Lessons from the Australian Commission for the Future: 1986-1998

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Abstract

The Australian Commission for the Future was a social innovation intended to raise the profile of public debate about futures issues and concerns. This report looks back at the 12 years of its existence, attempts to summarise its achievements, and then draws out a number of possible lessons that may be useful to other such initiatives around the world. It concludes that, while certain weaknesses and oversights partly explain its eventual demise, a deeper explanation will also include social factors that mitigated against it from the beginning.

Introduction

The Australian Commission for the Future (CFF) was launched by Barry Jones in a blaze of publicity in early 1986. It existed in one form or another for 12 years, had four directors, spent in excess of AUD $8 million, was privatised and vanished from public view sometime in 1996. After many ups and downs, after a number of false dawns and unsuccessful attempts at revival, ex-senator John Button, the last chairman of the board, ran out of inspiration in June 1998 and the CFF closed its doors for the last time.

In an essay on this topic I should make clear my own bias, or starting point. I was first invited to Australia in late 1986 to address a conference co-sponsored by the CFF on *Futures in Education*. [1] I can still remember the pleasure of reading some of the early publications and then the sense of excitement as I entered the tastefully-converted church building on Drummond Street, Melbourne, where the CFF was at that time housed. There were too few such places in the world at that time and there are still too few now. For a decade thereafter I worked with it and each of its directors through every phase and stage of its development. So, while I was never formally employed by the CFF on a full-time basis, I remained close to it and experienced the joys of its successes as well as the disappointments of its failures. As a specialist in Futures Studies (FS) I always attempted to be a supporter as well as a critical friend.

I have been elated by the CFF and its work, frustrated at times, but always there to help in any way I could. I saw it, and still see it, as one expression of an increasingly universal attempt to come to grips with the near-future context and to spread awareness of our many options and choices for the early 21st Century. Yet what many people have conveyed to me over the years is that the CFF was never a fully satisfactory organisation and, to some considerable extent, I agree with that. However, I also believe that the conclusions that most have drawn are completely wrong. They run something like this: 'we've been there, done that; it didn't work, so the whole idea of an organisation focussed specifically on the future should be abandoned.' The point of this report is that if this notion remains unquestioned by sufficient numbers of people of intelligence and good will there will be real consequences. We will have a much rougher ride in the 21st Century than anyone in their right mind would wish to contemplate, let alone bequeath their children. So my judgement is different. I want to suggest that we can *learn from and apply* the experience of the CFF. If we wish to exert any real control, claim any sort of autonomy, over our future, intending social innovators will deliberately embody these institutional lessons not just in a single replacement of the CFF but in a whole new generation of Institutions of Foresight (IOFs).

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Why are institutions of foresight needed?

I have written on this subject elsewhere and will hence only summarise aspects of a rationale here. [2] To begin with, it is patently clear that whether our concern is with our families, a business, a country or the future of the whole global system, at each of these levels we face unprecedented challenges from what Jim Dator calls 'tsunamis of change'. While any one change process can readily be exaggerated, over-hyped, it should be obvious to anyone who cares to look that the on-rushing waves of social, economic, technical and environmental change that we confront, together make up an outlook which is novel in the history of our species. That is why I refer to it as the 'civilisational challenge'.

When a journalist asked me if futurists had some sort of investment in dramatising the situation for their own purposes, it set me thinking. 'No', I replied, 'the line of causation is in the other direction.' What I meant by this was that FS has emerged as a true metadiscipline the world over not because futurists need work but because perceptive people in very many places have understood the reality, the significance, of the choices and dangers we face. [3] So, far from attempting to drum up business in a self-interested way, I think I believe that something else motivates most futurists (and others who have devoted their lives to this area). It is a sense that we should, as individuals, organisations and as a species, learn to pay attention; to read the signals of change and act accordingly.

Unfortunately, and as is well known, short-term thinking rules in governments, education systems and, with some exceptions, in business too. I regard this as one of the main 'perceptual defects' that we have collectively inherited from the industrial era. It can be called such because it actively de-focuses and de-emphasises the very innovative process that constitutes an historical breakthrough and which is comprehensively needed in our time. The breakthrough I am referring to is *a well-grounded and coherent forward view*. Short-term thinking thus pushes out of sight the source and springboard for rationales and strategies of adaptive change. That this is not some sort of unfortunate accident can be confirmed by considering aspects of dominant ideologies. For example, in his trenchant critique of what he calls 'the unconscious civilisation', John Saul has this to say about corporatism. He writes:

> corporatism - with its market- and technology-led delusions - is profoundly tied to a mechanistic view of the human race. *This is not an ideology with any interest in or commitment to the shape of society or the individual as citizen*. It is fixed upon a rush to use machinery - inanimate or human - while these are still at full value; before they suffer any depreciation. [4] (My emphasis.)

