

## LOOKING BACK ON THE FUTURE

Robyn Williams

I was in Port Moresby when Barry Jones phoned. The secretary in the Dean of Science's office was very excited as she waved at me to come. "Jones call!" she yelled.

Don't know anyone of that name, I thought to myself. I took the phone and there was the Minister. "I want you to join the Commission for the Future," he said and explained something about it as I strained to hear on the indifferent line.

At that point my kids came into the office. They had been cooped up at the University of Papua New Guinea for nearly a week and were desperate to go to the beach. "Come dad, now!" They pulled at my sleeve.

"I'm talking to the bloody minister. Go away."

Meanwhile the Hon. Barry Jones was expanding on the role of the New Zealand Future Trust, reformed from the disestablished Commission which had so annoyed the Muldoon government. My son was muttering something disparaging about priests.

"Will you do it?" bounced the Minister for Science and Technology (as he was then).

"Yes, delighted," I replied, thinking of no other way to stop my children hauling my legs from under me beachwards. That was how I came to agree to membership of the Commission.

Trepidation was the first reaction. Someone would want more of my time. I had none left. The Commission's title was misleading and controversial. Many would imagine think tanks like the Hudson Institute or the Heritage Foundation (on the right of politics), or the Worldwatch Institute in Washington (on the left). But Mr. Jones had been quite clear: prediction was not our job. We were to examine the likely directions the march of progress might take and to stir up public attention accordingly so that 'ordinary citizens' could be better equipped to make personal choices. Such a brief suited me. As a science journalist I am fed up with constant news of leaps into twenty-first century technology while there are basic problems of poverty and starvation unsolved. Two examples: as the *New Scientist* pointed out in an editorial recently, we have had the agricultural knowhow to feed the world for many years, but prefer to choose farming for profit. Secondly (and this affects me directly), as umpteen bright, shiny technologies emerge to carry communications — satellites, optic fibres, computer systems — so the skills to do the communicating become more rare. Never have so few broadcasters been trained to cope intellectually with the issues of today: never have there been so many machines to help them transmit their product.

My other commissioners appeared to hold similar views. They are not disciples of Ned Ludd, but they are convinced that we need to assimilate the colossal weight of material already brought forth by scientists before adding to the load. Momentum for its own sake is pointless and we cannot afford it. I knew the two Macquarie University professors — Leonie Sandercock (Urban Studies) and Peter Mason (Foundation Professor of Physics). Martha Cleary of ICI (an astrophysicist become executive) was new to me, as was Jan Owen (Youth Affairs Council of Australia) and Shirley Smith (Education, University of New South Wales).

When I was told the chairman was to be Phillip Adams, I became more convinced than ever that there must be scores of him. Some evil genius in Melbourne had removed an Adams' cell from the ample girth and had cloned Phillip Adameses to supply Australia with chairmen for every committee in the land (film, Australian Bicentennial, skeptics, advertising, Life Be In It, Ferrari fan club, etc. etc.). No, there's only one. His prodigious activity is made possible by calm good humour, immaculate judgement, unlimited contacts, boundless enthusiasm and one of the best brains I have ever encountered. After initial incredulity, I now appreciate why the Minister felt keen to have his old mate take on this too.

The first few months have been spent setting up shop, hiring staff and buying staplers, bookshelves and notepaper. The office is in a converted church in Carlton, Victoria (William of Ockham would approve) — it looks stylish and even has a two-flush loo. Rhonda Galbally is the first director.

In June we had a two-day brainstorming session with the best and the brightest from around the country, and Mike Cooley from the Greater London Council Enterprise Board. We talked about the Commission's style (be bold they all said) and our work programme. Not having large resources, we obviously could not take on all the world's problems at once. We also could not duplicate research work better performed by universities (with a staff of six that is out of the question anyway). But we could make a list of priorities, and did so. There are five in all to start the Commission's activities:

1. Work. Massive changes are already obvious and we may never see full employment again. Some think part-time toil is inevitable and mention the wage-for-life concept (where someone is required to do several hundred hours of paid work but is then free to enjoy productive leisure).
2. The Aging Society. Demographic figures show the population will become greyer, but not much thought has been given to the consequences of this shift.

3. The Information Society. Our themes would be dominated by means to enfranchise those with less access to the information boom.
4. Science Education. No longer can we justify putting physics, chemistry, maths, biology etc. in separate little boxes. The best minds in the scientific world describe nature as a complete, complex entity. Perhaps the time has come to teach accordingly, with much more emphasis on the history and philosophy of science. (More? There's practically none in schools today.)
5. Changes in medical technology.

I have suggested that we focus on some key issue in each of these, one by one, publicise some aspect of neglect, then hold a meeting of great minds and those affected. Such meetings would be organised as television events and broadcast accordingly, with videotapes made available to all who want them. In this way we could encourage debate without taking sides on an issue. This technique will take some organising, but certainly looks promising so far.

What about that part about the ordinary citizen's choice? How does that fit? We shall see. Obviously the debates, publications and even, perhaps, science shops may make a considerable impact, but other approaches are illustrated by a particular concern of my own. Few unions have scientific advice on tap. Instead, they react to events, and defend members' jobs when it is often too late to influence the course of change. While the Swedes (yet again!) have for years managed to use boffins to counsel unionists on everything from industrial health to technological change, such a nexus is practically unknown of this country.

Similarly, science exists but remotely for Australians: on telly, in labs, at school. The only manifestation of it at home is as gismos (consumer goods) or as hazard (the following trillion things are bad for you. . .). We would like to see science in the high street, as part of everyday culture — a promethean ambition if ever there was one!