A Partial History of Futures Thinking in New Zealand

What is futures thinking?

Futures Thinking offers ways of addressing, even helping to shape, the future; it is not about gazing into a crystal ball. It illuminates the ways that policy, strategies and actions can promote desirable futures and help prevent those we consider undesirable. It stimulates strategic dialogue, widens our understanding of the possible, strengthens leadership, and informs decision-making (OECD, 2017).

Defining futures thinking (also known as foresight) is like trying to pin the proverbial tail on the donkey. But in public policy terms it might best be characterised as anticipating tomorrow’s problems, protecting the long-term public interest and endeavouring to ‘future proof’ the state. For New Zealand, that includes managing a distinctive set of risks (Boston, 2016).

However defined, futures thinking is important because many developments, particularly those that affect the development of people, or a country’s infrastructure or economic base, or the sustainable development of its environment, are extremely long-term processes. It is important to set off on the correct path now. To find out in several decades’ time that the wrong turning has been taken would be disastrous, and futures thinking aims to reduce the chances of this happening (Menzies, Newell and Peren, 1997).

No one can credibly predict the future, as can be illustrated by many amusing examples of people who tried and spectacularly failed. Being right in retrospect is not necessarily helpful. Forecasts based on extrapolating from current trends can be useful, but if they extend over more than five years in a complex and fast-changing world their reliability diminishes considerably (New Zealand Treasury, 2013, 2016). More than five years out, projections might be informed by a number of different techniques, such as horizon scanning, cross-impact analyses and Delphi panels. Projections are usually also based on a range of assumptions and often underpin two, three or four scenarios of possible futures. It is generally accepted that all these might be upset by a ‘disjunctive shock’ (James, 2017) that either can’t be foreseen or is not

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The use of the plural in 'futures thinking' is deliberate, since futures thinkers argue that from the standpoint of the present there is no one future, and the one that finally arrives is not predetermined. On the other hand, it has to be recognised that for a small country like New Zealand, there are some outcomes that are highly likely (an aged population structure) and some that are less within our power to influence (such as the growth of artificial intelligence).

Indeed, there may be ‘probable’ futures in the near term, ‘possible’ futures which depend on a whole range of factors, and ‘preferred’ futures able to be shaped by human agency. All of these will overlap. Preferred futures bring into play notions of ‘visioning’ and ‘backcasting’, wherein a future is imagined so that strategies and plans can be developed and implemented in order to get there. Visioning processes are challenging and take many forms. George Bush senior once laconically referred to ‘the vision thing’ while campaigning for president, and this remark summed up many people’s ambivalence (Menzies, 2000). On the other hand, in 1999, Singapore, which is very future-focused (and perhaps less cynical, yet successful on many counts), proposed a new national vision for the 21st century.

Scenarios are particularly useful tools for testing how robust strategies are in the face of multiple possible futures, and for detecting signals of the actual, emergent future. However, like many futures thinking concepts, scenario planning is interpreted in a number of ways (Börjesson et al., 2006), and can even be misused.

Done properly, futures thinking is a creative process which often overturns conventional mental models (Johnson-Laird, 1983). Eminent futurologist Jim Dator goes so far as to say that ‘any useful statement about the future should appear to be ridiculous’. The OECD (2017) uses more conventional language, but along the same lines. Futures thinking:

- uses a multidisciplinary approach to pierce the veil of received opinion and identify the dynamics that are creating the future. … A variety of methods – qualitative, quantitative, normative, and exploratory – help illuminate the possibilities, outline policy choices, and assess the alternatives. … Futures thinking looks beyond immediate constraints. It helps people remember that existing attitudes and frameworks, which often seem immutable and insurmountable in the short term, are ripe for change in the long term. Futures thinking creates an environment for deeply informed decision-making with a sustainable and commissioners for Children, Race Relations and Retirement. The Office of the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment has a greater degree of autonomy and independence since it reports to Parliament, rather than the government of the day.

However, when measured against 17 criteria, New Zealand gets at best a mixed scorecard for the quality of its anticipatory governance (Boston, 2016, 2017b). While there are a number of commitment devices’ to protect future-oriented interests (e.g. the Public Finance Act 1989 and the Reserve Bank Act 1989), still in many policy areas outcomes are poor, often with

... no government can bind its successors and there is a focus on the short term, exacerbated by our three-year election cycle.
assessments, no national scenarios to use in such assessments, no parliamentary committee focused on emerging and long-term policy issues, few serious evaluations of the societal impacts of emerging technologies and important scientific discoveries, and only sporadic efforts by major departments and agencies to undertake horizon-scanning and scenario analyses in their respective areas of responsibility. (Boston, 2017b)

**Back to the Futures Commission?**

Recently a call was made for the formation of an apolitical Futures Commission to decide what New Zealand should look like in 50 years’ time, and to determine what needs to change if we are to realise that vision (Macdonald, 2017). The idea may have some merit, but there has already been a statutory Commission for the Future and it met an untimely end. Before proceeding further with the notion of a new organisation, it makes sense to review the history of futures thinking in Aotearoa New Zealand, to see what lessons can be learned. This article seeks to provide such a review, while fully cognisant of its partial nature, in both senses of the word. Over the last 20 years the author has been involved in several of the initiatives described below and there is inevitably an element of personal reflection, particularly when it comes to discussing possible ways forward. Second, even setting aside possible selection bias, a totally comprehensive review of all sorts of purposes: former prime minister Mike Moore wrote a book entitled A Brief History of the Future to support his bid to become director-general of the World Trade Organisation (Moore, 1998). An additional challenge is presented by the ephemerality of many futures thinking initiatives. A plethora of policy papers, organisations and websites have come and gone over the years, leaving little trace of their existence.

What follows is focused mainly on institutions and processes of futures thinking or foresight, with reference to some key individuals and related literature. Most emphasis is placed on Aotearoa New Zealand, but acknowledgement is made of the inherently internationalist nature of futures thinking. A full treatment awaits attention of some future PhD scholar.

**Early days**

Kupe was perhaps the first futures thinker to reach New Zealand. Like other explorers who set out towards geographical unknowns, [Kupe] must have imagined a future time when he and his companions would arrive somewhere new.

Very briefly, its purpose was to establish an agreed direction for diversifying the New Zealand economy away from its dependence on primary agricultural products (wool, butter, meat carcasses, etc.). The conference opened with plenary addresses from the prime minister, Walter Nash, the head of the Department of Industries and Commerce, W.B. Sutch, and the farmers’ official representative, W.P. O’Shea. The gesture of inclusion towards the farmers, as the dominant force in economic production, backfired. O’Shea used his centre-stage opportunity to tell the exact opposite story to the one the government was trying to have heard: he claimed that if the farmers were only given enough resources, they could solve New Zealand’s economic problems all by themselves – i.e. by producing more of the same – for as...
long as anyone present was likely to be interested in the matter.

Wallace goes on to describe the National Development Council system. The council and its satellite committees provided the institutional arrangements for gathering data from all sectors of the economy and setting targets for future output. A vital tool for the management of this process was the computerised model of the economy. Bryan Philpott became the leading New Zealand exponent of econometric modelling. As described later by the Task Force on Social and Economic Planning (1976), the aim was to produce an economic model which could be used to assess where the economy was heading on current trends, what it could feasibly or optimally achieve and what were the policy implications of the optimum blueprint. According to Wallace this approach was an example of a Newtonian/mechanical approach to planning for the future. But economies and societies are too complex for this to work satisfactorily, and there followed a rise of faith in free-market, ‘self-organising’ mechanisms. Over time in markets, however, the long-term view can be lost and the pendulum tends to swing back to some kind of external organising framework.

As a follow-up to the two national development conferences, the New Zealand Planning Act 1977 formally established two sibling bodies, the New Zealand Planning Council and the Commission for the Future. In summary, the functions of the Commission for the Future were: to study the possibilities for the long-term economic and social development of New Zealand, with particular reference to developments in science and technology and trends and events in New Zealand and overseas; to report to the minister and inform members of Parliament; and to publish and promote discussion and advice about emerging science trends and innovations.

