

# **Asleep at the Wheel: the World Future Society at Forty**

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I decided to write about the World Future Society (WFS) for a couple of reasons. One is a need to come to terms with my varied experience of it over more than two decades and, in so doing, to perhaps resolve some conflicting impressions. Another is that the USA has been generating and receiving what might be called 'heavy critique' for some time. Like most non-Americans I admit to a certain ambivalence. On the one hand I cannot imagine a world without American art, music, literature, film and so on. On the other I can certainly imagine one without its fundamentalist heartland, its cultural and economic imperialism, its chronic exceptionalism and its often disastrous foreign policy. It would be a far better world. The WFS is clearly not responsible for any of this. But neither has it demonstrated the slightest interest in finding a credible role or strategy for responding to the dilemma and dysfunction of early 21<sup>st</sup> Century America. Its modest offices in Bethesda, Maryland, are on the fringes of Washington, the outer edge of the cultural core. From the start it has been a cultural sideshow and will likely remain one. Yet it has a unique presence in the world of Futures Studies (FS) and applied foresight for one reason – it is the largest such organisation in the world. What, then, does it amount to forty years after its inception?

## **Beginnings**

My earliest introduction to the WFS was by way of Ed Cornish's book *The Study of the Future*, published by the society in 1977. [2] It provided a clear and readable introduction to what was then called 'Futurism' and Futures Studies, the history of the field, how it was being used in organisations, methods of forecasting, current thinking about futures and so on. It was not long before I found more substantive works, but this was the first.

Then in 1980 I flew to Toronto to attend my first 'real' futures conference: the First Global Conference on the Future. It proved invaluable. Not only was I able to listen first hand to near-legendary figures like Bertrand de Jouvenel and Herman Kahn, I also met others who were up-and-coming - people like Hazel Henderson whom, until that time, I'd known only through her short articles in UK magazines. I attended a pre-conference seminar on 'teaching futures' and this was an eye-opener too. At the time I was part way through a PhD thesis on Futures in Education, something that was unheard of in the UK. Yet in Toronto I met a number of educators who were both familiar with the area and actually teaching futures in schools. Moreover, there was a small but expanding literature on the subject. So when I returned to Lancaster it was with renewed vigour because the work was no longer 'merely theoretical'. While applying some of the material designed for a different cultural context proved more difficult, I knew beyond doubt that there was something vital and tangible here that justified my time and attention. A few years later the core of my thesis (on critical futures studies) was published in three parts in the WFS Bulletin. [10] At the time I doubted if there was anywhere else in the world where this material would have been considered – except, perhaps the World Futures Studies Federation (WFSF), but that still lay in my own future.

Following that first event I went back to the US for WFS conferences perhaps a dozen times over the years. As time went by I came to know more people and slowly built up friendships, both personal and professional. Through these contacts and, of course, the wider futures literature, I began to understand some of the main currents and divisions in the field and eventually to 'find my own feet', as it were, in the ebb and flow of ideas and approaches. The WFS was therefore significant in broadening my view and making it possible to get to know people from far and wide. For example, at one meeting in New York in the mid 80s I had a brief word with Isaac Asimov, suggesting to him that, were robots become truly 'intelligent' they might appear entirely alien to us (rather than passable as humans, as in his fiction). He paused for a moment and said 'maybe I'll

write a story about that'. But I don't think he ever did, and he died prematurely a few years later.

One must hand it to Ed Cornish, his family, colleagues and co-workers, for creating the WFS and making it possible for people to meet in this way. Without the network of friends and colleagues that began with the WFS it would never have been possible to initiate many of the projects that I undertook later. That said, I now turn to a more sober assessment of the society as I see it now.

## Conferences

The conferences represent both the achievement(s) of the WFS and clear evidence of its underlying weaknesses. A report on a meeting held in 2 000 by a then 31-year-old is one of many seen (or heard) commenting on the advanced age of many participants, suggesting that the whole enterprise was 'out of touch' and noting 'a sense of unjustified in-group comfort' in many of the sessions. [7] What's been clear is that the pay-offs of attending them have declined dramatically over time, even as the cost of so doing (especially from overseas) has risen. Having spent very significant sums travelling to and from the US I found myself asking: 'what has been the benefit from these expenditures'? The question has become increasingly more difficult to answer.

Part of the reason is that the more conferences you attend, the more the repetitions show: the same 'featured identities' – mostly WFS insiders – presenting, broadly the same ideas, the same occasionally interesting but often painfully dull 'professional members day' with its home-grown agenda, grandstanding and favouritism; the same lack of engagement with the rest of the world; the same over-hyping of the latest technology fads; the generic conference volume (see below) derived from a near-identical set of writers as in previous years.