This passage is not intended to provide support for views that are unreasonably hostile to business, enterprise or markets for there are examples of progressive work in each. Rather, it helps to explain why, in a broader social sense, there is so little support for long-term thinking. While there have been developments in government-driven 'foresight' initiatives in several nations, these are recent developments. Most forward-looking initiatives remain associated with conventional planning, commercial or financial speculation and the development of corporate strategies. The amount of futures work carried out by public bodies in the public interest remains far short of what is needed, though it is supplemented by small businesses and NGOs. This is a huge oversight - a functional gap in social administration. The forward view is too important, too central to developing high-quality responses, to be marginalised. Yet that remains the current state of play.

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The Australian Commission for the Future was one of a number of national government supported foresight initiatives created during the 70s and 80s. Its demise is to be regretted. But, properly understood (ie. in terms of a process of social and cultural legitimation), IOFs are experimental organisations created to address new needs and to explore strategies of a type and order that have never been needed before. The tradition that they draw upon (that of the emergence of FS as a metadiscipline) is itself only three or four decades old. So it is entirely understandable that some will fail. But the failure of any single IOF - or even of a number of them - should not be taken to indicate that societies do not need well-grounded foresight, for in fact the opposite is the case.

Early problems and successes

As a pioneering Institution of Foresight (IOF) the CFF was, throughout its life, under-equipped and under-designed. It attempted to carry out a wide range of projects and initiatives, many of which were intended to raise public awareness. But most projects were issues-based and it was not until rather late in the piece that standard futures methodologies were even contemplated. In this it differed from most other IOFs. The initial selection of staff was dictated more by a political agenda (Jones was the Federal Minister for Science) than a professional one, and this coloured the nature of the organisation from the start. At no time thereafter did any full-time employee possess a background in FS. To be fair, qualified futurists were not, and are still not, very numerous. But neither were steps taken to ensure that staff acquired the necessary grounding in FS. So it can be argued that the CFF was flawed from the very beginning. It is reasonable to conclude that the *impulse* underlying its creation was well founded, but the *execution* failed for a number of reasons. In the early years these included the following.

* Role conflicts arose from being dependent upon government departments; whereas futures work depends on having the ability to challenge political priorities.

* The premature dismissal of, or lack of familiarity with, the specialised FS knowledge, concepts, methodologies etc. which could have helped the CFF to develop in more productive and professional ways.

* The policy vacuum created by lack of clarity about the purposes and practices of futures work.

* The failure to employ suitably qualified personnel with a background in Futures Studies.

(Readers wishing to review an earlier account of the first 6 years of the CFF can find it in the relevant 1992 issue of Futures.) [5]

Against the early criticisms stand a number of successes. The *Greenhouse Project* was probably the most successful of all CFF initiatives in that it helped make the concept a household term. *The Bicentennial Futures Education Project* (BFEP) briefly placed futures studies on the educational map (though the follow-through was mishandled and the intended series of publications became just one small anthology). [6] However, the CFF did produce a range of other publications, some of reasonable, or better, quality and it may well be that public briefings, radio shows, parliamentary seminars and the like helped influence public understanding and planted seeds with long-term value.

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The glossy journal *21C* was certainly significant in Australia and in several other Western countries for a number of years. Its own rise and fall parallels that of the CFF in some ways. [7] It began in 1990 as an over-designed, large-format, magazine with the sub-title ‘Previews of a Changing World’ and a fairly standard menu of futures-related articles on topics such as smart cars, green economics, wildlife extinctions and computer art. Several years later it was taken over by a commercial publisher who, in 1998, pulled the plug due, it is said, to lack of advertising. Over 26 issues it had evolved from the simplistic ‘previews’ format to a highly specialised one catering to a small, but discriminating, readership. The subject matter had changed and *21C* had become an ultra-sophisticated cultural studies journal with a focus on ‘the impact of technology on culture’. The design standards were exemplary; but to my mind it had left the futures arena and gone too far into the detailed exploration of what I can only call ‘the detritus of post-modernism’: the realm of post-modern gurus, technological breakthroughs, media and, especially, the world of the internet. The whole process shows what can happen when intellectual frameworks and editorial guidelines are contested. However *21C* was certainly one of the most (if not the most) exciting and original publications ever produced in Australia and its demise leaves a significant gap.

Meanwhile the CFF had continued on its own long, meandering journey via the regimes initiated by four very different directors. When the last resigned in 1996 there was a significant hiatus while the board, newly headed by John Button, considered its options. The position of director was advertised, but a director was never appointed. A rapprochement with Monash University, in Melbourne, was pursued, but failed. Finally, an office minder was hired on a part-time basis and at that time the CFF ceased to be a viable entity. By late 1997 the web site had been virtually abandoned. Perhaps the last creative gasp was the belated attempt in 1998 to launch a *Future Directions* newsletter. But the modest 8-page format was unoriginal and unproven; the nearly AUD $200 annual fee too high to attract sufficient subscribers. *Future Directions* expired in June 1998 after only 3 issues.

