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Report 11

2058

A History of  
Future-thinking  
Initiatives in  
New Zealand,  
1936–2010

Learning from the past  
to build a better future

MCGUINNESS INSTITUTE

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**Project 2058: Report 11**

March 2011

## **A History of Future-thinking Initiatives in New Zealand, 1936–2010**

How New Zealand measures up against  
international commitments

This report forms part of *Project 2058*,  
the Institute's flagship project.

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1977

Commission for the Future  
established

(SFI, 2011b)

## 5. Government Institutions, Government Instruments and their Derivatives (Independent Agencies)

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An important step in planning for the future is the creation of a National Sustainable Development Strategy (NSDS) but despite being a signatory to international agreements to establish such a strategy, New Zealand has failed to do so (SFI, 2007). In addition, in its own work toward progressing an NSDS, the Sustainable Future Institute has noted that New Zealand lacks a centralised, government-funded futures organisation.

In this section we look at the institutional frameworks and policies that have been implemented in the past, and consider how our current institutions and instruments could be altered to enable New Zealand to become an intelligent country – one with the foresight and ability to ascertain the outcomes New Zealanders want, and to deliver those outcomes.

We begin with a discussion on New Zealand's only government-funded futures institutions, the Commission for the Future and the New Zealand Planning Council, and consider the nature of the work they carried out, and the circumstances of their demise. Then we consider the present, reflecting on the government instruments that are currently relied on to provide foresight.

Finally, we look at the independent agencies, and in particular the role of the Futures Forum and the New Zealand Futures Trust. The Futures Forum is a group of volunteers in government who aim to bring greater coordination and coherency to futures work across the public sector (Futures Forum, 2010). We consider the responses of those involved in the work of the Commission for the Future, and the evolution of the independent New Zealand Futures Trust, which today endeavours to continue the Commission's work in an autonomous capacity.

### 5.1 Government Institutions

The concept of 'indicative planning' was first adopted at a national level, and the importance of long-term thinking recognised by government, following the National Development Conferences of 1968 and 1969 (Marshall, cited in Duncan, 1984: ix). These conferences reflected the need for New Zealand to establish economic development options in the emerging international economy. This was part of an international trend of focusing on development economics, made popular during the 1960s as former colonies became independent, a trend that influenced policy in developed countries during this time as well (Te Ara, 2010).

In April 1976, the National government established an Economic and Social Planning Task Force, whose role was to examine planning in the public and private sectors and issues affecting national development. In addition, it was to make recommendations based on the study of previous programmes and current trends in New Zealand (Task Force on Economic and Social Planning, 1976: i). Proposals government considered were the establishment of a Commission for the Future, a New Zealand Planning Council, and a Population Commission (Hugh Templeton, personal communication, 6 November 2010; see Section 4.2.1). Although the latter was not progressed, the Commission for the Future and the Planning Council were subsequently established under the New Zealand Planning Act 1977 by the Muldoon-led National government.

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#### The first National Development Conference, Wellington, March 1968

Seated from left: Dominion President Federated Farmers (P. S. Plummer), Minister of Finance (Robert Muldoon), Deputy Prime Minister (John Marshall). At back from left: Deputy Secretary of Treasury and Deputy Chairman (H. G. Land), Research Officer Federation of Labour (D. B. McDonald), Managing Director Auckland Knitting Mills (L. H. Stevens), Secretary of Industries and Commerce (M. J. Moriarty), Secretary of Labour (N. S. Woods), Secretary to the Treasury and Chairman (N. R. Davis), Manager AMP Society (S. J. R. Chatten) and the Chief Accountant Woolworths Ltd (G. C. Broad).

#### 5.1.1 The Commission for the Future, 1976–1982

Professor James Duncan was appointed to chair the country's first Commission for the Future. For six years the organisation's function was to study 'possibilities for the long-term economic and social development of New Zealand', and to make its findings available to the government and the general public (New Zealand Planning Act 1977, s 9(a)).

Announcing the formation of the CFF [Commission for the Future], the Deputy Prime Minister (Hon B.E. Talboys) said that the government attached great importance to the CFF, believing 'that the complexity of modern living, the frequently unforeseen impact of present decisions and developing technology, and the need to ensure that human values and aspirations are not overlooked, require a detached long-term look at the possible directions in which New Zealand could be heading and the choices for the future open to us.' (Commission for the Future, 1977: 3)

Between its inception in 1976 and its disbandment in 1982, the Commission for the Future published numerous works, which are listed in Working Paper 2011/01, *Outputs from Eighteen New Zealand Future-thinking Initiatives*, and can be found on the Sustainable Future Institute's website. Concerned with 'understanding' rather than 'predicting' the future, the Commission undertook a two-phased programme to identify long-term probabilities and alternatives (Duncan, 1984: 3).

