

Creating and Sustaining Second-Generation Institutions of Foresight

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Introduction

Institutions of Foresight (IOFs) are purpose-built organisations that focus on one or another aspect of futures work. Depending on definitions there are, perhaps, several hundred around the world. Some of these are fully viable, while others no longer exist. The paper suggests that both successes and failures provide useful pointers for creating and sustaining second-generation IOFs. In particular, the paper considers some implications of the Australian Commission for the Future (CFF). It looks back at the 12 years of its existence, attempts to summarise its achievements, and then suggests some lessons, or broad design principles, that may be useful to other such initiatives around the world.

The Commission was launched 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 during 1996. After many ups and downs, after a number of false dawns and unsuccessful attempts at revival, the last chairman of the board ran out of inspiration in June 1998 and the CFF closed its doors for the last time.

Over this period many people suggested that the CFF was never a fully satisfactory organisation and, to a considerable extent, I concur. However, it seems to me that the conclusions that have been widely drawn are wrong: '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.' It seems to me that if this notion persists then we will certainly be in for a much rougher ride in the early 21st Century than anyone would rationally desire. So the purpose of this paper is to suggest that, far from dismissing them, *we can learn from and apply the experience of first-generation IOFs* like the CFF. An international program of study and research is urgently needed for this purpose. If we wish to exert any real control, claim any sort of autonomy, over our future, intending social innovators will deliberately embody these institutional learnings in a whole new generation of Institutions of Foresight.

Why are institutions of foresight needed?

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'.¹ It seems to me that what motivates most futurists - and certainly those who have devoted their lives to this area - is a sense that we should, as individuals, organisations and as a species, learn to pay attention. That is, to read the signals of change and act accordingly. But this is asking for something that goes a long way beyond traditional expressions of prudence and foresight that can be found in various cultures.²

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 merely an oversight can be seen when we consider aspects of dominant ideologies. For example, in his trenchant critique of corporatism, John Saul has this to say. 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. ³ (Emphasis added.)

This passage helps to explain why, in a broader social sense, there is so little structural support for long-term thinking. While there are a number of government-driven 'foresight' initiatives in several nations, these are recent developments, the outcomes of which remain uncertain. Most forward-looking initiatives remain associated with technology trends, conventional (short term) planning, commercial or financial speculation and the development of corporate strategies. To date, the amount of futures work carried out by public bodies in the public interest is minimal. This is a huge oversight. The forward view is too important, too central to developing high-quality responses, to be marginalised. Yet that remains the current state of play.

The Australian Commission for the Future was one of a number of national government supported foresight initiatives created during the 70s and 80s. As with the premature closure of the American Office of Technology Assessment (OTA), 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 scale that are historically unprecedented. The tradition that they draw upon (the emergence of FS as a metadiscipline) is itself only three or four decades old. So it is entirely understandable that some of them will fail. But the closure 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. In fact the opposite is the case. They provide a range of vital services for societies undergoing the stress of rapid structural change.

What services do Institutions of Foresight provide?

A few years ago I surveyed a sample of internationally-significant IOFs and derived an overview of their activities. Here, in summary, is a summary of the services they provide. First, it is clear that 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, innovations, both social and technical. Second, they *open out the forward view* and, in so doing, 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 implementation* 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 people and for experimental, or public interest, futures work which, perhaps, could not easily be carried out elsewhere. ⁴

It should be obvious that such contributions help in many practical ways to initiate and support the crucial shifts of perception, policy and practice which, in no small way, form the pivot upon which our over-heated and over-extended global 'megaculture' now turns.

Rise and fall of the CFF

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 projects were usually issues-based and it was not until rather late in the piece that standard futures methodologies (to enable more sophisticated options) were

even contemplated. In this it differed from many other IOFs. The initial selection of staff was dictated more by a political agenda than a professional one, and this coloured the nature of the organisation from the start. It is startling to realise that 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 key staff acquired the necessary grounding. So the CFF was flawed from the very beginning. Hence it is reasonable to conclude that the *impulse* underlying its creation was well-founded, but the execution failed for a number of reasons. These include the following.

