of long working hours, society may face a reduced working lifetime and be confronted with the challenge of the self-management of time. "Technology", said Jones, "is essentially subversive to the work ethic." Where technology multiplies production and divides the amount of labour necessary, how should the benefits be shared? If, as Andre Gorz suggests, labour time can no longer be the measure of exchange value, should there be formal recognition that the right to an income differs from the right to a job? If value is only partly expressed in terms of money, is it possible to reassess the contribution to society of activities that have not been regarded as work? What should people's expectations be, and do we define their limits too early, or on the basis of class? As Jones said, "Within Australia, life chances in education and employment are essentially determined by

postcodes. . . When people say 'But Australians couldn't do that', they generally mean working class Australians. But how do they know?"

How many resources should be applied to care of the aged, and what should be the aim of that support? This becomes a more urgent question as longevity is extended and paid work ceases earlier. There is the same pattern of energy consumption in Victoria as there is in Finland, which has a very much colder winter that lasts eight months of the year. How could energy be used more appropriately? In areas where employment has been devastated by recession and technology, such as Whyalla and Port Kembla, questions that are theoretical in other contexts are of immediate relevance. Beyond the defensive mechanisms of avoidance and postponement, what are the options for communities such as these?

In an interview with the Department of Science journal *Ascent*, Barry Jones elaborated on the need to reach these communities:

One of the great problems is that the impact of technology in job terms has been almost entirely positive for the middle class and the educated, but almost entirely negative for the poorly educated and manually skilled. And that is one of the great challenges facing the Commission for the Future. . . . I don't want to exaggerate the extent to which it will succeed and it may well be that, as is so often the case, the greatest users and beneficiaries of the Commission will be the schools in Point Piper, St Ives and Toorak. But its task will be to take the impact of technology to towns like Mt Druitt, MacDonald Town and Port Kembla.<sup>3</sup>

Two features of this description of the Commission's work program should be noted. The first is the genuine radicalism of its vision — it has not been suggested that the Commission deliver packaged solutions that toe a party political line. By the standards of Australian political life, that is a truly radical departure. The second feature is one that ensures that it avoids the scathing critique Langdon Winner has directed against bodies that concern themselves with technological assessment. The Commission for the Future will not be advocating . . . "a few minor adjustments here and there" so we can return to normal. Its most fundamental contribution may be the recognition that if there ever was a condition of normalcy, a longing for its return is misplaced. It is the future that must be faced, not the contemporary reconstruction of the past.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Langdon Winner, *Autonomous Technology. Technics-out-of-control as a Theme in Political Thought*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1977, pp. 90-1.
2. Barry Jones, 'The aims of the Commission for the Future', opening address to the Commission for the Future Workshop, Melbourne, 12 June 1985.
3. Patricia Donovan, 'An interview with Barry Jones', *Ascent*, 6, 1985, p. 3.