

Governance for the Future: Rhetoric or Reality?

There's no doubt that the new-look government announced today by Malcolm Turnbull will transform what had become a moribund and unpopular government under Tony Abbot. A younger cabinet, more women and a fresh agenda all signal a fundamental shift in focus and perspective. This, we are being told, is a 21st Century government and, indeed, one for 'the future.' If that is indeed the case then the country may discover new possibilities for informed optimism. This, in turn, would stimulate some long overdue shifts of thinking and practice. For the sad fact is that 'the future' has hardly ever been treated seriously during recent decades. It has been a time when market-oriented thinking and neo-liberal economic ideology have swept the field and undermined many more constructive options. Within the arid neo-liberal worldview 'the future' appears only as rhetoric, if at all, never as an essential element of day-to-day decision-making.

We should be cautious, however, about the possibilities for constructive change. In his very first pronouncement after accepting the mantle of PM from his colleagues he was at pains to stress that his priorities were: 'freedom, the individual and the market.' At first sight there's not much room here for 'the future.' Similarly, the mere mention of 'the individual' in this context sets off concerning resonances with Margaret Thatcher's view that 'there's no such thing as society.' Rather than rush to judgement, however, we should hold off for a while and see what actually happens as the new government attempts to get its act together.

Once the euphoria has dissipated what should we look out for? What are some of the possible indicators that the Turnbull government might finally be beginning to take 'the future' seriously? Here are some suggestions.

- Look out for any serious attempt to either access high-quality futures expertise or, even better, integrate it within government. There are plenty of examples to consider but I'd suggest beginning with Singapore and the RAHS (Risk Assessment and Horizon Scanning) program that sits right alongside the PM's office there.
- Be alert to any indication that the key point Naomi Klein has been making about the collision of the economy with the environment has (a) been heard and (b) being taken seriously. For her this intersecting crisis is systemic and existential – it 'changes everything.' But does it hold for the new government? That's what we need to look out for.
- The neo-liberal ascendancy has cost humanity dearly by sponsoring ways of life that cannot be sustained while sidelining so many of the alternatives that explored other ways of doing things. One consequence is that the world is now facing extreme versions of global problems that had been recognised decades ago (see previous news items). Will the new government be looking and listening broadly enough? Will it see the point of implementing high quality environmental scanning and strategic foresight? Time will tell.

- That such efforts need to become mainstream is daily demonstrated by the way that global issues are forcing their way into the comfortable enclaves where we - the rich and privileged - have sought safety and security. The issue is not confined to Europe. There are huge dynamic forces at play globally in every area of life and existence. Here, for example, is what one qualified observer has to say about the current migration crises. He writes that:

current policy responses bypass engagement with long-term trends. The world as a whole lacks a vision for how to respond to the changing nature of displacement. So much of the current “crisis” is not a crisis of numbers but a crisis of *politics*. We need bold leadership that correctly and honestly articulates the causes of movement and outlines global solutions.¹

As inhabitants of the biggest ‘island’ in the world, and however one might want to characterise their positive attributes, Australians do not exactly shine when it comes to relating their continuing tenure of this ancient land to the realities of dynamic forces that are re-shaping the whole contemporary world. Still, there’s a glimmer of hope here as well. The new PM has made a point of insisting that Australia must be quicker and more ‘nimble’ in responding to changing circumstances. Let us hope that is correct given that so many of us remain asleep in a self-, or media-induced haze, of convenient fictions within an inner reality of pure denial.

Terms such as ‘engagement with long-term trends’, ‘a vision for how to respond’, ‘a crisis of politics’, ‘bold leadership’ and, of course, ‘global solutions’ have been vanishingly rare in our political discourse. But they are not as uncommon or difficult to find as one might think. Consider, for example, the summary prospectus of the Centre for the Future. This emerging project displays precisely the kind of inspired thinking that’s required to reinvigorate the mainstream.²

Back in 1932 H.G. Wells made a plea for what he called ‘Professors of Foresight’. Will the new government grasp what that means in 2015 – or will it fall back on the kind of mass avoidance that got us into this mess in the first place? The very best – or perhaps the only - way to deal with the multiple upheavals sweeping the world is to pay close attention, strive to understand what is happening and then respond from the most encompassing worldview and the most advanced ethics that we can muster. After all, what is there to lose?

Richard Slaughter, Brisbane, 21st September, 2015

¹ Human migration will be a defining issue of this century. How best to cope? Alexander Betts, *Observer*, 20th Sep 2015.

² Hames, R. et al, Centre for the Future (Summary):

<http://foresightinternational.com.au/archive/centre-for-the-future/>