- Lack of comparative knowledge from other foresight contexts.
- Role conflicts that arose from being dependent upon a government department (Science); whereas futures work arises from a wider context and may involve challenging political priorities.
- The specialised knowledge, concepts, methodologies etc. available in FS were prematurely dismissed (in favour of consciousness-raising). These resources could have helped the CFF to develop in more productive and professional ways.
- Lack of clarity about the purposes and practices of futures work created a policy vacuum which made it difficult to adjudicate the many claims made upon the CFF and especially its director(s).
- There was a consistent failure to employ suitably qualified personnel with a background in Futures Studies.⁵

Against the early criticisms were 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 in Australia. *The Bicentennial Futures Education Project* (BFEP) helped to place futures studies on the educational map and produced some useful materials. The CFF also produced a range of other publications, some of reasonable, or better, quality. Also, an intense schedule of public briefings, radio shows, parliamentary seminars and the like certainly helped to influence public understanding and raised the profile of concerns such as innovation, re-cycling and the meaning of 'the clever country'.

The glossy journal *21C* was the most high-profile of the CFFs publications. Its own rise and fall parallels that of the CFF in some ways.⁶ It was launched 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. 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 eight years and 26 issues it had evolved from the simplistic 'previews' format to a highly specialised one catering to a limited, but discriminating, readership. The subject matter had changed. *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 forsaken the futures arena and wandered 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 in the absence of sound editorial guidelines based upon a coherent disciplinary foundation. However *21C* was certainly one of the most (if not *the* most) exciting and original publications ever produced in Australia and its demise left 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 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.

Looking back over the 10-12 years of its existence, I am firmly of the view that the CFF was by no means a waste of time and money. Rather, it encountered forces that it was ill-equipped to face, let alone resolve. The fact that such institutions are rare, are not widely supported, and are certainly not widely understood, points beyond the analysis of particular IOFs to the social context in which they are embedded. Perhaps the experience of the CFF reveals something about the 'shadow side' of human societies as we head into the millennium period.

Acknowledging 'the shadow' in human societies

It is easy to focus a critique of first-generation IOFs such as Australia's CFF on weaknesses in the 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 is both unconvincing and insufficient. I therefore tend toward an explanation of a rather different order: one that allows us to build on the mistakes and the successes of organisations like the CFF, and to move forward. This leads toward a powerful and disturbing conclusion.

On the bright, superficial side of human experience, most people 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 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, lack of interest which, given the global context, clearly imply Dystopian 'breakdown' futures. Though the latter are highly 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, leading practitioners within FS continue to suggest that the future of civilisation now hangs between two worlds or, more appropriately, two kinds of world. ⁷ 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.

So could it be that the accusing finger should point beyond particular attempts at institutional innovation to the heart of our societies and major 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 IOFs in recent years have had an up-hill battle, and why some of them no longer exist. In Australia, as in so many other places, forward thinking is neither a political habit, a widespread commercial practice nor a popular pastime.

But if IOFs became a more effective social force, it could become all of the above, and more.

Design principles for second-generation IOFs

First-generation IOFs were created largely in isolation from each other and in the absence of a body of applied knowledge about how best foresight work in the public interest can, or should be, carried out. So, as noted, many of them failed. But, at the dawn of the Third Millennium, there are enough case studies, enough accumulated experience, to begin to derive some provisional lessons, or design

principles, for future IOFs. The challenge is to assemble a body of applied knowledge that will form a sturdy foundation for 21st century IOFs.

One starting point is the outline research agenda for IOFs that Martha Garrett and I suggested in 1995.⁸ Earlier, still-relevant, sources are the materials gathered by Clem Bezold and his associates from the use of state government foresight in the USA, and Lindsay Grant's book on *Foresight and National Decisions*.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.