One has to account for the fact that for an outfit that overtly badges itself as a 'world' organisation with a 'global' identity there's remarkably little evidence of anything much happening outside North America or, indeed, happening within the WFS that originates from, or adds real value to, overseas work. Apart from a professional members meeting held some years ago in Salzburg (in cooperation with the late Bob Jungk's Futures Library) and a couple of meetings in readily accessible Toronto, Canada (America's 'largest northern state'), there has, over four decades, been no investment in overseas events or initiatives. This has real implications. For example, the costs of travel fall upon those living outside the US. Besides the direct costs one might also, in this era of heightened security, include the costs of standing in line for hours to be frisked, photographed and finger printed on entry to the US. How many 'home grown' attendees would put up with this, I wondered, merely to go to a conference? Clearly those who elect to make these long journeys are largely middle-aged, well heeled, and mainly from business or academia. They are a familiar group, on the whole, and a limited one at that. Apart from the occasional token 'third worlder' there are few genuine attendees from non-Anglo cultures and, as noted, the young are conspicuous by their absence. Thus the 'mature' home audience is always the one that is served first and best. In recent years I've begun to suspect that the welcome sometimes provided to overseas visitors is not because they are genuinely valued but, rather, because they fulfil the desire for legitimacy, ie, their presence makes the WFS *appear* to be more international.

The professional members days that I used to attend were of variably quality and occasionally a disgrace. Not only were they mind-blowingly dull, but were also dominated by the usual coterie of insiders. One particular event a few years back finally put a stop to my attending at all. I'd put forward an agenda item for the program (on the Knowledge Base of Futures Studies [KBFS] – see below) and was given to understand that it would be included. But when the day arrived the item had vanished; sidelined without discussion. I later found out that the topic was considered merely one of 'a number of compilations', and that was that. If the WFS was genuinely interested in

overseas contributions it had a strange way of showing it.

Then there is the vexed question of what I will diplomatically call 'dissonant personalities', ie, a few elderly people, mostly males, who seem to have a stranglehold on these events. They feature so prominently that the events begin to feel like stuffy old world clubs only lacking pipes, port, obsequious waiters and signs saying 'silence in the reading room'. Beyond this, the content of these sessions, like so much else in the WFS, shows just how far behind it has fallen. With only a few exceptions (such as the ever brilliant Weiner/Brown team) the ideas are dated, the methods hackneyed, the thinking uncritical and the world shrunk to US borders.

## Publications

The WFS puts out three regular hard copy publications, bi-annual conference volumes and various web-based offshoots. Its key flagship magazine is *The Futurist*, published monthly. With some notable exceptions I've found this unreadable for some years. The content is so popular in treatment and approach that it becomes pure watered down 'pop' futures - the froth of 'futures thinking' made as deliberately simple and accessible as possible - or what Michel Godet calls 'futures for fun and entertainment'. The fact is that no world issue, no problem, opportunity, new technology, social innovation or futures method can be understood or meaningfully described in the language of pop futurism. The magazine simply does not operate at the level where any substantial thinking about futures can occur. [3] The trite level of discourse, however, is no accident. The editors and contributors have 'read' their market, made judgements about its character and, in true US style, worked to produce a product to serve it. It is deliberately glossy, up beat, rapidly read and, I would say, just as rapidly forgotten. The articles are simple, direct, undemanding and prolifically illustrated. I do not recall meeting anyone, ever, who enthused about this futures-lite magazine.

If there's a standard piece in *The Futurist* it is about an emerging, or expected, new technology – the car or city of the future. How drugs will give you control over moods. How nanotech, while having a downside, will solve the world's problems. The full-page illustrations pamper the eye, the smaller ones domesticate new gadgets with stock photos or drawings of young models. The 'natural readership' of *The Futurist* appears to be the neophyte and the naïve, those whose minds are just 'waking up' (or perhaps 'closing down') and who may indeed gain some momentary satisfaction from grazing on this thin and glitzy diet. *The Futurist* is literally forced on the membership, whether people want it or not, by being bundled into the membership fee. One reason for this may be that if it were based on elective subscriptions the circulation would fall to a fraction of its present level (see below).

