THE POLITICISATION OF FUTURES PROJECTS

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Over the past few years there has undoubtedly been a sense of crisis among futurists. This derives importantly from three main observations:

- There is a sense, given substance by the poor track record of many forecasting exercises, that futures research has simply not delivered the goods.
- There is evidence that futures research and study has had little impact outside its own contituency.
- Despite the publicity attracted by works such as *Limits to Growth, Future Shock, Global 2000* and *Megatrends,* it is arguable whether futures research has played any great part in the socio-political processes and decisions of most countries.

In the UK and the USA particularly, futures work has been criticised as being of little value, such criticisms stemming importantly from the methodological problems of studying phenomena with no empirical reference except that deriving from the past and present. Futurists themselves have debated the methodological problems, and the discipline's self-questioning has recently moved into deeper issues relating to questions of socio-political analysis and choice and to the epistemological bases of the enterprise itself.[1]

In a recent article in *The Times,* the question was posed, "What future for futurology?",[2] and the various 'dualities' running through futures work were identified, with the author concluding pessimistically that futures projects had run out of steam. These dualities, which I have termed 'juxtapositions/oppositions', can be expressed as:

science	speculation
extrapolative	normative
change	continuity
short-term	long-term
optimism	pessimism
issues	synthesis

These dualities are always likely to appear in some form in any futures project, yet too often recently have they appeared as contradictions and, as shown by John Richardson, in terms of a "polarizing, confusing and counterproductive" confrontation.[3]

The Current Debate and Futures Projects

This debate has typically been conducted between and within US and European traditions in futures work, the US preferring the application of scientific method and the European drawing much more on the traditions of social philosophy. British futurists have long distrusted exercises in soothsaying, despite their often widespread public appeal, and the British approach to futures work has tended to be one of pragmatism and healthy scepticism — reflecting the sense that the future will always remain elusive, and ultimately unpredictable and unknowable, most importantly because a new *x* factor may well render one's plans as nought or an individual or group will act in a totally unexpected or unforeseeable way.

At its extreme, this view finds its expression in certain strains of conservatism, traditionalism and faith in dominating institutions, and it can be turned into support for the *status quo,* opposition to change and an antagonism towards more utopian visions of the future. Witness the words of Edmund Burke, opponent of the French revolution: "You can never plan the future by the past". Whilst futurists must indeed accept that forecasting the future can be a dangerous thing (self-fulfilling prophecies, the *x* factor, etc.), and we may well be right to be sceptical of some putatively scientific accounts of the future, we must not allow futures projects to be belittled, downgraded or closed down if they offer the prospects of helping people attain a better future, by offering a degree of early warning and foresight or by alerting them to future possibilities.

The belittling of rigorous and more 'scientific' futures exercises as little better than soothsaying at worst, or as informed speculation at best, struck a resonant chord among some Western governments in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and provided some kind of rationale for governments seeking targets for the budgetary axe during recession. There is clear evidence that, in the UK at least, government has concluded that long-term forecasting and planning are at best superfluous to its needs, and at worst positively nefarious in their ramifications. Mrs Thatcher's government's aim of cutting state spending, and natural antipathy towards state-funded bureaucracy and 'quangos', have served as the justification for a number of negative developments: the UK global model, SARUM (the Systems Analysis Research Unit model of the Departments of Environment and of Transport), also used in the OECD INTERFUTURES project, had government funding stopped. The Central Policy Review Staff — the UK government's think-tank — was scrapped. And the demise of such units is not unique to the UK, finding parallels in the lack of follow-up to the OECD initiative and the lack of funding for programmes such as that run by UNITAR. In the US, members of the

Reagan administration find little to be gained from a governmental level forecasting/planning unit.

The current critique of government-level forecasting has been summarized by Danny Boggs, in an article in *Futures,* who argues that *Global 2000* and similar works had a number of dangerous effects:

> The key issue surrounding government forecasts is not simply the activity *per se,* which is subject to the same hazards as private forecasts, but the aura that grows around it when encouraged, or sponsored by the Federal Government.[4]

Three particular dangers are identified by Boggs:

- Projections represented as official government forecasts may require an unearned validity, and there tends to be increased centralisation of data collection and analysis.
- The search for forecast consistency is likely to lead to greater inaccuracy. Centralisation may enhance coherence and consistency, but the pursuit of these goals may lead to analysis that is geared to the lowest common denominator.
- Government forecasting ". . . as now practised tends inevitably toward an authoritarian and centralised view of the economy and of life in general."

These three perceived dangers focus on the concern about centralisation and the possible extension of 'big government'. We would, of course, agree that there is a political context within which all futures exercises are conducted — be it, for example, the consultancy exercise carried out for a corporation or the development of a global model for the US Department of Defense.