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

These are useful insights. It is the 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. Thus for most of its life it lurched from one crisis to another, despite the best efforts of the board and successive directors. So where do we go from here? The following suggestions arise in the context of the CFF and a number of other examples.¹¹ It is essential that they are critiqued, checked and supplemented by further work. Nevertheless, they provide some clear starting points for enquiry and practice in this still under-developed, but increasingly vital realm.

1. Define core purposes

The core purposes of any IOF should be carefully defined and linked with the main institutional functions (as in a successful business). In other words, there must be a clear match between purposes and the structures created to sustain them. For example, there is little merit in creating a 'soft', inspirational, consciousness-raising operation if the main clients are likely to be results-oriented government or business people. Ends and means must be appropriate to the chosen purposes.

2. Funding

Funding issues should be tackled and a secure, diversified basis of financial support established as soon as possible. During the early years any IOF will be vulnerable to many hazards, not least of which is running out of funds. Two starting strategies are as follows. One is to secure benefactor funding. This means locating an organisation or an individual who will elect to support the new organisation because they believe it is worth doing, ie., that there are intrinsic benefits, or tangible benefits, or both. Such support is not impossible to find if it is sought in the right places. A second approach is to establish a fee for service operation from the outset. If successful, this becomes a source of 'hard' money that will not suddenly disappear. By 'fee for service' I mean a viable product or service that is offered for sale. It may be a series of foresight-related courses or seminars, a new angle on consulting or a publication such as the Worldwatch Institute's very successful *State of the World* series.

3. Contextual knowledge

The knowledge gained from other foresight initiatives around the world should be thoroughly understood and applied such that the learning curve can begin from a higher level and take place more quickly. There is nothing more futile than for different foresight initiatives to be each re-inventing similar 'wheels', as it were. So to make the very best use of scarce resources and personnel, every effort should be made to learn about the nature, work and strategies involved in other IOF initiatives.

In part this means that the channels of communication between widely-dispersed IOFs should be open and facilitative (see below.)

4. Quality control

This is of such overwhelming importance that I would recommend it be taken as a central principle of any IOF. The reason is that there are many myths and misunderstandings about FS and futures work in general. Second rate futures work is worse than none at all because it provides spurious grounds for the dismissal of the whole enterprise. Measures for quality control include: external refereeing, benchmarking, best practice criteria and the adoption of a code of professional ethics. ¹²

5. Qualified employees

Those working in IOFs should be fully qualified to carry out futures work. This will necessarily mean that a certain proportion of employees will either have recent relevant experience of futures-related work or will undertake the necessary training as a condition of their employment contract. While there may be regrettable consequences attending the professionalisation of FS work, these are minor compared with the need to create durable organisations with professional standards. ¹³

6. Use of robust methods

Futures methodologies have developed rapidly in the last decade or so. The field is no longer limited to the earlier empirical methods (eg. forecasting, trend extrapolation, scenarios) that were developed in the 60s and 70s. These will remain important in relation to the empirical dimensions of futures problems. But more sophisticated work will also integrate other approaches. Some years ago a three-fold division into empirical, critical and interpretive approaches had been recognised. ¹⁴ This represents a useful starting point for the wider exploration and use of futures methods which go a long way beyond the pop-futurist habit of merely re-hashing surface understandings which are normally both highly problematic and culture-bound. ¹⁵

7. Constituencies of support

Particular attention must be paid to building up and sustaining the constituencies upon which such enterprises depend. This is a challenging task since the spread of interests is clearly very wide. 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. Obviously all of the above takes time. Yet so vital is this area that the appointment of a full-time PR individual need not be seen as a luxury. It goes without saying that all IOFs require a board comprised of leading people from key social and economic areas who will tenaciously pursue the interests of the organisation. Such work embraces basic fund-raising as well as the search for social legitimation (see below).

8. Communication

One of the greatest lacks at the present time is a dedicated channel of communication for IOFs and those who work in them. Of course, all are loosely connected by the internet, journals, futures organisations and the like. But it may be that the time is right to establish a more formal association to assemble foresight knowledge and expertise in a more coherent and reliable form. One approach would be to establish a dedicated web site. Another would be to host special-interest gatherings in collaboration with, eg., WFS and WFSF conferences. Overall, it is vital that IOFs communicate with similar organisations around the world and begin to: share expertise, organise meetings, pool efforts in common projects and, perhaps, to begin to 'speak with one voice' across cultures and national boundaries. IOFs that begin to cooperate in these ways will be able to wield far greater social and symbolic power than any of them could working alone.

