Chapter Two: Looking Around

The argument outlined above is essentially that major aspects of the Western industrial worldview are defective and need to be replaced. In this chapter I look more closely at this process as it affects some of our major institutions. If this argument is correct, the latter will show features that are systemically related to that worldview, yet which are also, in an important sense, 'out of sync' with the needs of our time and beyond. If this can be clearly demonstrated, a substantial part of the case for implementing foresight much more widely than hitherto will be revealed. Then, in Chapter 5, we will be in a better position to explore the difference that foresight can make.

In what follows, I look briefly at politics and governance, economics, education, commerce and the media. Two caveats need to be borne in mind. First, I am aware that these are not depth analyses, nor do they constitute the whole picture. For example, I am not looking at science, the judiciary or the church, important though they may be. Second, this is not an academic critique. My intention at this stage is to draw attention to fairly obvious defects without turning this book into a sociological treatise.

Politics and governance

The purpose of politics is to make decisions, to administer and oversee the everyday operations of a society. To this end, societies have evolved ways to select people for this role in the expectation that their work will be of a reasonable quality. Of course there are some societies where dictators and oppressive regimes retain power by open force. These are subject to a different set of defects that are beyond my present scope. They would, in any case, have little use for foresight.

By contrast, liberal democracies select their leaders through the ballot box via elections. But what kind of leadership do they actually get? The people who go into politics tend to have strong personalities and perhaps a striking public profile, but there's no guarantee that they will be the brightest or best. If the USA can choose a second-rate actor of low intellect, but benign stage presence, for its president, we can be sure that there are similar problems elsewhere. So one issue is the calibre of the people chosen to lead. It is not as good as it might be. Perhaps we could think again about the qualities we require of leaders? One thing is certain: most politicians are not, in fact, leaders at all.

One of the characteristics of a leader is that he or she has a vision of a better future and more than a passing idea on how to work toward it. But the political process is mainly focused on the present and short-term future up to the next election. The electoral cycle, then, is one of the main stumbling blocks to longer-term view. Yet the decisions made in the political arena often have long-term repercussions. Here is an important clue: the time-frames of conventional politics are inappropriate for the long-term processes that they directly affect. I will suggest in Chapter 5 that there are other choices.

A further defect in politics and governance is that the units of area under consideration are often too limited. Local politics, the politics of the town hall, are geared to local problems and needs. They have little or no chance to take a wider view. Similarly at the national level, the tendency is to regard the nation state as primary, and the global system (of trade, communication, environment) as secondary. But this is a long-standing inversion of reality. In an indivisible and interconnected world, local and national politics should be firmly located within their wider contexts. Means are needed to enable this. Attempts to form local trading blocks and areas of economic cooperation may be steps in the right direction, but only so long as they are indeed genuine moves toward cooperation, not merely new bases of power and exclusion.

Finally, politics tends to be dominated by 'issues of the day'. Whereas a few government departments (such as defence and economic institutions) and many private corporations have adopted various systems of environmental scanning and detailed prospective analysis, governments themselves tend to be somewhat 'rudderless', uncertain of their direction or ends - unless it be simply staying in power. And this brings me to the last point. The motives for going into, and staying in, politics, need to be re-assessed. It is not enough to ask MPs to reveal their bank accounts and private interests. Given the very real challenges of the times we are in (and heading toward) we need to ensure that politicians are far more alert, able and ethical. We need to find ways of ensuring that politics are transformed into a vocation inspired by the highest possible motives, not the lowest.

Economics

Economics, the dismal science, is important because it is about wealth, trade and the material foundations of civilised life. It is unfortunate, therefore, that the discipline has such an abstract and diminished view of reality that it measures the wrong things, gives the wrong signals and helps to speed the process of social decay and environmental destruction upon the earth. When systems of national accounting were set up some time ago, a certain view of what was important was established, and this has remained largely unchanged since. Thus, an economy is a system of interactions, buying, selling, investing and so on, which, while entirely dependent upon the natural environment, still considers it a mere 'externality'. Similarly, women's work in the home was regarded as of no value - it was simply assumed to be unimportant. A further error is embedded in the notion of GNP, or gross national product. This is so constructed as to count accidents, disasters and costs of many kinds as positive contributions to the economy. Thus the Alaskan oil spill, which was one of the greatest environmental disasters of recent years, actually served as a stimulus to the economy of that state. This is crazy accounting.