The more seriously academically oriented journal with pretensions to be taken seriously is *Futures Research Quarterly* edited by Tim Mack. I edited an issue myself back in 1992 on 'FS and higher education' but that was pretty much it. [11] Skimming through the last few years' issues one finds a variety of papers on standard futures methods, various home grown pieces that do not travel well and, overall, a reasonable sample of what mainstream futures people are thinking and doing. Why, then, does it stack up on my desk every year until the annual clear out? Well, part of the problem is competition, which is in no way the fault of the WFS. I read several futures journals but this one always slips down the reading order for one key reason - it is the least original and rewarding. Similarly, the format and presentation are desperately dull and have needed sprucing up for years but, like the WFS itself, they remain stuck in a time warp. Possibly the best issue was the one put out after the 9/11 event containing several outstanding pieces by a range of innovative futures thinkers. Overall, however, FRQ contains little that's genuinely new, innovative and ground breaking. Most of the methodology pieces are minor modifications, afterthoughts, elaborations of innovations from years ago. A piece by Andy Hines (one of several by this outstanding practitioner,

I must add) that applied new methods to environmental scanning was a rare gift indeed. [4]

The real problem here is not so much with the individual contributors as with the tradition of futures work with which most of them are associated and which the WFS so clearly reflects. I call it the 'American empirical tradition' not simply because it deals only or predominantly with the familiar external world but because it is deaf and blind to, and therefore largely ignorant of, what might be called the 'two revolutions' that have swept FS, applied foresight, and are continuing to restructure and transform it from within. By this I am referring to the 'critical' tradition that sought to introduce what might be termed the 'cultural interiors' into futures enquiry and practice, and, more recently, the 'integral' tradition that shines new light on these and the 'individual human interiors'. The latter is simultaneously working its way through many other fields as well. So ignoring it cuts the WFS off from innovations and synergies with those unfolding areas.

For those whose induction into futures work began before these changes occurred (which is to say, the majority) the world is a simpler, and I would say more 'sparse' and humanly 'thin', place. The work carried out in this awareness has typical hallmarks and limitations that are readily seen and which I have described elsewhere. [13] But FRQ knows little of this. Very occasionally it publishes work illuminated by more recent knowledge, but this is exceptional. Paradoxically, therefore, FRQ is resonant of the past, of earlier disciplinary paradigms, not of the present and certainly not the future. The underlying point is that this tradition had its time in the sun, produced its results, made contributions that indeed helped bring us to where we are now. These are real achievements and they deserve to be acknowledged and respected. We should now recognise, however, that the earlier formative tradition has to be 'transcended and included' in a broader, richer and certainly deeper view. *Taken on its own the empirical tradition is dead as the proverbial doornail because it overlooks the very sources of human insight, value and motivation that makes futures work (any work) possible in the first place.* That is the main reason why FRQ presents as a lifeless carry-over from an earlier time.

I have commented elsewhere on *Future Survey* so will keep these remarks brief. [12] For nearly three decades this publication has provided summaries of published material on FS and many related topics. Over time, however, while the range of subject matter reviewed has broadened, its coverage of FS per se has been both limited and idiosyncratic. Despite this, I've had a good deal of sympathy both for the publication and its editor. I think that there's been a personal price for what is, by any account, an impressive achievement. That said, I regret that the e-mail debates between the editor, myself, Wendell Bell and others have completely failed to achieve any real meeting of the minds or any practical consequences whatever. The point of critique is misunderstood when it is seen as mere criticism; it operates most productively in pursuit of 'seeing more deeply'. It is best viewed as a starting point that leads on to adaptive change, innovation and development. Yet in this context it merely seems to have cemented in place existing differences of perspective, viewpoint and value.

I used to read FS with nearly as much interest as my US colleagues - until the so-called 'super 70' review landed on my desk a few years back. I then took a closer look. What I discovered was the projection of an individual view of FS that was idiosyncratic to the core, assumed a God-like power of discrimination, yet was in complete denial regarding the cultural and personal 'filters' that had shaped the whole opus. Executive influence from the WFS hierarchy was non-existent. Furthermore, those overseas who should have known better merely picked up the material and passively reproduced it. Thus what might be called the 'FS view of reality' echoed the deeply unfortunate hegemonic power relations that have plagued the world over the last half century. The critique that was offered, far from sparking a productive debate, merely led to an attempt to

pathologise the intervention, followed by a further collapse of critical standards.<sup>1</sup>

The overall impression I have of *Future Survey* is that it is not about the future at all, but the present. It is determinedly rational and full of what might be called ‘despatches from flatland’. The poet William Blake warned that ‘reason alone leads to despair’ and FS tends to confirm that. Year after year the abstracts bear witness to a society stuck in a reality it can neither fully comprehend nor change. What it, and the rest of the WFS opus completely misses is that to escape from the self-constructed nightmare of growth, consumerism and overshoot-and-collapse futures requires ‘other reasons for being’. But what those reasons may be cannot be found in this context. In time, however, a new lease of life for *Future Survey* can be anticipated. With the right kind of executive oversight, other cultural and personal ‘filters’ and, overall, a more open-minded and outward-looking editorial presence, it could become a much more fruitful publication.