Nevertheless, the decision (or non-decision) not to conduct government-funded forecasting and futures exercises is itself political, and there are perhaps more profound dangers in this course. Lord Kennet, responsible for the Europe +30 project in the mid-1970s, has written that:

> There are positive decisions hidden in the negative one to stop doing forecasting and planning, and these positive decisions have no less an impact on people for being undeclared and invisible. Not to forecast and not to plan is a use, or misuse of government power. It hands control of people to other forces, other people, other institutions or enterprises. The most familiar example at the moment is that it hands the fate of people to the effects of what are called 'market forces', which are supposed to be in some conclusive way both objective and 'real'.[5]

Lord Kennet argues that it is the duty of government to do what it can for the people as best it can, and that looking ahead is one of the

things that it is for. Danny Boggs' counter argument, that a separate government forecasting entity, kept apart from the government's policy making processes, would have power without responsibility, may contain some validity if we accept the centralisation argument, but it is difficult to see how futures work undertaken in a unit disengaged from the policy-making machinery can wield power, customarily defined by political scientists as the ability to get someone to do something that they would not otherwise have done.

Indeed, although we can speak of the political dimension and political context of forecasting and planning, we should distinguish this from the politicisation of forecasting and planning. It is the very lack of politicisation that may account for the inefficacy of much futures and forecasting work. Writing in *Futures,* the British MP, Enoch Powell, argued that:

> The politician turns out not to be interested in forecasts, right or wrong. They are not, after all, the stuff with which he operates. In the short run, they are useless to him unless they coincide with what he himself is engaged in projecting — and then they are superfluous. In the long run, there is no benefit in knowing, if it were possible, what the fates hold in store; for he would still be obliged to defy or ignore it as he goes about his business.[6]

The important question to be confronted here, in my view, does not revolve around the optimism/pessimism debate, but rather on what may be characterised as the relative balance between short-term and long-term thinking and planning. The politician, it seems, does not typically go about his business with a concern for the long term. It was Harold Wilson, former British Prime Minister, who remarked that "a week is a long time in politics."

It is clear that for long-term futures work to have an effective role in the policy process, the tilt towards short-term thinking must be reversed and the politician's bias against the long-term view overcome. Some reappraisal has already occurred within the futures field to start to achieve this, although the analysis of the key issues of the global *problematique* does still remain rooted in the concerns of the late 1960s and early 1970s. These tended to be 'single issue' concerns with the long-term — the present was relatively secure in an era of unprecedented affluence. Certainly in the UK, and in other countries also, the long-term view has been obscured by more immediate concerns — economies in recession, unemployment, fading smokestack industries. There is now greater uncertainty as to what policy issues are the crucial ones; both government and industry are increasingly worried about survival and crisis management; and there is less faith that science and technology offer the prospect of material wealth and security for all. Interrelationships between issue areas and

links between systems have been recognised, but their nature is problematic: underlying structural phenomena are brought to the fore, none more so than work and employment in the developed countries, and the problems of economic development and social welfare in the developing countries. These are clearly all also of immediate, short-term political concern.

This simplified view of the complex forces at work has ramifications for the course of futures projects. The role of rigorous, 'scientific' analysis as a basis for 'rational' policy making and decision making is being downgraded; cruder political and economic interests prevail. While this may always have been so to a greater or lesser degree, financial cutbacks for the pursuit of academic and scientific analysis of policy compound the problem. This is not to say that we should not continue to look to the important issue areas for the future as worthy of consideration and research, since both governments and industry will always be concerned with strategic areas and systems that impinge on future security and prosperity. But there would seem to be greater risk of research results and recommendations having little effective impact when they stem from studies that employ a single-system policy focus.

This implies being aware of not only the organic relationship between short-term and long-term phenomena, but also of the means-end continuum between long-term planning and political decisions aimed at the short run. Denis Loveridge, Chairman of the UK Futures Network, has argued that the balance between short-term imperatives and long-term opportunities is dynamic and that we must expect this balance to tilt one way or another at particular times. However,

> Too often long-term vitality is regarded as an optional extra, rather than an essential ingredient of short-term survival, and a pursuit to be indulged once the immediate crises of survival have been 'dealt with'. [But] crises are a recurrent and essential part of long-term vitality: they are never 'dealt with' in any absolute sense, since resolving one crisis creates a series of new ones.[7]

Key Approaches

Having provided the rationale for the long-term view, and urged the politicisation of this view, what does this imply for current programmes, such as the work of the Australian Commission? On the basis of the experiences of a number of important projects, I identify the following:

1) the need for a normative approach;
2) an emphasis on values (political, socio-economic, etc.);
3) the need for a synthetic, systemic view.