Learning from experience

Looking back over the 10-12 years of its existence, I am firmly of the view that the CFF was anything but a waste of time and money. Rather, it encountered forces that it was ill equipped to face, let alone resolve. So it is clear that future IOFs could do worse than learn from this one and explore a different approach. What lessons therefore emerge for the design of future IOFs? Here are a number of suggestions.

* The core purposes should be carefully defined and linked with the main institutional functions (as in a successful business).

* Funding issues should be tackled and a secure, diversified basis of financial support established as soon as possible.

* The knowledge gained from other foresight initiatives should be thoroughly understood and applied such that the learning curve can begin from a higher level and take place more quickly.

* Quality control must be a central principle of the organisation. Second rate futures work is worse than none at all because it provides spurious grounds for the dismissal of the whole enterprise.

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* Employees should be fully qualified to carry out futures work. This will necessarily mean that a certain proportion of employees either have recent relevant experience of futures-related work or will undertake the necessary training as a condition of their employment contract.

* Robust methods should be used which integrate empirical, critical and ethical components.

* Particular attention must be paid to building up and sustaining the constituencies upon which such enterprises depend. In this regard, full and proper use should be made of all available media outlets to ensure that they are informed in good time of all initiatives, publications etc. Key figures in relevant areas should be consulted and valued.

* IOFs should communicate with other equivalent organisations around the world to: share expertise, organise meetings, pool efforts in common projects and, perhaps, to begin to 'speak with one voice' across cultures and national boundaries.

* Finally, IOFs would benefit from participating in, and supporting, research into the nature and effectiveness of futures research and applied foresight.

An outline research agenda for IOFs was set out my myself and Martha Garrett in 1995. [8] However, to the best of my knowledge, the suggestions made at that time have not been widely taken up. An earlier, but still-relevant, source is the evidence gathered by Clem Bezold and his associates from the use of state government foresight in the USA. [9] There are also occasional more general overview-type studies such as that carried out by Skumanich and Silbernagel in 1997. These researchers studied what they termed seven 'best-in-kind' foresight programs and concluded that the most successful ones had the following features.

1. They began with a perceived need to prepare for future challenges.
2. They each had 'program champions' during the start-up period.
3. They proved responsive to client needs.
4. They involved the relevant participants in the process.
5. They experienced a legitimising process. [10]

It is this last factor which, I suspect, weighed heavily against the CFF. It was widely seen as a politically driven entity, rather a commercial or professional one. It won few friends in the parliament, in business, in education, in intellectual circles or in contemporary social movements. So for most of its life it lurched from one crisis to another, despite the best efforts of the board and successive directors.

Next steps: an integrated foresight strategy

In an earlier paper I outlined a rationale and approach to the creation of a national foresight strategy for Australia. [11] This remains a vital goal, and one with uses beyond a single context. Here are the steps I proposed.

1. Create an Australian Foresight Institute (AFI).
2. Map national and international foresight work.
3. Develop a skill-transfer strategy.
4. Identify key sectors, organisations and individuals within each.
5. Review progress and link with similar initiatives elsewhere.

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6. Secure long-term funding.

Two years after making these suggestions there is no sign of a national foresight institute - though one has been created in nearby New Zealand. It remains a desirable goal, but is certainly not the only option. Australian Business Network (ABN) and the Sydney-based Futures Foundation are both lively examples of small, but effective, private sector futures organisations. Various small-scale innovations in the university sector herald the appearance of FS in new courses and higher degree programs. However, there is still no department of foresight or FS anywhere in Australasia and this remains an increasingly perplexing oversight. As one of the most dynamic and exciting of all newly-emergent fields the continuing omission of FS from the 'official map of knowledge' in the tertiary sector is very serious, given what is already known about the near-future context. During 1997 this view received support from an unlikely direction. In an article about a submission to the Australian government's 'West Review of Higher Education', Prof. Don Aitkin, vice-chancellor of the University of Canberra had this to say. He wrote:

> It seems to me that humanity may have only two generations left in which to sort out how to modify the impact of the human species on the planet. If it does not learn how to do that, then the world is likely to experience a catastrophe even more severe than that which followed the collapse of the Roman Empire. Compared with 1500 years ago, we do know in some detail what is happening and we know at last some of what needs to be done. Moreover, we understand that where we do not know something, we can set about finding it out.