The conference volumes comprise a genre worth examining in its own right. For many years these books were edited by retired academic, Howard Didsbury. Although a stalwart of the WFS for some years, the fact is that volumes he edited were of the instantly forgettable kind that were never consulted later. They always had abstract, grandiose titles but were profoundly second rate. I never saw them quoted anywhere and imagine that they eventually disappeared from most peoples' shelves.

The post-Didsbury volumes have been a distinct improvement, although the titles are as inflated as ever: *Foresight, Innovation and Strategy: Toward a Wiser Future* [6] and *Creating Global Strategies for Humanity's Future* [15]. While many have contributed to these volumes (this writer included), and some of the papers are not without interest, they have limited intrinsic value for the same reasons as mentioned above. 'Foresight' is a term appropriated by the WFS and I'll comment further on this below. Nor would anyone whom I've ever met ever be likely to accuse the WFS of knowing a great deal about 'innovation', 'strategy' or a 'wise future'. Titles like these make most sense *not* when they point 'outward' toward the world, but when they are reflected 'inward' and seen as part of in-house WFS myth-making.

It's startling to note that no WFS publication that I have ever seen suggests that the Society has much of substance to add to the existing rich literature of FS. Many contributions are either a form of advertising or palatable digests of other work. In short these volumes are not contributions to the field as such but rather (1) products synthesised from external sources to support income-generating conferences and (2) symbolic statements about the near-delusional belief systems at work in the WFS. They are only possible because people (and I include myself here) have been willing to exchange their work for publicity and / or recognition. This may appeal within a culture that has elevated merchandising and self-promotion to a global norm (and one that now works powerfully *against* the shared interests of humanity). But such tendencies also work against the field. High quality futures / foresight work in the public interest is rare in the US. So, basically it's a simple bargain - authors get their work into print for the publicity value while the WFS gets to use peoples' IP / promo material for free. This helps to explain why WFS conferences feel more like half-hearted trade shows than anything approaching a real meeting of minds.

## Leadership and guiding influence

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<sup>1</sup> FS was the only source that panned both the KBFS and Futures Beyond Dystopia. The editor had difficulty in distinguishing between the integral perspective per se (which is a product of the work of many people) and that of Ken Wilber, the individual from whose work it initially emerged. In Chicago we met with an FS sub-editor who encouraged us to build bridges and find ways to work together, arguing that in essence, 'we were on the same side'. We agreed and put forward some specific suggestions. But that was the last we heard.

The individual who stands behind the WFS is Ed Cornish, a man I have come to know, slightly, over the years from numerous always-fleeting interactions. He's held in warm and respectful regard by many US futurists for two reasons: he is a very pleasant person and he also started the organisation. A journalist by trade, he gathered together a group of supporters and began publishing *The Futurist* in 1966. That's a respectable achievement by any standards. Yet Ed is a seeming contradiction, a mild and painfully shy man whom one could not imagine saying 'boo' to the proverbial goose. How then did he manage to create the WFS? We should note here that the 'world' aspect has always been an idealistic fiction, a projection, not a reality. Second, he had an idea that fitted the times (ie, the late 60s and early 70s) when FS was beginning to take off. Third, he engaged the interest and help of a group of DC people, some of whom are still around. Finally, a contribution was provided by Ed's family. One fact stands behind all the above – the WFS is a family business. The way Ed sees the world pervades both. His book on 'futuring' makes the nature of his influence even clearer.

For several years Ed was known to be working on 'the book', a summation of a life's work, a mature statement by someone who you'd expect to be as well versed in futures thinking as anyone. To his credit he even sent out draft chapters to colleagues, myself included, asking for their comments prior to publication. This was a rare gesture and I admired the openness and collegiality. But when it finally arrived, the book proved disappointingly weak and banal. It is broad, in the sense of touching on many topics, but intellectually superficial and parochial. It is very much of a piece with *The Futurist* and remarkably similar to the earlier work. The omissions would fill a book in their own right. For example:

- the palette of futures methods is long out of date;
- the rise of critical and integral futures is not mentioned, which means in turn that;
- the shaping power of individual and cultural 'interiors' is overlooked;
- both the long term historical and more recent lineages of foresight are completely ignored; and
- despite the WFS's earlier involvement, the pivotal role of futures in education is also overlooked.

As would be expected, the author has covered a lot of ground and the book is certainly readable. But it is so bereft of any real non-US post-1980s insight that it can only be seen as another introductory 'pop futures' text. Having come to this judgement independently I then turned to two reviews by other futurists; one by Wendell Bell, a highly respected professor emeritus at Yale and another by Rakesh Kapoor, a younger futurist, board member of *Futures* and member of the WFSF executive council, from New Delhi. Bell is one of the most gracious people in the field and so it is understandable that he would use terms such as 'clear, graceful and informed account of the modern futures movement', 'a masterful job at describing its development' and 'an engrossing and important book'. Then, after summarising some of the key points Bell touches on three areas that he considers lacking:

- the design perspective (ie, acting to change the world, not merely anticipate);
- the role of the self-altering prophecy; and
- some discussion of alternative futures for women. [1]

The omission of the latter theme is significant both because it became a central concern for futurists everywhere and also because the omission of a progressive theme like this one suggests gaps in the author's worldview. Like Bell, Kapoor also adopts a positive tone and then proceeds to identify several other deficiencies:

- the discussion of tools and methods, the role of chaos theory, and the power of the individual to

- bring about change is 'oversimplified and banal';
- the description of the global power transformation and the supertrends shaping the future are 'ordinary and commonplace for any informed reader today';
- the other main world organisation, the WFSF, is dismissed 'in one line'; and
- there is no mention at all of the flagship journal *Futures*.

He then comes to the heart of the issue:

not once in the book has he mentioned, so apparently he does not realise, that futuring is not just a skill, not just another emerging 'science' or discipline, but it is also an arena of moral and political choices that individuals and communities make about both their own lives and about larger social and global choices. How we look at the past and at the present is influenced by our 'map of reality' – which is influenced both by our socio-economic circumstances as well as our ideological-cultural predispositions.... (Therefore) how we interpret the past and the present world, and from there what kind of future world we want to create is as much a question of cultural influences and political choices as it is of having the skills to explore the future. [5]

I've paid particular attention to *Futuring* because it tells us a great deal about the 'prime mover' of the WFS. It clearly illustrates both the idealism that is inherent in the organisation and its failure to move beyond a basic and elementary 'journalistic' mode of discourse. Respect him though we may for his humanity and dedication, the unavoidable conclusion is that the responsibility for this state of affairs lies primarily with Ed Cornish, owner, proprietor and editor in chief. Zia Sardar's summation is as good as any. The WFS, he notes, 'serves the interests of the dominant culture'. It is a prime example of the fact that 'futures studies is sponsored by scholars who are not just totally divorced from any political and cultural movements, but are quite unaware of the fact that the future has anything to do with critical questions of power, history and politics'. [9]

Throughout the organisation and its products there is no social analysis, no recognition of the many ways that culture shapes us, no allowance made for the fact that different worlds of reference are not only possible but vital to any notion of liveable futures. By naively attempting to avoid politics and clinging to an impossible ideal of 'neutrality' the WFS has overlooked some of the most powerful ways of understanding and dealing with our world. It has also avoided acknowledging, and therefore dealing with, the sheer systemic unsustainability both of the US as a nation and also of the way of life it has so successfully imposed on the rest of the world. Futures work in this environment therefore becomes contradictory and eventually self-defeating. Overall, and fatally, I think, there has been no attempt to understand or incorporate the stream of depth understanding, insights and knowledge about how we, the 'human system', operate, interpret, select, edit, choose, value and interact with each other and the wider world. This, I think, squarely nails the central reason why WFS is a declining entity, itself located within a fractured and confused nation deeply and ironically fearful – and for good reason – of its own future.

### **Overseas presence**

There are two key ways that the WFS promotes itself as being a world body and a third lesser one: the spread of its membership, including overseas chapters; the spread of its 'global advisory council' and the putative global reach of its publications. WFS promotional material claims that it has 'some 25 000 members in more than eighty countries around the world'. These figures have been around for some time and so I attempted to check them at source. Despite several requests, however, the society refused to provide any figures beyond a dated publicity sheet, so one cannot be sure how

reliable they are. I guessed that, since memberships have been falling for some time, they were over-estimates. The level of secrecy here seems puzzling at first since it contradicts the 'open' ethos that Ed has sought to promote. But it makes more sense when you realise that, in fact, the WFS is beholden to no one. As a privately held family company it discloses no more than it must. Then a colleague suggested a proxy measure – what was the registered circulation of *The Futurist*? In 2006 it turned out to be 17 500, which is a lot less than 25 000 and certainly still an under-estimate. [17]

There was a similar evasiveness and lack of cooperation when I asked about the number of overseas chapters: no reply. So I changed tack. Could you please supply me with some basic information about *one* overseas chapter that, in your view, represents 'best practice'? In other words something that one could point to as an exemplar, something to be proud of. Again: no reply. This 'stone walling' response set me to thinking: why was the WFS so defensive? I then got in touch with some of those listed as being on the 'global advisory council' (GOC) and the results were both suggestive and consistent with the above. One mentioned that being 'on the board practically means nothing' and 'I've never been to a WFS meeting'. Another said that such membership 'did not mean a lot'. Other than routine invitations to contribute to pre-conference readers 'there have been few other requests'. Both mentioned that they'd attempted to suggest a more international focus but that these suggestions had never been acted upon. How many others on the GAC are similarly tokenistic, I wondered? Most or all would appear to be the answer.

The question of local chapters is equally problematic. Since there is much window dressing outside North America, there's likely some inside it too. I've personally seen evidence of a handful of strong chapters in the DC area, Minnesota and California, but of the others all I can say is that they seem rather quiet. Overseas the picture is murky. While copies of *The Futurist* certainly go out to people in many places, anecdotal evidence suggests that viable overseas chapters are rare. In my own experience I've seen them set up in name only by ambitious people who spot a chance to improve their CV profile - the same people who stay 'on the books' for years, but who do nothing to support and sustain the field. I'd have welcomed some clarity on these questions and, indeed, sought it, but since the society ignored every request for clarification, I can only conclude that the picture is pretty much as described.

### **Professional cooperation and support**

When I think back over the years since I have known the WFS, there are a couple of things that stand out which reflect the kind of collegiality that I value highly. One of them occurred some years ago when I arrived in Washington without a firm hotel booking. With enormous graciousness and consideration, the late Frank Snowden Hopkins, a former Vice President of the WFS, provided me with a couple of day's accommodation at his DC club at his own expense. His generosity greatly impressed me and, in all fairness, I should also say that other WFS people do continue to host overseas visitors from time to time.

Another significant event was the generous foreword that Ed Cornish wrote for the first hard copy edition of the *Knowledge Base of Futures Studies* (KBFS) in 1996. He ended the piece by saying that 'we all owe a debt of gratitude to the editor, and all those connected with the project. With this new series we expect to make giant strides towards realising the extraordinary potential of our field'. To be fair I should also add that I returned the favour by providing his staff on request with a favourable 'publicity quote' for *Futuring* even though I'd only seen a couple of draft chapters at that point.

These are, as I say, two of the high points. By contrast, during 2004-2006 I tried an experiment that was entirely serious in its own right and also intended to establish what level of cooperation could

be achieved with the WFS with an overseas product. Thus, over a two-year period I worked at persuading the WFS to 'adopt' the latest version of the KBFS CD-ROM, the successor to the hard copy original, by then in use around the world. [15]<sup>2</sup> By 'adopt' I meant co-promote, list alongside in-house works, place on the website etc. I saw it as a win / win proposal since the WFS would take its share of income from sales. The work contains numerous contributions from many members of WFS (and WFSF), reflects a truly international stance and evidence of futures consciousness and capacity from many different far-flung cultures. What happened? Mostly our messages were ignored. But we finally we realised that there was indeed a familiar message: 'go away, we're not interested'. Some years ago an Australian colleague had attempted to form a not dissimilar alliance with a well-known scenario-building outfit in California, only to conclude that the 'not invented here' syndrome had kicked in, effectively closing the door on any possibility of real cooperation. I found the same syndrome operating at the WFS.

This same ingrained parochialism is reflected in a piece originally published in *The Futurist* and since available as a downloadable pdf called *The Art of Foresight*. [16] To read it you'd be forgiven for thinking that foresight had been invented in America. The nine-page document makes no mention of *any* overseas work or publications with a bearing upon the subject, even though there are many to choose from. Rather than provide a balanced international overview (as befits an organisation wishing to assert a 'world' identity) there are five pages summarising a simple US view of foresight and four spruiking the publications and services of the WFS. Our experiment and this piece make it very clear that the WFS will not readily take overseas practitioners or their work seriously or build effective alliances with them. In refusing this vital flow of real cooperation it confirms and consolidates its own decline.