These are all interrelated and emphasise the role of political and social *choice* of futures.

Three important studies can be cited which have adopted a scenario-based normative approach — the Dutch policy-oriented survey of the future,[8] the work of the Swedish Secretariat for Futures Studies,[9] and the 'worlds apart' work of Sam Cole and Ian Miles which builds on the University of Sussex SPRU 'world futures' study.[10] These studies utilise scenarios of the future but take current political and social forces as the point of departure for developing normative perspectives. Long-term trends in the global economy, population growth, energy and resources, the environment, and scientific and technological change are not presented as autonomous developments, but rather, under the influence of the *Futuribles* approach, far more emphasis is placed on the view that the future depends on choices made by human beings.

Schoonenboom and Veeneklass outline the Dutch approach:

> On the basis of various assumptions with regard to possible trends, possible scenarios are outlined: descriptions of society in the future which display a certain measure of internal consistency. The courses of events leading to such ultimate scenarios can be constructed by means of an analysis of present-day society. Together with a reflection on the scenarios and their desirability, these analyses and courses of events can be used to suggest options and points for decision with regard to relevant policy areas. The choice of the normative basis is guided by the researcher's own prejudices (sometimes inspired theoretically) concerning essential changes in society.[11]

This approach is similar to that employed in the Swedish Scretariat's survey of the future in which four scenarios were developed for the position of Sweden in the international system, although the political options outlined in this study did not relate to recognisable strands in contemporary political ideologies:

> We have not taken any position on many central questions in order to avoid stifling discussion right from the start by invoking ideological and party political opinions which are current today.[12]

This is at variance with the approach of Cole and Miles' important analysis of global development and international distribution. Allied to their use of a computer model of the global economy is a method of scenario building which takes contrasting theories as a starting point:

> We isolate the key elements of proposals, and identify the actors that might support them and the conditions under which they might be implemented. This approach highlights the political objectives of major actors and their actions and reactions in changing circumstances.[13]

In my view, it is critical that futures works be located within such a political analysis, and with regard to international development, Cole

and Miles outline key values, assumptions and strategies deriving from four main development approaches, and from this develop a possible 'future history' based on the application of scenario construction and modelling techniques to a detailed scenario analysis.

The significance of the studies cited above is that they lay primary emphasis on the importance of sociopolitical forces (and only secondly on economic and then on scientific/technological developments), and particularly the relationship between policies (based on distinct political values and interests) and strategies for national and global development. How does this relate to existing material circumstances, to the key issues of the global *problematique?* Cole and Miles point to the divisions that have sharpened within and between countries, and to the differing political values which produce the different world views offering divergent accounts of the nature of the global *problematique.* Their view adds a further dimension — that of global political dynamics — to the more structural analysis offered by OECD INTERFUTURES.

The INTERFUTURES study warned of the dangers of 'economic and social breaks' which might disrupt global economic growth and development:

> These possible breaks are an indication of just how *vulnerable* the present developing societies and the advanced industrial societies are. They show that in the great transition now underway, the *risk of a major crisis* does not derive solely from the difficulties encountered in specific fields like population, energy, agriculture and reallocation of industrial activities. It results first and foremost from a *conjunction of the problems,* which considerably increases the task of governments. To understand this conjunction of problems, it is necessary, while keeping in mind the orders of magnitude for future trends, to analyse in depth the transformations that are linked with values, institutions, productive systems and trade between countries.[14]

Thus, although the identification of trends and forecasting developments in key issue areas of the global *problematique* does offer help in making more manageable the handling of global problems and does offer the prospect of identifying possible solutions germane to sectoral level problems, these are only part of the picture: both the INTERFUTURES study and the recent EUROFUTURES report by the FAST (Forecasting and Assessment in Science and Technology) team of the EEC,[15] emphasise structural and systemic phenomena.

It is fast becoming clearer in long-term forecasting and planning work (e.g., the FAST programme) that future policy making will have to take account of the links between, and structures underlying, the systems and issue areas that everyone has been busy putting into

discrete compartments. An important reason for this stems from the nature of scientific and technological change, and the form and capabilities of new technology. Computer communications are, for example, changing the traditional roles of the banks, estate agents, etc. Sears Roebuck in the USA and Debenhams in the UK, for instance, are now significant credit houses, as much as consumer retail operations. This has been expressly recognised in the FAST II programme, which has led to the identification of the putative 'axes' of future industry — the agro-chemico-energy axis and the space-telematics-electronics axis.