The Commission for the Future did not last. It attracted the ire of Prime Minister Robert Muldoon and was abolished by the government in 1982. The commission’s chairperson, James Duncan (a professor of chemistry) responded by setting up the New Zealand Futures Trust, which maintained a significant base of corporate and individual members into the early 2000s and continued to carry out research and produce a journal (Future Times) up until 2012. James Duncan also wrote a substantial book on Options for New Zealand’s Future (Duncan, 1984).

The Planning Council, with its medium-term horizon, survived until 1990, when it, too, was disestablished.

**Into the new millennium**

At this stage, institutionalised approaches to futures thinking were on the back foot, but the 1990s onwards saw a flurry of disconnected planning and futures-related activity. For example, the Porter Report to 2010 (Bolger, 1993) and subsequent updates, and Strategic Result Areas for the Public Sector (New Zealand Government, 1994), which were agreed policy priorities set by Cabinet for government departments – presaging today’s Better Public Services targets (State Services Commission, 2017). The Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet carried out an annual review of progress against the strategic result areas, which also gave rise to key result areas for chief executives. The Ministry of Commerce ran an extensive consultation on how to encourage the growth of a knowledge economy, resulting in a report entitled Bright Future: making ideas work for New Zealand: 5 Steps Ahead (Ministry of Commerce, 1999). Then, in 2001, Prime Minister Helen Clark co-chaired the high-profile Knowledge Wave conference, which sought to identify strategies for New Zealand’s transition into a knowledge society. At the conference there were echoes of the 1960 National Development Conference stand-off, when a speech by the then governor of the Reserve Bank almost prompted a walkout by trade union representatives, highlighting the inherent risks of a ‘conferencing’ approach to futures thinking (Wallace, 2012).

A separate agency emerging from discussions held at the Knowledge Wave conference was the future-focused New Zealand Institute, which operated for a number of years before merging with the Business Roundtable to become the New Zealand Initiative. Also in 2001, as part of a campaign heralding the introduction of Kiwibank, New Zealand Post invited New Zealanders to submit visions for the country’s future.

The Local Government Act 2002 required local authorities to develop long-
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desired futures’ (Regional Growth Forum, 2007; Waikato Regional Council, n.d.).

Also in 2002, as a result of the Review of the Centre, the State Services Commission started in-house futures research and then a Futures Programme which included working with public service chief executives to build their shared understanding of the future. This led to an upsurge in futures thinking projects in the public service and the commission’s development of a network (the Future Practitioners’ Forum) to support public servants undertaking futures projects.

Between 2004 and 2009 the Future Practitioners’ Forum had around 200 members (from across the state sector, not just the public service) and met monthly, with 70–120 members attending meetings. It collected a repository of shared futures projects in the public service chief executives to build their capability among senior managers. Laterly, a cross-agency Strategic Futures Group with around 70 participants has been rebuilt in the public sector.

In 2004 an amendment to the Public Finance Act required the Treasury to produce a report every four years on New Zealand’s long-term fiscal position, with a horizon of at least 40 years. Mostly these long-term fiscal statements – a form of ‘commitment device’ – have been low-key affairs, but in 2013 there was an exceptionally high-profile process of consultation and publication. This had little impact, but Treasury was undeterred and made another attempt to influence thinking with production of the 2016 long-term fiscal statement (New Zealand Treasury, 2013, 2016). Treasury also produced a forward-thinking Living Standards Framework to convey a vision wider than one based only on traditional economic measures.

A 2013 amendment to the State Sector Act 1988 established the notion of ‘stewardship’ and defined it to be the ‘active planning and management of medium- and long-term interests, along with associated advice’. The purpose of the amended act is to ‘uphold a State sector system’ that, among other things, fosters a ‘culture of stewardship’ as defined above.

The New Zealand Defence Force has strong futures capabilities, and the Ministry of Transport produced a set of scenarios for the future of transport along with a dedicated futures page on its website, and provided advice and mentored new teams on futures approaches. In 2016 and 2017 the ministry sponsored several well-attended ‘101’ foresight courses for the public sector.

Non-governmental initiatives

Other futures-related activities in the 2000s included a ‘Being there in 2025’ series of scenario debates broadcast by Radio New Zealand in partnership with the New Zealand Futures Trust; the 2025 Taskforce; and a visioning process promoted by Anew New Zealand, a privately-run non-governmental organisation.

Secondary Futures was an OECD-affiliated project which engaged New Zealanders in an extended national conversation about their vision for the 20-year future of secondary education in New Zealand. It was funded but not driven by government, being put instead under the direction of four independent ‘guardians’ of the conversation. The New Zealand Council for Educational Research has produced Key Competencies for the Future (2014), and the New Zealand Curriculum, Policy Studies, Secondary Futures and Landcare Research explored possible futures. Generation Zero is a youth-based activist organisation with a focus on achieving a safe, zero carbon future.

The FutureMakers initiative was a collaborative partnership between Victoria University’s Institute for Governance and Policy Studies, Secondary Futures and Landcare Research to cast a light on the challenges and choices facing New Zealand over a 20-year horizon and to build capability for taking the long view. Landcare Research explored possible futures for New Zealand under the rubric of ‘building capacity for sustainable development’, using a series of participatory workshops supplemented by expert input and reflection and followed up with over 2,000 people at 34 conferences and workshops.

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with a commitment to building public futures literacy designed and managed three free, game-based public futures conversations in partnership with Crown research institutes and centres of research excellence. The first conversation, Magnetic South, was in partnership with Landcare Research in 2011 on the long-term future of Christchurch. The next two, both called Pounamu, were on science and the future of New Zealand, and were run in 2012 in conjunction with the MacDiarmid Institute for the Royal Society’s Transit of Venus event (Gluckman, 2012) and in 2013 with Professor Shaun Hendy, with support from the MacDiarmid Institute and other centres of research excellence. These futures games engaged New Zealanders from nine years old to 90 and from Kaitaia to Invercargill.

Foresight and futures research have been built into public policy courses at the University of Canterbury. The Tourism Group at Victoria University has undertaken a considerable amount of futures work, and in 2012 produced Tourism 2050: planning for the future (Moriarty, 2012).

The McGuinness Institute has collected a repository of futures resources in the James Duncan Memorial Library. In recent years, several specifically futures-oriented books have been written by New Zealanders (Gilbert, 2005; Carden and Murray, 2007; Wallace, 2011; Kelsey, 2015; Palmer and Butler, 2016; Boston, 2016, 2017a, 2017b; Harris, 2017; James, 2017).

In 2016 the New Zealand Labour Party published reports on the future of work (Future of Work Commission, 2016). In the same year, as a way of winding up the New Zealand Futures Trust (latterly known as Futures Aotearoa) an online series of interviews on the future with both prominent and young New Zealanders was posted on the Institute for Governance and Policy Studies website. Television New Zealand aired a series of interactive programmes on New Zealand’s future (What Next?) in 2017.20

The international scene
Boston’s two books on the theme of governing the future (Boston, 2017a, 2017b) draw on his studies of other countries’ approaches to futures thinking. Finland seems to be particularly strong in this area, with its requirement for governments to produce a report on the future every parliamentary term, but there are many other international examples of futures thinking. To pick just a few, Scotland’s Futures Forum commissions in-depth studies and undertakes scenario-planning; Wales has a Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act; Possible Canadas is a partnership of diverse organisations which share the goal of supporting forward-looking conversations about the future of Canada; Switzerland has prepared an Outlook report on the future of work, and in 2012 produced Tourism 2050: planning for the future (Moriarty, 2012).

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The future of futures thinking

It is clear that there are many excellent developments in futures thinking going on in New Zealand, yet they tend to be disconnected from one another and struggle for acceptance or to become embedded in public institutions and processes. This is a fate shared by many cross-disciplinary fields, but an additional challenge in an evidence-driven world – along with growing threats to that world – is the obvious inability to collect evidence from the future.