This ingrained insularity shows how the WFS not only undermines those from overseas who seek its support, it also prevents the WFS from being supported *by* non US members. In 2005 I came across John Perkins artfully titled book *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man*. [8] No one could argue that this book is great literature – manifestly it is not. But it contains sufficient evidence to show very clearly how representatives of US commercial and state interests had, as a matter of deliberate policy, spread strategically around the world to construct 'deals' that were expressly intended to create overseas dependence and political malleability. One section deals with early and determined US intervention to 'lock up' Saudi oil through various means. This not only dealt a blow to the traditional culture of the country but also helped sow the seeds of resentment that were to 'blow back' so dramatically in later years. (Most of the 9/11 hijackers being Saudi nationals.) Other sections deal with case-by-case examples of the mis-use of economic forecasting and a variety of other 'dirty tricks' played out for the sole benefit of the US. As I read the book I became increasingly concerned that the ground that WFS metaphorically 'stood upon' was being eroded. If this was what had been happening for many years how, therefore, could any US futurist, or futures organisation, respond? To *not* respond could easily be taken for ignorance or complicity.

With an 18-hour time difference between Australia and the Eastern US it proved difficult to catch people during office hours. But after a number of tries I finally reached the WFS and attempted to

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<sup>2</sup> The following are typical of comments received about the KBFS. "I congratulate you on one of the most important publishing events in the history of futures studies. For many decades to come, these volumes will remain the standard by which all other work in the field is judged. I'm very happy and proud to be included in them". *Prof. Wendell Bell, Yale University* "The KBFS is the best futures resource available". *Graduate Students, Futures Program, University of Houston*. "Thank you for making the CD Knowledge Base of Futures Studies part of the learning material we received. It is indeed a pleasure and a great opportunity to have access to such vast amount of literature at the click of a mouse-button. I am tempted to refer to the knowledge base as 'Fast Forward into the Future!'" *Andries Fourie, Innovation Enablement, Group Innovation Services, Stellenbosch*

discuss these concerns. I was listened to politely. But the end result? A short list of books I should read. Clearly there was no point in taking this self-appointed task any further. It was the very same message I'd heard before...

### **Not 'world', not 'futures', not a 'society'**

In this essay I've tried to acknowledge my early debt to the WFS as well as some of the ways it has assisted me. One of my starting points was Ed's first book. Opportunities to meet many people were provided by various WFS conferences. The KBFS, and much else, could not have come into being without a broad spectrum of people, including many US-based futurists. They all helped to some extent. But when I look at the WFS today I have to conclude that, despite the arrival of the ebullient Tim Mack as CEO, and the improvements he has sought to achieve, the organisation has little to offer to an ever more threatened world. As we contemplate profoundly challenging futures the WFS remains metaphorically 'asleep at the wheel'.

It is not a world body because it has never found a credible way to transcend its origins and actually engage with the wider world, its people and cultures, in an open and respectful way. [9] Even when work of proven quality is placed before it, it refuses to lend a hand and withdraws to more familiar home grown alternatives. It is actively concerned with 'the future' only insofar as the concept has meaning within a popular discourse and taken-for-granted US orientation. It refers, as the name implies, to a singular future. It is not now, nor has it ever been, a futures (plural) organisation that seeks diversity or participation, that is open to, accepting of and informed by the real nature and differences of people and multi-faceted cultures. It has neither the personnel, the knowledge nor the capacity to reach out and become global. Thus the inflated claims of its publicity and the similarly empty titles of its publications are resonant of unfulfilled aspirations. It has never come to grips in an open and credible way with the contradictions of attempting to carry out futures work from within a hegemonic environment. It appears to be uninterested even in the ways that such problems might be approached, understood and perhaps resolved.

Equally, the WFS cannot be described as a society but as a semi-benevolent autocracy, or, in plain language a family business. With some clear exceptions, it is dominated by a limited group that, like Ed himself, appears reclusive and inward looking. From this emerges a typically parochial US outlook that fails to 'front up' to the world and to deal with the implications of America's increasingly controversial and contested role within it. A functional society at any level is very different. It establishes a viable give-and-take dynamic. Its core concerns are, to some extent, negotiable or at least meaningfully legitimated. It cares for its members and responds to their needs. It does not mechanically send out the equivalent of 'bargain membership renewals' with weary regularity while, at the same time, ignoring requests for help and genuine offers of cooperation. If it were true to its current reality the WFS would perhaps be re-named the Washington Friends Salon, or something very like it.

### **Where to from here?**

It follows from the above that the WFS may not have a future worth speaking of. If it is to move beyond the current spiral of incapacity, defensiveness and decline then the central issue is that of generational change.

### **Leadership and internationalisation**

The WFS needs new leadership. The early impulses that drove its creation need to be reinterpreted and reinvigorated by a new generation looking freshly on what is possible and what needs to be

done. Without this, nothing much else will happen. A dense network of linkages needs to be established between the WFS, other futures organisations and active programs in schools, colleges and universities. The Education Section needs to be re-constituted in the real world, not minimally as an occasional web-based newsletter. It also needs to think far, far beyond 'the future of computers, IT and 'digeality'. The fact that 'trans-humanist' fantasies of 'post-human' futures receive so little critical attention also serves to underscore this point. To understand the limitations of such fantasies requires a wider and deeper frame than can be imagined from within the current worldview of the WFS.

The membership and functions of the current 'international advisory board' should be re-thought and given real weight. Those overseas must not only feel that they are valued but also know that their contributions will have some effect. Otherwise it is all an empty show. For the WFS to have any chance whatever of retaining any credibility at a 'world' level it must internationalise both its board of directors and its wider advisory council. It must move out of its parochial heartland both in its thinking and its operations. This also applies to the currently restrictive boards of each of the publications.

## Events

As noted the main events hosted by the WFS are its annual conferences. At an operational level these have attained a level of functional efficiency, but at a program level they are very dull and professionally sub-standard. New leadership will deal with this issue by, for example, taking a leaf from the WFSF's book by actively helping overseas practitioners and students to attend the meetings. As noted, a central concern is the absence of young people. Again, it is vital to expand the newly formed education initiative to actually engage with, and bring in, a range of young people, from schools, colleges, universities and the community. Whole days can be set aside for this purpose, as occurred at the Earth Dialogues in Brisbane during 2006. Equally, keynote speakers, seminar organisers and workshop facilitators from abroad should more than balance those from the US in featured sessions. An open evaluative process and assistance with travel costs would help ensure greater diversity and improved quality of overseas visitors.

## Publications

There's an argument for continuing some version of *The Futurist* but progressively and subtly changing it over time so that, without become esoteric or theoretical, it began to represent more adequately the breadth and depth that now characterises the parent field. Readers need to be drawn into *a qualitatively different kind of engagement*, and it is the task of editors and writers to find the best ways of achieving this. Far more contributions should be sourced from overseas.

FRQ is long out of date and should be completely re-thought and re-designed. Currently it is comprised of fragments that do not cohere, that have no underlying rationale and, as stated, reflect the field's past much more than its present or future. It should also be peer reviewed by an active and competent board to bring it up to the necessary minimum standard. Papers written by editors should only be published exceptionally and never without independent review.

*Future Survey* needs to grow beyond the limitations set by its first, long-serving and dedicated editor through a substantial injection of innovative new talent. Many people with a background in the field could perform this task with distinction. (They can be found, for example in the Association of Professional Futurists (APF), in the younger ranks of the WFSF and in PhD or Masters students from many different institutions.) Overseas coverage can be vastly expanded by establishing a functioning network of paid regional editors. All of the publications should be

'unbundled' from the membership fee and separately priced so that they can be available in whatever combination people prefer. Each would then find its 'natural' level.

## Conclusion

The WFS is an expression and product of a generation of thinking people who, from the vantage point of a resurgent America in the 1960s and 1970s, saw promise and peril ahead. They responded with the means they had available, framed in the worldview of the time. Part of that was a typical US self-confidence and a strong belief in 'progress' and the efficacy of technology. Another was the possibility of 'neutrality' but this too has proved to be a false hope. The WFS is a projection of these self-understandings into a time when they have lost salience and power. The fact is that US confidence has steadily declined, 'progress' is a term that can only be used with irony, technology is a two-edged sword and, finally, it is now widely understood that no neutral place to stand can be found anywhere. All self-knowledge and human expressions are mediated by language, power, politics and culture. Rather than face up to these facts and what they might mean, and rather than joining with others to fashion a new synthesis, the WFS has chosen to ignore them and to defend the founding myths even as membership numbers have declined.

It achieved much in its earlier years - a fact I have tried to acknowledge. But it now desperately needs to reinvent and re-equip itself. It needs to face up to the fact that the US achieved its dominance, affluence and period of world leadership at incalculable cost to itself and to other nations. Beyond all the usual evocations of 'world problems' the US is deeply complicit in sponsoring modes of development, trade and 'security' that have moved humanity ever closer to an entropic trap with incalculable consequences. The transitions we are facing more than ever call not for the trite, culture-bound banalities that constitute WFS stock-in-trade, but for depth understanding and innovative futures / foresight work across the board. Hence there are severe challenges ahead for all those who think that America is still 'the land of the future'. The next column will explore the extent to which this 20<sup>th</sup> Century myth still holds true.

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### **Note**

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