OPINION INTERVIEW

Ask most people and they'll tell you they take the future very seriously. Ask a politician and they'll bore you into the ground with a 50-point action plan. Hopeless, says **Richard Slaughter**, who's just become president of the World Futures Studies Federation. He's a professor of futures studies based at the Australian Foresight Institute within Swinburne University of Technology, and he reckons the way we think about the future is all wrong. What we should do is study it systematically if we are to stand the faintest chance of avoiding the disasters that are rushing to meet us. For him, understanding the future may also be the best way to change the present. **Liz Else** caught up with him recently

Seizing tomorrow

Could anyone have predicted what happened to the World Trade Center?
It's been clear for a long time that many people anticipated that large-scale terrorism was "inevitable". But such warnings tend not to be heeded. The real point is what we learn from it. We have to reorganise our tenancy of this planet to ensure that the root causes of this disaster are fully dealt with. Otherwise the same things will happen time and time again.

So we're not very good at learning then?
No. The fact is that people mostly operate on a very short time frame that they are not really aware of. And it seems that there is a dialectical relationship between foresight and experience. People won't change their modus operandi if they only suspect it might be off. They have to know it from harsh experience.

For example?
The outbreak of foot and mouth disease in Britain. It's pretty clear that the whole livestock industry will be reorganised on the basis of this savage learning experience. People had been talking about the dangers for 30 years, but that didn't matter. You need the experience to make social change. That's

M. Amendolia/Network

the dilemma we face. The trouble is that the potential level of losses that we are facing with some problems are so great that to have that experience becomes counterproductive.

You're painting a rather bleak view of the future?

Humans have reached a stage where we are a major force on the planet, equal to many geological forces or more than some of them. The future doesn't unwind naturally from processes humans have unconsciously set in train any more. It becomes more and more a consequence of all the decisions and actions that we take. So the emergence of futures as a field of study is a consequence of understanding that, rather than drifting and ending up who knows where, we have to try to direct our development so we can reach a future that is worth living in. Paul Ehrlich had a wonderful simile. He said the future was like going up in a plane with a bunch of rivets popping, and as you fly along you keep popping off the odd rivet. The plane keeps flying for a very long time. But you know it is eventually going to fall out of the sky even if you can't say when.

But which future do you think is most likely?

Unfortunately, the most likely futures are pretty awful—scenarios that no sane person would wish to live in. This scenario is based on the continuing human impact on the global environment. Global warming is bad enough, but there's also the impact on other species, on wildlife extinctions, on soil loss or tropical forests—basically, gross and sustained simplifications of Earth's life-support systems. We have to learn to rein in this growth. But growth is the engine of a capitalist economy, so this is a very tough question—how to move to a form of development which satisfies human needs but doesn't wreck the life support systems while we are doing it.

Hence the need for futures thinking?
That's part of it. There are two aspects. First, there is the fear of reaching futures that are unpleasant and lead to the end of the human experiment. That's the stick. Then there's the carrot—the desire to create a better world. In its most advanced form, futures enquiry is very much about understanding the nature of the civilisation we live in, about understanding the present, which means understanding history. So one aspect is about avoiding dystopias. The other one is about not exactly creating utopias but about designing the kind of world that makes sense for most people who have to live in it.

What's different about your kind of futures thinking and that of the Rand Corporation in the 1950s?
Rand was spawned by the military and was concerned mainly with techniques of predicting, of modelling, of envisioning the future. It tells us a lot about the thinking of that time, but not that much about the future. It was a search for forecasting accuracy, which was rather akin to science. That effort foundered because people with no training could get as good results as people who invested massive amounts of time and energy. What happened was a shift from forecasting accuracy to readiness for change, or the exploration of diverging possibilities. This is when scenario building became popular. You make various assumptions and track them through into different worlds, so you have an array of possibilities. The point is to challenge our preconceptions about how things will develop—not to predict the future, but to give an array of future worlds that seem to flow from these assumptions. Recently there has been powerful development which brings in an area of sociology called social construction. This gives you access to a way of understanding the "constructedness" of society, so you can intervene in some processes to create outcomes you want.

How do you deal with the uncertainty in the data set of many areas?
That's why you have something called environmental scanning. It's exactly parallel to what an organism does. You're walking down the street, you come to a crossing. Do you charge across or do you scan the environment? You see people walking on the pavement—why don't they bump into each other? It's a scanning loop—looking, interpreting, acting, checking, looking . . . Environmental scanning is just creating that scanning loop at an institutional level, doing what an organism does, intuitively, very rapidly, repeatedly, so there never is one final route to the future, it is constantly refreshed.

What about all those bestsellers that sell definite, quantifiable futures?
We have a lot of pop futurists these days—

the people who produce articles and books that are frothy, simplistic, easy to digest and perfect for sound bites. That's why the World Futures Studies Federation is so critical. It is big enough, broad enough and open enough to bring people into the futures discourse, from many different international cultures, not just the Western culture—or should I say, the American culture.

Is this bias towards the US a problem?
Let me give you an example. Recently an academic published a list of the 70 best futures books, and he failed to mention any books that challenged the Western viewpoint. His choice meant completely discounting what many of us think is the most exciting work in this field—books by people like Sohail Inayatullah or Kjell Dahle, who take a international view and write from either developing or smaller developed countries—in favour of the deeply American *Encyclopedia of the Future*. Which means that the dominant views about the future are embedded in a particular context. And busy editors will pick up the list that says: "Here are the best books."

To distance yourself from all this shouldn't you call yourself something different?
Yes. I don't like the word futurology. I've never met a futurologist. They don't actually exist now. Rand's Hermann Kahn was a futurologist. There had been and still are many futurists, but most of us do not wish to be attached to an "ism". I prefer the term "foresight" because foresight is something everyone knows about. It's a good word. The future is often portrayed as something distant, abstract. But when you look how people function in everyday life, you see there are aspects of the future embedded in every aspect of the present. If you look at it even more closely, you find that every human act is based on purpose, on intention. These things always refer forwards. Human existence draws on the past, is enacted in the present, and is future-oriented.

How well can you apply all this? What's your most successful project?
The last part first: putting together the Australian Foresight Institute because we had the support of the university's vice-chancellor and we ended up with a niche to work from. Terrific! As for applications, foresight work has been funded by governments and corporations for a long time. Corporations invest in foresight to outsmart their competitors. By achieving what they call intellectual leadership and industry foresight, they can reach virgin territory and develop it before other people even thought about it. The Finnish company Nokia has actually followed this methodology, and despite its recent vicissitudes it is still ahead. But there is a huge gap—public agencies that are quasi-monopolies. Here we're virtually deaf, dumb and blind to macro-change. I find that really interesting: central governmental uses of foresight, competitive uses, while the public sector doesn't even know what is going on.

What do your family and friends ask you about the future?
They've learned not to ask for predictions. My sons, who are 22 and 24, ask a lot about the state of the world and prospects for their lifetimes. Friends tend to consult me on issues like terrorism, nanotech, developments in electronic media and unemployment.

What question is most often asked about the future?
They ask me what on earth do you mean by futures or foresight. This leads to my five-

minute taxi driver explanation: both terms are part of everyday life, and we build on these capacities, so they can be used in organisations and socially. Most people seem to get the point very easily. And then they ask: why haven't we heard about this before? Good point. To which I can only answer: it takes time and Galileo didn't have much fun either.

Sounds like you've got your work cut out explaining all this to the millions of people who are, whatever they say, dedicated to living in the present

Our culture is a culture of false solutions. Media, sport, drugs, commercial sex, speed, extreme sports are all sold to people to help them escape, to make things bearable for people who find life really tough and difficult. These false solutions never work. Erich Fromm wrote a book called *To Have Or To Be?*, where the "having" mode is constantly in need of support and sustenance, whereas the "being" mode, which comes from a more Eastern approach—meditative, connected, calm, centred—can dispense with all that. But the money people see the "being" mode as threatening. And it is—to them. Commercial interest is profoundly implicated in our alienated, chaotic world—and it continues to peddle false solutions.

But that's the essence of capitalism?

Capitalism is perfectly unsustainable and everyone knows it at some level. But that knowledge is repressed. There are massive interests keeping this system going, despite the cost. I don't know how long it is going to take for us to learn that but we have to learn it. I don't believe in revolution, I just believe we are in an extremely dicey situation.

What a can of worms . . . Do you ever regret getting into it?

No. Never. Or not for long anyway. I lived in Bermuda for six years, a place that has never planned its future, that was drifting down the tide and getting more and more unliveable-in year after year. Far from being an ocean paradise, it was becoming a teeming mid-ocean metropolis. Most of primeval Bermuda was bull-dozed in the name of progress. That was my radicalising experience. So I came back to Britain, to the University of Lancaster, where I took a course on alternative futures. That got me started—and I never stopped. Futures thinking became a way of life.

FIRST PERSON CESAR VILLANUEVA

All our futures

FOR US in the Philippines, the future is like the typhoons that so often engulf and flood our homes and communities, bringing chaos and destruction in their wake. But like the *minaalamon* (which means wise person locally) who have learned to endure the many typhoons in their life, we have learned to read the warnings, prepare for them, survive their fury, and rebuild our lives afterwards. Try living under a dictator for years.

Which is why someone like me, involved in thinking about the future, ended up torn between two important tasks. There I was at the beginning of September, back home in Bacolod City, preparing to leave for a conference of the World Futures Studies Federation in Brasov, Romania, where I was due to help run events after four years as secretary-general. At the same time, I was busy organising a rally against the Philippine National Oil Company (PNOC), which wants to intrude into the protected zone of Mount Kanlaon Natural Park on our island of Negros. I considered both activities to be crucial because theorising about the future has to be linked to activism, especially in a developing country.

Those challenges don't get more severe than in Kanlaon. PNOC's plan for a geothermal plant there sounds like a good idea in principle—geothermal power is clean, isn't it? Unfortunately, the environmental cost in this case is just too high given our fragile ecosystem of just 3 per cent forest cover.

The park is one of the most important watersheds locally, and its rivers supply water to 158,500 hectares of land. Mount Kanlaon is also host to up to a third of the Philippines' 3 to 4 per cent of original primary growth forest, including centuries-old examples of trees such as almaciga, red and white lauan and igem—and much of this is where the PNOC wants to build its exploration and development zone. The area is also home to the globally endangered Negros fruit dove (*Ptilinopus arcanus*), which is found only in Kanlaon.

The struggle to save Kanlaon goes on. I was heartened, though, by an encounter with a group of poor women. I asked them, if they were to have one wish granted, what it would be. A just and right relationship among themselves, their community, and the world, they replied. Fearing this sounded too good to be true, I probed further. They explained: if we have a just and right relationship in the world, no amount of natural calamities or crises can ever destroy the human spirit. Who says only the educated and well-off can think long-term and make the future different, exciting and full of wonder!

Cesar Villanueva is director of the Community Development and Volunteer Formation Office at the University of St La Salle in Bacolod City

N. Hicks/Woodfall Wild Images