The first phase was a review of the 'present and future resource, technical, social and economic potential of New Zealand, and its relation to the world at large' (ibid.: 4). This was documented in informative and digestible texts that covered a range of issues, including resources and technology, societies in change, values, and international relations (see Working Paper 2011/01). The second, 'analytical' phase saw the Commission examine this potential and the problems and challenges in achieving it (Duncan, 1984: 4). There were several components to this work, as noted by Duncan: context studies, where the directions in which New Zealand might be taken were explored; modelling, involving scenario work; special topic research, with the themes of communications, disaster contingency and employment; identification of informed opinion, where aspects of the future were considered with input from a broad range of interested parties; opinion polling, involving assessments of public perceptions of likely scenarios while mitigating against professional value judgements being forced upon the public; and professional reports and publications, such as *Future Times* (ibid.).

Works of particular note include *A Question of Priorities: New Zealanders in conversation about the future* (1979), which explores the opinions of New Zealanders on specific aspects of societal futures, and *Attitudes to the Future* (1980), a survey based on similar concerns but from a statistical point of view. Another interesting output was the *Report of the New Zealand Televote* (Becker et al., 1981). The Commission's Televote provided the opportunity for participants to choose between four possible future contexts and challenged them to define their own fifth option. This informed part of a comprehensive study conducted with the aim of informing the public of the content of the Commission's four contexts for the future, receiving public evaluation of these contexts, and engaging the public with the Commission's work (ibid.: 1). In addition to the publication of this report, and a number of seminars and public engagements, the Televote was a means for the Commission to solicit feedback from, and promote futures thinking to, the New Zealand public. Educating and interacting with the public was considered vital by Duncan, as evidenced in his observation that 'ultimately the success of any organisation involved in future studies must be materially affected by the skill with which it conveys information about its work and conclusions to society' (Duncan, 1984: 5). He also went on to note the importance of a strong research base to inform these conclusions (ibid.).

In an interview for the *New Zealand Listener*, Myra Harpham, who shared the role of Secretariat Director of the Commission for the Future with Margaret Hunn, observed its unique positioning: 'We are facing outwards, towards the public, we are not an advisory group facing inwards' (Harpham, cited in Paske, 1981: 16).

A significant challenge for the Commission was not only to educate members of the public about future-thinking and the organisation's sphere of activity, but also to engage people in its research findings. As mentioned above, public opinion polling was one aspect of this approach. Margaret Hunn recognised that, given the complexity of the information, the Commission had a responsibility to attract people's attention to it, and make the Commission accessible to them (Hunn, cited in Paske, 1981: 16). She also observed that the expectations of decision-makers for 'long-term extrapolations of current trends and quantitative predictions' were out of step with the nature of the futures work undertaken by the Commission (ibid.: 11). The Commission therefore gave as much focus to educating its audience in the application of the information in its findings by encouraging 'anticipatory thinking and planning' as it did to conducting and publicising its research work (ibid.).

### 5.1.2 The demise of the Commission

Prior to the disestablishment of the Commission, Myra Harpham noted that it could be viewed as 'a measure of the health of New Zealand's democracy that it is possible to fund a body like [the Commission]' (ibid.: 16). However, this comment was soon seen to be premature, as the Commission was dissolved in 1982, merely six years after its inception. The demise of the Commission cut much of its work short; some reports were left unfinished, while others were planned but never started. Among the Commission's last publications were the 'Future Contingencies' series, entitled *Natural Disaster* (Preddey, 1981), *Societal Disaster* (Parr, 1982) and *Nuclear Disaster* (Kjellstrom et al., 1982).<sup>8</sup>

Hugh Templeton, who was a cabinet minister in the Muldoon government and heavily involved in the establishment of both the Commission and the Planning Council, attributes the decision to disband the Commission in part to its work around the threat of nuclear disaster and national security, an opinion shared by Jeanette Fitzsimons<sup>9</sup>. The Commission 'intruded on established policy in the prime field of peace and security' (H. Templeton, personal communication, 13 December 2010). Templeton observed that the Commission went beyond its remit to consider New Zealand's long-term national interests and involved itself in matters relating to international security, which proved unpopular with Prime Minister Robert Muldoon.

Futurist Dr Malcolm Menzies concurs with this view, commenting:

I suspect [a] reason for the demise of the Commission for the Future was political miscalculation. Sure this was always likely to happen given the nature of the Commission's brief and the PM we had at the time, but this is an important general point because a key element in the success or failure of any futuring exercise is the degree of 'connectedness' to networks of influence. Balancing connectedness with the essential 'edginess' of futures work is a very difficult task. (M. Menzies, personal communication, 6 December 2010)

<sup>8</sup> Other titles in this series that were planned but not published were *Future Contingencies 3: World Economic Disaster*, and *Future Contingencies 5: Summary Report for Wider Dissemination*.

<sup>9</sup> See Jeanette Fitzsimons' personal reflection on page 69.

