

Preface for Thinking About the Future – Guidelines for Strategic Foresight

Andy Hines and Peter Bishop (Eds), Social Technologies, Washington DC, 2006

It is a rare pleasure to welcome this book of guidelines for excellence in strategic foresight. Something like this has long been needed. As part of the run-up to creating the Australian Foresight Institute (AFI) I tried my hand at some possible definitions. One was that:

*Strategic foresight is the ability to create and sustain a variety of high quality forward views and to apply the emerging insights in organisationally useful ways; for example, to detect adverse conditions, guide policy, shape strategy; to explore new markets, products and services.*¹

It's not a perfect definition. It doesn't mention social foresight, which later became a primary focus as we saw how, properly understood, this modality can rise up from its relatively humble human origins and become a social principle of remarkable power. What we also grappled with was how to access and distil widely scattered professional knowledge and capability in a way that would be broadly useful both to our students and, possibly, to others. That goal has finally been achieved by Andy Hines and Peter Bishop.

There are several other reasons why I am delighted to welcome this book. First, it is, in part, a marvellous response to a challenge I attempted to set out in a paper for *Futures* on 'professional standards in futures work' published in 1999.² There I drew on some of the earlier work of futurists such as Elenora Masini, Yehezkel Dror and Wendell Bell, to propose a broad framework for approaching the topic, but it fell a long way short of providing the kind of detailed practical recommendations set out here. Second, the editors have synthesised some of the best applied thinking available and, in the process, have created one of the first, if not THE first, truly 'broad church' and 'ecumenical' futures texts. What makes it distinctive is that it moves lightly and with ease across so many of the fruitless lines of difference and paradigm conflicts that have divided our field and, in so doing, draws upon any and all who have something useful to contribute. Third, they do this in a way that's both critically and integrally informed throughout. This is a real achievement in its own right. Critical and integral futures perspectives bring into play 'interior individual' and 'interior collective' factors that have a great deal to offer but have often been misunderstood or set aside. Practitioners have not been universally willing to accept these gifts, to take on the challenges they imply or to explore their implications - not only for background theorising but also for day-to-day practice across the board. The book clearly demonstrates some of the pay-offs of accessing and applying these powerful new perspectives.

Fourth, it addresses the concerns of practitioners in a clear and accessible manner. I imagine that virtually everyone engaged in applied foresight work will want to read it through in its entirety and then return, over and over again, to key sections. Equally, those who ignore it, believing that their own tool kit is already complete and needs no further improvement, will discover over time that they produce inferior results. In other

words, this book helps move the field toward a new stage of practical competence and capability.

Finally, it reads very well. There are few signs of the extensive editing, the cutting, pasting and liaison necessarily involved in project of this kind. Overall we must be profoundly grateful to Andy Hines and Peter Bishop for their time, effort and – most of all – their vision. The book will be of enormous and enduring value to practitioners everywhere. It will also help propel the field into a future where work of the quality suggested here is not merely available to the few but eagerly sought and promoted by organisations of all kinds.

This is a future in which the foresight profession thrives and, in so doing, illuminates new options for an ever more hard-pressed world. For more information about the book follow this link: <http://www.socialtechnologies.com/Content.aspx?PageID=22>

Richard A Slaughter

Foresight International, Brisbane, February 2006

Notes

1. Australian Foresight Institute publicity flyer, Melbourne, December 1999.
2. Slaughter, R. Professional standards in futures work, *Futures*, 31, 1999, 835-51. Revised and up-dated as Chapter 3 of Slaughter, R. *Futures Beyond Dystopia: Creating Social Foresight*, London, Routledge, 2004.