

Origins of the Australian Foresight Institute

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During early-to-mid 1998 I'd been meeting regularly with Adolph Hanich, a friend from my time at Melbourne University. We'd known each other for some years and shared a number of common interests. He'd been CEO of a large company and a partner at one of the leading city consulting firms. His interests in strategy resonated strongly with some of mine on foresight. So we started meeting informally. This led to our developing a number of ideas for designing strategy / foresight workshops that we considered running together at a local management college.

At the time Adolph was working as a part-time lecturer in the Business Faculty at Swinburne and was present at a meeting of the university's international advisory board. One of the members of the board is said to have asked the Vice Chancellor, Iain Wallace, if the university had ever thought of 'doing something about futures.' This was apparently a new idea, but Adolph was standing nearby and overheard the comment. He realised at once that this could be an opportunity. So he followed it up by suggesting that I might be contacted with a view to putting forward some sort of proposal.

He and I subsequently had several meetings with university staff and with the VC. The result was that we were invited to put forward a proposal for a feasibility study, which we quickly set about doing. Finally, after some time, we were advised on September 15th 1998 that the VC had accepted the proposal and was ready to proceed. So we started work in earnest. Around this time the university ordered a set of the 3-volume hard copy edition of *The Knowledge Base of Futures Studies* that I'd edited back in 1996. This, it seemed to me, provided supporting evidence for what I knew to be a fact i.e. that futures study / applied foresight can and should be taken seriously at the tertiary level. ¹

Some within the university hierarchy favoured the notion that a futures 'think tank' could be created to serve some of the university's sponsors and supporters. This option was duly considered but it soon became clear that such an enterprise could not be attempted from scratch. Instead, we worked on a design for an Institute that would offer post-graduate qualifications centred on the concept of strategic foresight. Our view, in a nutshell, was that 'foresight refreshes strategy.' The new entity would constitute a 'first step.' If it was successful there'd be a new source of futures / foresight expertise as well as a reliable income stream.

On December 14th 1998 we had another meeting with the VC in which we received some useful feedback on the draft proposal. He made it clear that the latter was being viewed favourably and, for the first time, asked me if I wanted to be directly involved. Adolph suggested that Wallace and I discuss the matter over lunch, which we did later that week. Things were going well. All that was left for us to do was to complete the study, which we did by the end of January 1999. The following week was hectic to say the least. On Monday 1st February the VC offered me a Professorial Fellowship to set up the newly named Australian

Foresight Institute from mid-year. On Wednesday 4th my domestic circumstances in Melbourne reached a long expected turning point and I moved to Brisbane. But there was never any doubt that I'd return.

By early July I was back in Melbourne but space had not yet been allocated. So I found myself sitting in a corridor with a desk, a borrowed IBM computer I did not know how to use and a waste paper basket. There followed some months of rapid learning, skill acquisition and extensive collaboration with various colleagues locally and around the world. In October 1999 I flew to Houston to spend some time with Peter Bishop and others who'd been running the University of Houston Clear Lake (UHCL) futures program for many years. When I returned I had a much better grasp of some of the essentials for running a successful futures program. It then took a further year to draft course units, develop resources and have the program accredited.

Part of the overall design was to for the AFI to have its own external board. This, it was felt, would give us access to some high quality professional expertise from outside the university. Besides being a source of external support it would be a valuable sounding board and a forum for dialogue that would enhance our own strategic decision-making. We were also fortunate in that the Hon Barry Jones (who'd set up the Commission For the Future, or CFF, back in 1986 and with whom I'd worked on a number of occasions) agreed to be our patron. I drew on expert help with the university to assemble the necessary accreditation documents. They were put to the relevant academic committees and, with the full support of the VC, were passed with little comment on September 27th, 2000. Teaching began in Brisbane and Melbourne the following February.

In the years prior to this I'd taught futures in several other universities (both in situ and as a visiting lecturer) in Australia and overseas and this prior experience stood me in good stead. As did my familiarity with the literature and, indeed, personal contacts with many of those around the world who'd produced it. I'd long held the view that much of the strength of the futures field is, indeed, achieved through making such connections. The best way to accomplish this is to regularly attend the appropriate meetings as and when they occur. The World Future Society (WFS) and the World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF) had been invaluable in this respect. Equally, I'd been brought to Australia in the late 1980s to address a conference on *Futures in Education* hosted by the then CFF. I can still recall the elation I felt in 1988 when I first walked up the steps of the converted church in Drummond Street, Carlton, where its premises had been located. On return visits and later, following a permanent move to Australia, I'd worked with each of its directors. So I'd had a ringside seat, as it were, to observe up-close the various successes and failures of that all-too-rare and worthy social innovation.