9. Legitimation

The parent field of FS is arguably making steady progress in its own path toward full social and professional legitimation. That is, it is emerging as a serious and substantive entity that can contribute in a host of ways to the framing of policy and practice in many, many fields. ¹⁶ If, as a group of organisations dedicated to some of the ends outlined here, IOFs are able to set themselves appropriate tasks to serve their constituencies in a competent, consistent and high-quality way, then they too will follow this path. It will then become self-fulfilling: IOFs will finally have 'arrived' in the sense of having established their social, economic and professional viability. They will be seen as legitimate, socially-vital organisations called forth by the historical conditions of our time and serving a range of profound human interests.

10. Research

As part of the coming-together of IOFs around the world, there is a need for an intensive program of work to carry out tasks such as the following.

- To document as much institutional foresight activity as possible. This will form the history of the discipline of foresight work. It will record the emergence of this sub-field and its early attempts to get established.
- To investigate particular IOF case studies in order to draw out, check, critique, create and re-create the essential procedures and principles of operation that minimise failure and maximise the chances of success in particular contexts.
- To explore ways of functioning, modes of cooperation and the like that will increase the efficiency and effectiveness of IOF work around the world.
- To evaluate the outcomes of IOF activity in relation to appropriate professional standards.

In such ways IOFs can be created and sustained into the distant future.

Conclusion: from IOFs to national foresight strategies

The creation of free-standing IOFs is itself only part of a wider foresight strategy; an attempt to help societies move from their traditional stance of being inspired or 'driven' by the past, to a stance which remains open to the past but which is also increasingly responsive to the 'signals' of the near-term future, as revealed by well-constructed forward views. To achieve this goal each nation will find it valuable to undertake a national integrated foresight strategy that matches its own priorities, needs and culture(s).

In a paper published in 1996 I outlined a rationale and approach to the creation of a national foresight strategy for Australia. The basic steps were as follows.

- Create an Australian Foresight Institute (AFI).
- Map national and international foresight work.
- Develop a skill-transfer strategy.
- Identify key sectors, organisations and individuals within each.
- Review progress and link with similar initiatives elsewhere.
- Secure long-term funding. ¹⁷

Three years later a feasibility study for the AFI was completed and accepted by a leading university in Melbourne. The new organisation began work in mid-1999. This development will help to catalyse the other steps mentioned above. It is a long-overdue development, though not a new idea. National 21st century studies have been around for some time (although, puzzlingly, Australia did not participate in them). ¹⁸ Nevertheless, support for such work has come from a highly significant source. 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.¹⁹

Universities are not the only places where IOFs can be created and sustained. But such developments are clearly appropriate there. Indeed, properly understood, universities can be considered IOFs in their own right.²⁰ Such developments would go a long way toward enabling national foresight strategies appropriate to the needs of different societies and cultures.²¹

In time, we can expect to see a variety of second-generation IOFs springing up internationally. They will pursue a variety of agendas and serve a variety of interests. There is no single mould: they will be multicultural and diverse. Within that diversity will lie part of their strength. The latter will also derive from rigorously interrogating worldview assumptions, dealing effectively with the many avoidances and repressions that are expressions of 'the shadow', as well as using and adapting some of the more practical suggestions outlined here.

By or before 2010 we can anticipate an integrated network of IOFs operating around the world to create, sustain and apply the forward view in a wide variety of contexts. These purpose-built institutions will be durable, far-sighted, but keenly attuned to their social contexts - and thus socially valued. They will help to plot dynamic and sustainable paths ahead in the manifestly challenging and unstable conditions of the early 21st Century.

This is an historic task wherein there is nothing to lose and just about everything to gain.

Notes and references

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Note

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