Templeton identified other reasons for the short life-span of the organisation as relating to its structure. The responsibility for the operation of the Commission resided with Members of Parliament, who already had significant workloads. Templeton concludes that the Commission would have benefited from greater human and financial resources, as well as being located closer to the workings of government. In view of its advisory role on economic and financial issues relating to New Zealand's long-term economic performance, he surmises that the most appropriate location for an institution of this nature would have been within the Treasury.<sup>10</sup> Lack of funding imposed limitations on the Commission's ability to recruit high quality staff, and its distance from the workings of government affected its influence (H. Templeton, personal communication, 13 December 2010).

In the foreword to Duncan's personal publication *Options for New Zealand's Future*, Sir John Marshall commented that 'It [was] not surprising ... when, in 1981, the government, more concerned with the next election than with what might happen in the next thirty years, disbanded the Commission for the Future' (Duncan, 1984: ix). New Zealand's three-year electoral cycle provides little incentive for the government to invest in long-term futures work. Commenting on this short-term cycle recently, Victoria University political scientist Jon Johansson noted that the 're-election imperative is so acute; governments are always thinking about re-election' (cited in Comrie-Thomson, 2010). This has implications for government decision-making and choices around long-term strategy. While the issue is beyond the scope of this paper, the possibility that long-term future-thinking objectives, such as an NSDS, might be better served by a four-year electoral cycle deserves further research.

A centralised, government-funded organisation, such as the Commission for the Future, existing in a healthy democracy, has the ability to question the status quo and challenge the government to address tough issues relating to the country's long-term sustainability. At the same time, a tension will exist between its need for independence and the potential unpopularity of its findings. The challenge will be to ensure that the structure and terms of reference of any future organisations are sufficiently robust to enable effective dialogue on long-term challenges without being impeded by short-term political goals.

**Personal reflection: Hon. Hugh Templeton, December 2010**

Excerpts from a conversation with Hugh Templeton, December 13, 2010.

On the inception of the Commission for the Future:

It was simple. The computer and the chip revolution was under way. The nano age – we really had to try and have a look further ahead, a generation ahead, even thirty or forty years ahead. At that time a host of futures groups were starting up around the world. All of those thoughts suggested: let's bring together a few people alongside the Planning Council [with,] a specific role of trying to envisage the future. That's really how it began.

On the role that the Treasury should play in strategic and future planning:

My response now: I would have put the Commission for the Future into a government department, preferably the Treasury because their opposition to bodies outside is so endemic, it's so powerful. Unless you carry the Treasury you can't really get very much done in our system. There is a hugely negative capacity. "We haven't the money" is the most powerful if not the stupidest statement ... when the Treasury says it to you, don't believe them, it isn't true – it's oxymoronic. It is almost impossible to get a Prime Minister or Cabinet to look at a project if the Treasury is opposed. The original Planning Conference was a Treasury and Trade and industry device led by the powerful and "intelligent" Deputy PM Jack Marshall which was the most effective thing we did in my view, in that 50 years, to try and orientate the New Zealand economy.

My argument in the New Zealand context: get into the system; it's not what you know it's who you know ... The rationale is clear, you start something off and then you're transferred, the next person may have no interest in what you're doing, in fact may actively be concerned to change what you're doing or preferably save work and let it die. If you've locked it into the Treasury, they've then got an interest in action and progress.

<sup>10</sup> For more information on the role of the Treasury in New Zealand see <http://www.treasury.govt.nz>



## 5. GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS, GOVERNMENT INSTRUMENTS AND THEIR DERIVATIVES

On why the New Zealand Planning Council endured for so much longer than the Commission for the Future:

It was unwise of them [the Commission] to get into foreign policy, they were meant to be doing New Zealand futures, you know, what would our grandchildren be doing? In effect the Commission for the Future stepped outside its brief. The PM said 'I cannot have an instrument of government contradicting government policy'. There was no question, the Planning Council proceeded and it was producing good work.

On the necessity for a sunset clause for the Commission for the Future and the New Zealand Planning Council:

My view now is that we should have had a sunset clause so that they saw themselves as having to operate right now, and then you do away with them. It then means they've got a finite life, they've got to perform. Five years?? Maybe seven. Look at the task then and maybe try another means?

On those with enormous foresight in New Zealand's history:

There were two genius founders ... George Grey and Wakefield. [Wakefield] was a brilliant man ... he helped found four states; Canada, New Zealand, Australia and South Africa, it was his vision that established our modern parliamentary state within fifteen years ... Grey was a genius, he really made modern New Zealand, not just in his governorships, but as a politician he established the liberal tradition of governance ... the liberal state based on Freedom of the individual, but linked to the requirement of the community, that where the individual and the community could not manage issues – from public health to public education, from birth to old age, the state should take a role as the liberal governments pushed forward with say pensions and maternity hospitals. