A COMMISSION OF CONTEMPLATION — OR OF REAL CONSEQUENCE?

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Introduction

Charles Kettering's famous observation, that he was always interested in the future because that was where he intended to spend the rest of his life, makes good sense as well as providing a nice irony. Unfortunately, however, good sense frequently takes a back seat in consideration of the future, which is too often portrayed as an either/or situation: either Armageddon or Paradise. It is neither, and it is both. The future can be romantic and dramatic; it can be traumatic and catastrophic; but it will always surprise.

We live today, of course, in an era of rapid and accelerating change. Yet it is important to recognise just how recent is this phenomenon. Until the first part of this century, as Aflred North Whitehead once noted, the accepted view of history had always been that each generation would live substantially amid the conditions governing the lives of its fathers. It would transmit those conditions to mould with equal force the lives of its children. "We are living in the first period of human history," wrote Whitehead, "for which this assumption is false."

Small wonder,then, that we frequently find ourselves suffering from 'future shock'. Small wonder that some of the most vivid recollections of those currently in the process of their earth-walk relate to experiences of 'the distant future' suddenly melding with 'the present'. The most outstanding example is probably Neil Armstrong walking on the moon; but global TV, artificial organ transplants, and the boundless advances of computer technology are other illustrations.

Yet Australia has been mostly a spectator, looking on at many of the dramatic changes of recent decades. To be sure, it has been the recipient of the benefits of new technologies, and has made some distinguished, though fairly isolated, cutting-edge contributions to technology. Essentially, however, it has until recently lived in an environment of steady and fairly predictable progress. Change has been absorbed without too much damage to the fabric of national life. Australia has not gone through the Third World's revolution of rising expectations and period of decolonisation. We have lived, for the most part, in the wonderful land of 'She'll-Be-Right'.

Sleepers Wake!

Inject into this scene a concerned and highly intelligent Minister for Science, author of a widely acclaimed book on the theme of technology and the future of work entitled *Sleepers Wake!* Result: Australians are to be made more aware of the future and the choices to be made, like it or not! To give the Minister his due, his recipe is a palatable one. Establish a Commission for the Future, headed by a charismatic community figure and composed of an intelligent cross-section of the public, and have it do some crystal-balling. The Commission — like Noel Coward — should have a talent to amuse. With its province the rich and tantalising landscape of tomorrow, and with a Chairman almost unrivalled as a raconteur of the national mores, the Commission can be expected to produce a feast of interesting information and speculation. The popular and academic press will have a field day, not to mention the current affairs commentators. It will hardly be surprising if the Commission's prognostications, having passed through the media 'beef up', do not emerge owing much to Buck Rogers, Arthur C. Clarke and Robert Heinlein. After all, the future is everybody's inheritance, to be defended according to the particular interests involved — religious, political, conservationist, xenophobic, even anarchist.

The danger is, of course, that the media and community discussion following Commission outputs will become so popularised, polarised and trivialised that serious discussion becomes almost impossible.

A Time for Action

Five years ago, the US State Department published what was called the *Global 2000* report, and in a key passage made the following observation:

> The time for action . . . is running out. Unless nations collectively and individually take bold and imaginative steps toward improved social and economic conditions, reduced fertility, better management of resources, and protection of the environment, the world must expect a troubled entry into the twenty-first century.

In the time since these words were written, the sense of urgency for positive action by governments has grown. There is now a consensus among those who study the future that the nations of the world can no longer indulge in hypothetical contemplation of the future. As Maurice Strong puts it: "The time has come to move from thinking and dialogue to action."

This realisation has not become apparent to the current government. Establishing a Commission to contemplate the future may be a laudable idea in concept, yet it will not of itself advance us

one iota towards the action that is now so urgently required. Of course, there are advantages in having our own Commission, but, while the dissemination of knowledge and the promotion of informed public opinion is vital, it is not enough. If we are to have the action we require, we need not just people with knowledge about the problems and challenges that are developing, but people who will strive to develop solutions to problems and, most importantly, people who can implement the solutions.

Unfortunately, in Australia today we don't have time to wait. The task of education — which presumably will fall to the Commission — must go on simultaneously with problem-solving and strategy implementation. Without adopting this integrated management approach, any attempt to plan purposefully for the future is doomed.

Managing the Future

Managing the future is not all guesswork. Decision makers today can call on models and methodologies for forecasting which are very powerful indeed. The problem is not so much that we lack the means to make reasonable assumptions about the future, but rather that we lack the experience and therefore the confidence. Our 'She'll-Be-Right' world was the result of decades of expectations of progress — expectations which were in the main satisfied. The rest of the world has always wanted Australia's products — first our wool, then our whales, our gold and our wheat, and more recently our massive mineral resources. We had but to produce and sell. With such a past, it is little wonder that we have never undertaken any purposeful worrying about the future.

However, even here in 'the lucky country', the last decade or so has taken most of the fun out of decision making. The world and national economies have behaved in a volatile, erratic manner — and the fall-out has affected every aspect of society. Those who have sought to act decisively in such an environment have encountered obstacles that never previously existed. We entered a period of great discontinuity; old economic landmarks disappeared, new social attitudes and expectations emerged, the political pendulum swung giddily, and bureaucracy and government intervention proliferated. And, superimposed on all this turmoil has been the ever-accelerating pace of technological change, in particular in information technology.

So, in good Australian tradition we have put a bit each way on everything. A bit on trade liberalisation and a bit on protection. A bit on centralisation and a bit on deregulation. A bit on new technologies and a bit on the *status quo*. The result is that our capacity for effective decision making has been falling away. We find ourselves traumatised by the past — and apprehensive about the future. We have seen a vision, but the past vision splendid of agricultural fields and

mountains of minerals has been displaced by a blurred vision of continuing economic uncertainty, of dwindling resources, and a stagnating world economy.

Add to that the gloomy prospects for youth employment, the anxieties of an ageing population and the currently popular perception of Australia as a country which is no longer internationally competitive, and any further contemplation of the future appears masochistic! In such circumstances, a Commission simply to contemplate the future would seem a luxury that we can ill afford. It must analyse and address policy options.

Needed: an Action Plan

The facts are that Australia's history has been overtaken by her geography: we are today a Western nation situated in the midst of the fastest developing parts of the Third World. Our Anglo-Saxon traditions have been diluted by large scale immigration from Europe and, in recent years, from Asia. We no longer have one of the world's highest living standards. We are a middle-ranking power on the world stage, and a waning power in our region. Our real rate of economic growth during the 1970s was slower than any other major economy in the Asian region.

No amount of wishful or creative thinking will change this national profile in the short term. It is futile and irresponsible to be embarking on blue skies thinking which presupposes we have an infinite array of choices available to us. The hard truth is that we are not wealthy tourists of tomorrow who can afford to take a risk on some exotic destination in the hope that it will become our Shangri-la. As a middle-class nation of reduced means, we must choose our destinations very carefully on a value-for-money basis, watching our budget and travelling economy class. And we need to get on our way fast before our options become still further constrained.

The Information/Action Gap

The Minister for Science has decreed that one of the Commission's objectives is to allow individuals to make what he calls 'meaningful choices' about the future — careers, working life, appropriate education and so on. He seems to imply that such choices are available for the taking. Fine — so long as the society has the economic wherewithal to ensure that this is a realistic objective. For many unemployed teenagers and people forced to take early retirement in Australia today, however, there would be great scepticism. When Australia has structural unemployment problems, structural wage problems, structural trade problems and structural debt problems, it also has to have structural 'meaningful choice' problems.

What is needed, once again, is some mechanism to translate information into action. Only when such a mechanism exists can the energy generated by information and discussion be channelled in a positive direction. Without such a mechanism there is a danger that information and discussion will serve only to disrupt society, and thus decrease the capacity for constructive action.

Giving the Tiger Teeth

If the Commission for the Future is to make a lasting impact, one of two things should happen. Either the Commission's terms of reference should be changed to allow it to make policy recommendations to government, or a separate policy body should be established. The former would obviously be preferable; it would establish a strong line of accountability and facilitate the introduction of clear management procedures, without adding another level of bureaucracy.

Such a proposal, however, may not win many supporters in government. For one thing, it would then be the Commission's charter, presumably, to provide the long-range alternative to short-term political policy — thus making the latter more difficult to sustain electorally. For another, the Commission's findings and recommendations may not fit with the government's ideology, or may be diametrically opposed to its policies. It is not difficult to find reasons why the Commission for the Future has been given such a limited role.

Indeed, without a functional capacity to recommend long-term directions, the Commission for the Future could end up, however unwittingly, encouraging a superficial national gabfest. This would almost certainly divert the attention of the electorate away from critical long-term national issues and policy decisions and actions, and into trendy, exciting Star Wars prophesies which are entertaining but not really helpful to the serious-minded policy maker. This would not just be a disservice to the nation: it would be a missed opportunity of major dimensions. The task of preparing for and managing Australia's future cannot be delayed any longer. The choices for effective action become fewer with each month that passes.

The Prospect Before Us.

There are certain things to be done immediately, Commission or no Commission. First, we must accept that Australia faces a different future from that we had envisaged at the beginning of this decade. There is no magic formula or combination of factors that can allow us to avoid hard work and hard choices.

Second, we need to take inventory of the key resources we are likely to have available to us in 10, 15 and 20 year's time, or even longer.

These include capital, skilled and unskilled manpower, technologies, natural resources, and communications networks. We need to have such an inventory carefully projected before we can have a clear framework within which to plan effectively.

Third, we must start taking initiatives which, even within the constraints already indicated, have clear prospects for future development. We must pick the right technologies, develop long term strategies for our natural resource industries, explore practical and far-sighted applications of information technology, and capitalise on our know how, as well as our products, in the export market. We must recognise the importance of market niches, the importance of timing and of getting 'jump starts' into new technology (not necessarily high technology), and of seeing things through.

Australia has an impressive track record — largely unrecognised — in many niche areas. For instance, our successes in bioengineering techniques, such as the breeding of the Australian merino and the development of drought-resistant wheat, are remarkable by any standards. Our coal-drying, off-shore drilling and other resource technologies have, in some areas of software application and even in the manufacture of microchips, provided important world 'firsts', and sophisticated applications (like the airport landing system, Interscan) have been adopted as international standards. There are countless other examples, especially in small and medium manufacturing, where appropriate technology, persistence in marketing, attention to quality, and team motivation and dedication have achieved national and international success.

As all these examples suggest, there are many lessons for our future objectives to be observed in present successes. If the Commission can find ways of identifying localised cultures of Australian achievement and success, and transform them into more purposeful and dedicated national cultures, it will prove more valuable than most of the 27 Departments of State put together.

The future we desire will not just happen. It will need concentrated and sustained efforts to implement long-term policy which is clear and yet flexible. We cannot afford the policy vacillations which have typified much of the past. In this respect it is perhaps unreasonable to expect government to be responsible in the final analysis for devising long-term future policy. After all, its charter is essentially short-term, and no government has demonstrated its willingness to address long-term issues without fear or favour to the short term. Are we approaching the point where we must look to a responsible non-political body to provide this essential guidance on a continuing basis? Perhaps a Commission for the Future, given the necessary powers and composition, would be a logical choice to take on such a role.