Given the nature of scientific and technological developments and the scale of these changes, a major lesson to be drawn from the FAST I study is that national and even regional projects are confronted with the 'globalisation' of both R&D and economic processes. In telematics, space, materials technology, the environment (e.g., acid rain), energy, food and biotechnology *inter alia,* politico-economic and social costs may be large, but similarly the opportunities and possibilities are enormous. We are starting to see political actions based on this awareness; e.g., in the US 'Star Wars' initiative and in the European EUREKA programme, as well as in the EEC ESPRIT, RACE, BRITE and IRIS programmes.[16]

In the FAST I *Eurofutures* report, it was concluded that:

> A long-term EEC science and technology strategy should address itself to problems of industrial change in the context of an increasingly world scale economy as well as to the problems of social transformation, with employment and the metamorphosis of work in first place. Only an overall policy which integrates the industrial, scientific, technological and social components, and which also gives a major role to education and training can succeed. Change is a global social process: to treat its different aspects in separate slices is the surest way to lose control of it.[17]

Building on this in the FAST II programme (1984-88), an attempt is being made to identify and explain the linkages between these systems, the underlying structures, mechanisms and, indeed, values. I would argue that this type of systemic focus — recognised also by the INTERFUTURES work — is crucial. I suggest here that analysis of this kind, particularly with a political dynamic dimension of the type developed by Cole and Miles, may provide the basis for developing not only strategies offering choice and options for the future, but may also provide a political understanding of the onset of 'shocks', 'crises' or 'disruptions'.

Implications for the Australian Commission

There are exciting opportunities for the Commission to begin to affect the social, political and cultural values of not just industry and

government, but the Australian public at large. The release in September 1985 of the French Commissariat General du Plan's (CGP) report on France 2000 has stimulated a national public debate on new technology and employment, and there is now clear evidence that the work of the CGP and other government-funded bodies has made the French people much more aware than their West European partners of both the opportunities and dangers of high technology.

In Latin America, where a 'new wave' of important futures work is being conducted, the experience of the Peruvian futures unit, GRADE, is illuminating.[18] Although GRADE is a private, non-profit institute sponsored by international agencies, it carries out similar activities to the Australian Commission. Its aim is to offer as wide a range of futures options as possible, although it may at some stage begin to work closer with government to attempt to formalise national strategies. Its most successful stimulus to public debate was an illustrated report about future technologies and sociopolitical developments in the colour supplement of the main Peruvian Sunday newspaper, which coincided with the installation of the new President, Alan Carcia.

Despite these possibilities, *caveats* should be entered. The recent review of national year 2000 projects at a conference in August 1985 in Mexico City emphasised two main issues of relevance here. First, the needs of each country for a particular futures approach are different, given differing governmental structures, economic conditions and political and sociocultural/religious values. What might work or is appropriate for France (or, indeed, Peru) might not be for Australia. Second, there are clear gaps between futures work as academic study, as a learning process for those involved, for public consciousness-raising, and as providing instrumentalities for decision making and formulation of policy options. Politicians and governments are subjected to the constraints of day-to-day politics, of organisational and bureaucratic factors, and of the 'anarchy' of an international system comprising sovereign states, transnational corporations, international organisations and other non-state actors. A successful futures project may hinge ultimately on availability of money and force of personality.

We referred above to the inevitably political context, covert or overt, within which futures work is conducted and towards which it is directed. We have also referred to the politicised decisions of a number of governments to downgrade or scrap government-funded futures units. The Swedish secretariat, for example, is currently undergoing a cabinet-level review of its activities after a somewhat critical report on its policy relevance by researchers at the Rand Corporation. The institutionalisation of a government-funded Australian Commission can be viewed as a welcome example of a

converse politicisation (of the long-term view) by a particular government.

Yet herein may lie the seeds of the Commission's undoing, particularly given the large public consciousness-raising role of the Commission's remit. Will it be subject in future to a conservative backlash which places little or no store by the long term or is indeed averse to government impinging on individual choice in this way? The real need, therefore, is for the Commission to develop a national consensus that the future is something that a civilised nation should know something about, and should *want* to know something about.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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14. INTERFUTURES, *Facing the Future,* OECD, Paris, 1979, p. 96.
15. *Eurofutures : the FAST Report,* Butterworths for the EEC, Guildford, 1984.
16. ESPRIT = EEC programme in information technology; RACE = EEC programme in communications and electronics; BRITE = EEC programme in materials science; IRIS = EEC programme (proposed) in social aspects of information technology.
17. *Eurofutures, op.cit.,* p. 184.
18. See 'Long-term development options and strategies for Peru: a programme of studies and research', GRADE, Ap 5316, Miraflores, Lima 18, Peru, October 1984.