

The Foresight Principle - Author Reflections

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The Foresight Principle began as a short paper of the same name published in *Futures* in October 1990, one year after I had started work at the Institute of Education, at the University of Melbourne. It was only my fourth paper for *Futures*. Here is the abstract.

Foresight has ubiquitous uses in everyday life. But its implementation at the social level presents difficulties that have not yet been fully resolved. This article considers the nature of foresight as a human capacity, some barriers to its use and contexts where implementation is being attempted. It is concluded that foresight activities are basically driven by structural imperatives. They imply a growth of foresight work despite the considerable difficulties involved.¹

At the time the term 'foresight' had not been widely used in a futures context if, indeed, it had been used at all. It seemed to me, however, that there was real value in the term. People might be confused by terms like futures studies. But foresight was something that anyone could grasp and, moreover, see operating in daily life. While futures studies were remote and abstract, foresight was clearly grounded in everyday life. It therefore seemed a good term to use.

Then, on one of many trips to the UK, something quite remarkable happened. It was as if there were what I can only describe as two 'balls of energy' in my mind. One of these could be described by the term 'foresight' and the other by 'wisdom'. Now I don't mean to imply that I understood in any depth what these terms really meant. But what I was aware of was that when they seemed to 'come together' that is when the sparks would begin to fly. In other words, a huge amount of energy was generated by the relationship between these two entities. Something was obviously happening.

I played with the ideas for some time. Then, when I was ready, I went into my office at the university during a vacation and wrote the basic text for the book in two weeks. This would have been late 1993 or early 1994. It then took me several months to edit the raw manuscript into shape. By the time I'd finished I felt as though I'd finally been able to put together a reasonably concise statement about why foresight seemed to me to be such a powerful, yet underutilised, capacity. It took another couple of years before I could begin to describe the links between individual foresight and what I began to think of as social foresight.² But the reviews I received were generally positive and I was encouraged to think that I appeared to be on the right track. I was pleased, as any author would be, to see that for several months the book appeared on the World Future Society's list of 'best sellers'.

Yet, as the book was taking off, so my relations with the original publisher were deteriorating. I had had real problems with the contract and then even more problems with one particular individual. It turned out that I was not the only one. This 'publisher of choice' for the futures arena shone brightly for a short time and then expired in a cloud of broken promises and terminally frustrated authors. Royalties had long stopped appearing. Interesting, then, to see the book still advertised for sale on the internet in 2005. Clearly someone was still reaping an income, but not this writer.

The book was published in 1995 after I'd left the university and was again learning how to earn an independent living. I found it hard at first but soon adapted, adjusted, and came to prefer this different *modus operandi*. For a while I worked out of a home office with a schedule determined largely by my own preferences. Still the energy contained in these ideas continued to grow. *The Foresight Principle* allowed me to express them coherently for the first time, but now it was time to find another approach.

With the help of other colleagues, members of the World Futures Studies Federation and the World Future Society, I began working on the *Knowledge Base of Futures Studies*. That was, as they say, a whole new ball game.

References

1. Slaughter, R. The Foresight Principle, *Futures* 22, 5, October 1990, 801-819.
2. Slaughter, R. Futures Studies: From Individual to Social Capacity, *Futures* 28, 1996, 751-762.

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