Unfortunately, however, governments tend to rely overmuch on economists and to be drawn into their abstractions to the point where national policy is shaped very much in the light of economic considerations. But economics is not life. It is a frequently crude abstraction. Worse, policy decisions are often made on the basis of market signals. Now of all entities to give signals to governments,

markets are not the best. For one thing they are heavily weighted toward existing agendas and priorities. For another, they actively point us toward perverse directions (see Commerce, below). Finally, it is frequently overlooked that market signals are retrospective. Markets do not contain a sufficiently strong forward-looking component because the future is constantly discounted, made to appear infinitely less important than the present. This is a crucial mistake, a cultural error. Under different circumstances the future could be considered *more* important than the present, though the latter involves pathways toward it. National economies are themselves increasingly open to international forces, to 'globalisation', and there is a flood of 'how to' books instructing executives how to expand and prosper. Yet few of them consider the long term. It tends to be critics of mainstream economics such as Fritz Schumacher, Hazel Henderson and Susan George who think outside the standard economic paradigm. If one cares to consider their work, it becomes evident that there are many ways out of the trap: new indicators, new concepts, new methods for making economics responsive to our biological heritage and the long-term future.

But at present, most of those innovations lie ignored and untried. It will probably take an economic collapse of terrible proportions to provide habitually short-termist societies the motivation to reinvent their economics. That, unfortunately, is the price of greed, short-term thinking, and the long habit of social learning not by thinking ahead, but by crude experience.

Education

Education is the sum of formal and informal structures and arrangements insituted by a society to ensure its renewal. It tends, however, to be identified with the formal structure of the education system. For brevity's sake alone, I will follow this convention here. Formal education exhibits a major paradox. On the one hand, it developed in a time of rapid industrial expansion to serve the needs of a factory-based society. Its curriculum and map of knowledge are derived from older medieval models based on the classics, mathematics and philosophy. Generally speaking, it has subjects which look back (history, human geography, geology, economics) but none which look forward except in an implicit, undeveloped way (design for example). Let’s consider this for a moment. The educational system of any country costs very large sums of money to run. Its teachers are highly trained. It is a labour-intensive and difficult job. Its purpose is to prepare successive generations to participate in the running of the society, its preservation and development. Here is the paradox: an educational system is from the past and is intended to prepare for the future - yet it turns away from the future in the way it is conceptualised, structured and taught. While futures have been taught explicitly in schools, colleges and universities for over twenty-five years, perhaps 99 per cent of the teaching profession world-wide are unaware of the fact or its significance. This brings me to the next point.

As indicated above, change in the real world over the last two centuries has been rapid, profound and structural. The world we now live in is different in many key respects from anything that has ever existed before. Yet schools remain

uninformed and passive. They have no systematic way of monitoring, describing or even noticing such changes directly and clearly. On the whole, the culture of teaching, while displaying some very fine features, remains inward looking, parochial and isolated from the wider world. This means that adaptive processes that could be taking place are not happening, or are not happening fast enough. While progress has been made with areas such as peace studies and environmental education - both important fields - the future in schools remains a missing dimension, a blank and empty space.

This is one of the reasons why many young people feel anger and despair. At some level they instinctively know that the future is important. But, on the whole, the messages they get from school, commerce and media (see below) are not helpful.

Commerce

Commerce is an ancient and, in many ways, an honourable activity. It brings variety and stimulation to our lives. Yet in the 19th century, and even more in the 20th, something has debased this vital human activity. Buying and selling have become too important, too compulsive and, overall, too damaging to ourselves and the wider environment. Modern marketing now comes equipped with all the tools and psychological insight of this technology-obsessed era. So a vast range of techniques is now turned upon us to persuade, cajole and seduce. The point, as is well known, is to stimulate sales, to increase turnover, to maintain profits. Yet at the heart of modern marketing and merchandising lies a diminished view of humanity and personhood. Nothing makes this clearer than the emergence of sleaze into the marketing mainstream. If pop stars can peddle their fantasies of sex, power and debasement to millions, we will no doubt see others follow suit. I am not a moralist, not offended by nudity and not against non-violent erotica. But the marketing imperative is now penetrating into areas where it never ventured before. It will continue to do so until enough people consciously choose limits and stop it.

Commercial interests have exerted profoundly subversive effects within industrialised cultures. On the whole, they have sold materialism so successfully that people think more readily about what they have, rather than what they are or may be. I referred to this as part of 'the metaproblem', above. The constant media assault recommends what are, in fact, a whole series of false solutions to the problems of being in the world: consumption, distraction, gratification of the unreconstructed ego. These false solutions have led on to the creation of what Ian Mitroff and Warren Bennis have called 'the unreality industry'. And there is a great deal more to come. Though few consumers are asking for it, we are being prepared for the commercial application of virtual reality, which one day will provide multiple substitute worlds. The danger here is not just in the nature of the medium itself. More significantly, just as the actual world is reaching a most dangerous and unstable condition, when we are at the point where it is essential to pay attention and 'steer' very, very carefully, people are tuning out in unprecedented numbers. It seems to me that those who understand the implications most clearly are more likely to be readers or writers of science

fiction than those involved in public or commercial life. For it is in fiction that the wider social implications of such futures have been most thoroughly explored.

Materialism, consumption, ego-gratification, distraction. Isn't it obvious that these are taking us in an unwise direction? We need a good deal less marketing and a great deal more careful thought - followed by action - regarding the kind of ethics and worldview that underlies commercial activity. A gilded deception is being exerted here upon entire populations. But we need a different view of commerce. A view that stems from different sources, takes a benign long-term view and participates in a larger and more worthwhile human project.