He then added:

> The principal institution in humanity's race to save itself, if we set aside enlightened governments, is the modern university. [12]

There is clearly a contradiction here. The very institutions that should be working to develop and implement high-quality forward views remain stranded in a socio-political time warp. While some individuals at every level see the point of FS and foresight work, the familiar 'industrial' system imperatives of economy, efficiency, effectiveness and control remain dominant. This, I suggest, is where the real problem lies. Its effects are pervasive. They are nowhere more crippling than in the hard-pressed state school systems where, in contrast to leading educators within schools, substantive forward-looking approaches remain blocked by ministers and administrators at the very highest levels.

Items 2-6 on the above list remain viable, not to say urgent, agenda items. The mapping of foresight work, the need for skill-transfer, the local search for enabling individuals and contexts, reviewing and communicating and, above all, the search for long-term finance for publicly vital work - all remain essential. The conscious pursuit of such a program would perhaps be enhanced if the outcomes of foresight work were more widely appreciated. So what social functions do IOFs actually perform?

What services do Institutions of Foresight provide?

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In a review I carried out a few years ago of a number of international examples of IOFs I derived a kind of 'identikit' composite view of their activities. Here, in summary, is a list of the services they provide. First, they raise issues of common concern that are overlooked in the conventional short-term view; eg. issues about peace, environmental stability, inter-generational ethics, the implications of new, and expected, developments in a number of fields. Second, they highlight dangers, alternatives and choices that need to be considered before they become urgent. Third, they publicise the emerging picture of the near-term future in order to involve the public and contribute to present-day decision-making. Fourth, they contribute to a body of knowledge about foresight and the macro-processes of continuity and change that frame the future. Fifth, they identify some of the dynamics and policy implications of the transition to sustainability. Sixth, they help to identify aspects of a new world order so as to place these on the global political agenda. Seventh, they facilitate the development and application of social innovations. Eighth, they help people to deal with fears and become genuinely empowered to participate in creating the future. Ninth, they help organisations to evolve in appropriate ways. Finally, they provide institutional shelters for innovative futures work which, perhaps, could not easily be carried out elsewhere. [13]

It should be obvious that such contributions help in many practical ways to initiate and support the crucial shifts of perception, policy and practice that, in no small way, form the pivot upon which our over-heated and over-extended global 'megaculture' now turns. The fact that these tasks are not well engaged, not widely supported, not even widely understood, reveals something about the 'shadow side' of human institutions as we head into the millennium period.

Conclusion: discerning 'the shadow' in our major institutions

On the bright, superficial side, those who are paying attention are keenly aware of the way that powerful new technologies are being promoted with the promise that they will support millions of people in unprecedented wealth and comfort. But, at a deeper level, I don't think that many people really believe it - least of all the young. If we look deep within 'the shadow' (ie. the repressed contents of the human mind, both individual and collective) we find familiar defence mechanisms: avoidance, denial and lack of interest which, taken together, clearly imply Dystopian 'breakdown' futures. Although the latter are certainly plausible, and well founded in known facts, they remain anathema to dominant institutions and the mass media and are thus ignored (except in entertainment where the rehearsal of disaster is a familiar theme, and one readily dismissed). However, some of the best minds within FS continue to suggest that the future of civilisation now hangs between two worlds or, more appropriately, two kinds of world. [14] One is where the balance swings away from foresight and we learn (if we learn at all) through the kinds of social experience seen in the collapse of other civilisations, though on an immeasurably wider scale. The other is where humankind negotiates the end of the industrial period with foresight, elegance and skill and finds new ways to live on this over-stressed planet. In this latter world the forward view is a functional necessity, not an esoteric abstraction.

It is easy to blame the demise of Australia's CFF on weaknesses in its original design, deficiencies in the way it was administered and led and the half-hearted nature of its 'stop/start' work program. There is, as I have noted, some truth in all of these. But, in the context outlined above, this 'internal' diagnosis remains facile and unconvincing. Hence I tend toward an explanation of a completely different order: one that allows us both to build on the mistakes and on the successes of the organisation, and to move forward. It is a powerful and disturbing conclusion.

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Could it be that the accusing finger should point beyond this particular attempt at institutional innovation to the heart of our major social institutions? If so, does it not point to the fundamental assumptions, the views of reality, that still govern them? Notions of growth, of a powerful but defective economics, the primacy of the marketing imperative, the view of nature as a mere resource, of materialism, of the future as 'an empty space' - all these are powerful aspects of an existing worldview - though their 'use by' dates have, in many cases, long expired. It is within this arena of ill considered but deeply-embedded cultural commitments and presuppositions that we may find the most profound explanation about why the CFF had an up-hill battle, and why it no longer exists. In Australia, as in so many other places, forward thinking is not a political habit, a widespread commercial practice or a popular pastime.

Learning from this example will certainly contribute toward the international foresight enterprise and a new generation of 21st century IOFs. But, more profoundly, such learning also poses significant questions about the viability of the present global socio-economic order and the principles upon which it continues to operate.

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