This won’t change, yet for futures thinking to thrive it may be necessary to ‘double down’ with an even more cross-disciplinary approach, including contributions from the humanities, arts, social media and communication technologies. Scenario planning is an excellent example of the way different disciplines might be blended, given that scenarios are essentially stories derived from research and analysis, imagination and vision, and are able to be falsified (or not) as time goes on.

There are also lessons to be learned from other fields where there have been attempts to change ways of thinking: for example, in retirement income planning, where people are encouraged to think more about their future selves and the trade-offs required between different time periods. Financial behaviours are susceptible to applied behavioural economics or ‘nudges’ (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008), such as automatic enrolments in KiwiSaver. Some of the periods. Financial behaviours are susceptable to applied behavioural economics or ‘nudges’ (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008), such as automatic enrolments in KiwiSaver. Some of the commitments device identified by Boston (2016, 2017a, 2017b) are analogous to nudges, although others might better be characterised as ‘shoves’.

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This assessment rings very true. Furthermore, dependence on a single mechanism – particularly one that is centralised – is unlikely to bring about the desired change in a complex and constantly changing world. Progress is more likely to come from a whole-of-system, multifaceted approach.

While promising no simple solutions, Boston (2016, 2017b) effectively provides a recipe for ways to enhance anticipatory governance in New Zealand. Ingredient objectives include: constitutional reform; improving long-term reporting; improving foresight capability; strengthening futures-focused institutions; embedding the future within policy frameworks; nurturing a future-focused political culture; and improving environmental stewardship and adaptive governance. A particular argument is made for instituting commitment devices that require the policy system to conduct regular foresight exercises, undertake periodic long-term forecasts and projections, and develop long-term plans (e.g. for conservation, infrastructure and other forms of public investment).

Boston has effectively laid out a manifesto for change, which provides a basis upon which Aotearoa New Zealand can build a global reputation as a futures thinking nation. In the short term, leadership would best be provided by a dedicated Futures Unit within the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. The time is also right for a commission of inquiry into anticipatory governance, to see which of Boston’s proposals can be implemented, and how.

1 Some of these have taken on the characteristics of urban myths, such as the Deca executive who declared a cost cut with the Beatles on the grounds that ‘guitar bands are on the way out’, or Lord Kelvin who pronounced that flight by heavier-than-air machine was impossible. Niels Bohr is commonly attributed with the statement ‘prediction is very difficult, especially about the future’, but others may have said it first.
2 Sometimes referred to as TUNA conditions of turbulence, uncertainty, novelty and ambiguity.
3 The author had a conversation in about 2000 with American futurist Professor James Dator in which he clearly described preconditions – particularly, unsustainable levels of household debt in the United States – that already indicated to him the likelihood of a major ‘correction’ in the financial system.
4 http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/history/events/662445b-43c1-401a-ab0b-ab89085b969e.
6 Economists describe this preference in terms of a ‘discount rate’, which, when it comes to money, indicates how an individual values an amount received today compared to in the future. For example, when a sample of older Australians were asked the following question, ‘If you had a choice between receiving $10,000 now, or a greater amount of money one year from now, which is the minimum amount you would need to receive in one year in order for you to choose this option instead of $10,000 now?’, the median response was $15,000 – a discount rate of 50%. There are a number of possible explanations for this large discount rate, but it suggests an extreme preference for immediate funds over future funds (Higgins and Roberts, 2012).
upcoming-new-zealand-election.aspx.
11 Approximate 30 years worth of Future Times have been archived at www.futuretimes.co.nz
12 I am indebted to Stephanie Pride for much information on these developments in the public sector, the FutureMakers initiative and associated activities.
14 Records of these are to be archived in Ngā Taonga Sound and Vision.
17 http://www.generationzero.org/.
18 See http://igps.victoria.ac.nz/events/Ongoing_research/
19 For example, see https://www.charteredaccountantsanz.com/
23 http://www.forthright-platform.nz/.

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Acknowledgements

Contributions and peer review on this and an earlier draft were provided by Jonathan Boston, Ros Coote, Yvonne Curtis, Andrew Jackson, Bryce Johnson, Mahanga Muru, Stephanie Pride and Derek Wallace.
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