It's ironic that a decade later, in 1998, when Adolph and I were starting work on the AFI the last vestiges of the CFF were being dismantled by John Button.² Although I'd acknowledged its various imperfections I was disturbed and disappointed by the loss. I disagreed fundamentally with those (largely right wing) critics who had more faith in markets than I could ever have and never

saw the point. Then, instead of the dismissive prevailing 'been there, done that, forget it' view, my conclusion was 'what can we learn from its experience, how can we do better?' One thing was clear – the need for high quality foresight work was greater than ever. The AFI gave me a chance to create something new. So I carefully reviewed the experience of the CFF and attempted to put these lessons into practice. ³

In 2003 /4 after running through a couple of annual cycles, and having set up a research program on 'Social Foresight' funded by the Pratt Foundation, I published an overview of the program as it had developed. ⁴ We'd achieved what entrepreneurs call 'proof of concept.' The program had attracted several cohorts of extremely capable and forward thinking people. The key characteristic that they appeared to share was that they were mostly 'mid-career professionals' who were actively looking for 'something different.' As such they tended to stand out from middle-of-the-road applicants who were interested in taking more conventional MBAs.

As the program got into its stride we soon began to receive international recognition. In part this occurred through the agency of several outstanding overseas guests. ⁵ Overall, things were looking very positive indeed and everything was running smoothly - until the VC retired. Then, during the interregnum, some odd things started to happen. ⁶ As is common, his successor had different ideas, one of which was to abolish all the Institutes within the university. The AFI was not specifically targeted but the writing was on the wall, so to speak. The value and associated status accorded to it and myself in the previous administration slowly diminished. I decided to leave in August 2004, five years after starting work.

The farewell event kindly organised by colleagues and students gave me a chance to say 'thank you' especially to my closest helpers. ⁷ Along with a sense of gratitude that the opportunity had arisen in the first place, I felt a mixture of satisfaction and regret. I certainly could have continued for some time but not, I decided, under duress. I also recognised that since the program was viable my primary task had been completed. So at the farewell I suggested that this was not 'the beginning of the end' for the foresight program but, rather, 'the end of the beginning.' And so it proved to be. Peter Hayward who, in the interim, had earned his PhD (one of the very first in applied foresight) subsequently took it over. ⁸ He, Joe Voros and others then successfully undertook the strenuous process of having the course re-accredited, which provided it with a new lease of life. An overview of this second and most recent phase can be found in a 2011 paper for the journal *Futures*. ⁹

Fast-forward to 2010 when a '10 in 2010 Celebration' was organised by members of the alumni group in Melbourne to mark the anniversary. Some 70 people attended the dinner in a city restaurant the previous evening. The main event took place the following day in a converted church in Hawthorn. The location and setting provided a perfect backdrop for the range of hands-on activities that ensued. There was a real 'buzz' as people from different cohorts met and compared notes. I'm glad to say that this unique event was recorded and

rendered into several You Tube clips featuring short interviews and a sample of the day's activities. As an overview of 'what the AFI was all about' they're likely to be of interest to past, present and, indeed, prospective future students. They can be found via the strategic foresight tv site.¹⁰

Overall what this event and the decade leading up to it demonstrate is that a program of this kind touches people in profound and life-changing ways while, at the same time, dealing with core issues around the emerging global emergency. A new generation of integrally informed foresight practitioners has emerged, and is continuing to emerge from the program. I'm proud to have been associated with it during the early years. I hope that it will continue to thrive and be widely emulated here and overseas. Currently the need is greater than any conceivable expansion of supply.

The time is right and, as ever, the future remains to be written...

Richard Slaughter, Foresight International, Brisbane, October, 2011.

Notes and references

¹ R. Slaughter, The knowledge base of futures studies as an evolving process, *Futures* 28, 9, 1996, pp 799-812. Also see:

<http://www.foresightinternational.com.au/shop/dvd-cd-rom/knowledge-base-futures-studies-pro-edition-cd-rom>

² Senator John Button was the last Chair of the CFF. He'd taken over from Science Show host Robyn Williams who, in turn, was preceded by broadcaster and advertising guru Philip Adams. While each of these people had many admirable qualities I concluded that none of them had any real knowledge or understanding of the futures field per se.

³ R. Slaughter, Lessons from the Australian Commission for the Future: 1986-98, *Futures* 31, 1999, pp 91-99.

⁴ R. Slaughter, Road testing a new model at the Australian Foresight Institute, *Futures* 36, 2004, pp 837-852.

⁵ Andy Hines, then working at DOW Chemical in the US; Chris Jones, a leading light in the WFSF; Zia Sardar, editor of *Futures* and Fabienne Goux-Baudiment, a leading French practitioner.

⁶ For example, the internal auditing process authorised by the HR Department became distinctly more heavy-handed and threatening.

⁷ These included Adolph Hanich, then head of the Graduate School of Entrepreneurship, Peter Hayward, Joseph Voros, Rowena Morrow and Jose Ramos.

⁸ P. Hayward, *Developing Wisdom: How Foresight Develops in Individuals and Groups*, VDM Verlag Dr. Muller, 2008.

⁹ P. Hayward, J. Voros, R. Morrow, Foresight education in Australia – time for a hybrid model? *Futures*, in press, 2011.

¹⁰ Four You Tube videos from this event can be found at:

<http://strategicforesight.tv/videos/10-in-2010-celebration-10-years-of-strategic-foresight/>