The Media

The media are often castigated for the ills of society and perhaps made to serve as a scapegoat for many projected ills and motives. I do not want to add to this shrill critique. But some criticisms are necessary. In the late 20th century the media became a multi-dimensional industry of great symbolic and cultural significance. They powerfully affect what, how and why people think. They create a kind of ersatz reality with its own rules, images and dynamics. One might say that while the media are certainly owned by particular individuals and companies, they belong to no one. There is a kind of anarchic variety abroad in media as diverse as papers, books, magazines, journals, films, TV, video, computer games, bulletin boards, e-mail and virtual reality. They support every conceivable interest group, such that broadcasting is rapidly giving way to narrowcasting, the tailoring of media to personal or group requirements.

Within all this complexity and diversity, it is difficult to make generalisations. But it is important to try. On the whole I believe it's true to say that these powerful news media are attracted to the dramatic, the visual and the negative. They go to any ends to photograph an accident, a murder scene or a naked princess by a pool. In this latter respect it is hard not to be drawn willy-nilly into a kind of weak, second-hand voyerism. Even women's magazines are not immune. Equally, there are some subjects that provide a real challenge to the media. I am thinking of good news, things that are routine, but working well and reliably, and social innovations. My reading of the futures literature suggests that for every major problem or dilemma we face, there are many potential solutions waiting to be tried or applied. Unfortunately they are not always dramatic or newsworthy. Ideas circulate in esoteric publications like the journal of the London-based Institute for Social Inventions. They are seldom featured on the evening news. This is one of the subtle biases that conditions late 20th century life and contributes to its downbeat flavour. So we are entitled to ask: why is good news so unpalatable?

For young people there is a different problem. I have examined a range of young people's media, looking for the ways in which they represent futures images and ideas. After looking at many examples and checking surveys of young people's views of futures, I came to the following conclusions. First, the images of futures in these media tend to be dark, violent cityscapes dominated by machines, and robots. It is amazingly difficult to find images of future people, particularly

people who demonstrate that they too have moved on and evolved in some way. Such futures are often represented in compelling detail and may arguably provide the means through which to consider fears of depersonalisation and so on. Yet what they do not provide is material which can be used to actually create the future. In other words, much of this material is disempowering.

A second conclusion was that young people's media was confused. What I mean by this is that there seem to be a number of fundamental 'category errors' widely reproduced in comics, videos and films, for example. Good and evil, right and wrong, science and magic seem interchangeable. Where, then, is the material through which to interrogate the world, test out its meanings, negotiate rites of passage? With the exception of the 'good' books which fewer young people read, there seem to be few points of clarity among the confusion. Much of the mass media seems to be little more than a strategy of distraction, driven by too-powerful a marketing imperative.

Why our institutions are out of step with the times

By way of a summary, I want to conclude this chapter by suggesting some of the basic reasons why some of our major institutions are failing us. They are as follows.

1. They had their beginnings in an earlier age and therefore still reflect that safer, slower, less threatened world.

2. The interests embedded in these institutions are not universal interests supported by clear and high-level values or motives. Rather, they tend to be limited, partial, frequently exploitive and driven by low-level values or motives.

3. Changes within systems and institutions are always slower than those outside of them. So it is easy for the former to become rapidly out of touch and unresponsive to current needs. People are often well ahead of the institutional contexts in which they work and this can cause stress and frustration.

4. Turbulent times pose severe problems for leaders and those in charge of enterprises. Many are not aware of the tools and other means by which they might see ahead more clearly and achieve a more deliberate, strategic stance. Many so-called leaders are merely administrators or caretakers with little understanding of the wider picture.

5. The Western industrial worldview contains a number of assumptions that are faulty, unhelpful, and which directly impede useful responses. One of these is a chronically short-term view, based on Me, Mine and Now. Another is a reductive notion of time that views the present merely as an isolated, fleeting moment. This helps to cut us off from the universal process in which we are immersed. These and related assumptions have served to legitimate the present assault upon the life-support systems of the planet.

'Looking around' at some of our major institutions suggests that this past-oriented culture is attempting to move into the future without a futures perspective - that is, without sustaining and viable notions of how they might be constituted. In the default view, the future is an empty space. It does not exist. It cannot be studied. Yet intuitively this feels wrong. If that were really the end of the story there would be no point in writing (or reading) this book. We would be 'locked into' a process we could neither foresee nor affect.

Human beings are born with the capacity for foresight. But we need to learn how to mobilise and apply it more effectively. That is, to re-constitute it at the social level. This one development would do much to help us see clearly how industrialism has already breached certain crucial limits. It would also begin to reveal some of the many options for moving in more life-affirming directions. It follows that late industrial cultures need to adopt the foresight principle as part of their 'software', their underlying assumptions, their *modus operandi*.

Without it they will be thrown back on mere experience and that, by itself, is very dangerous indeed.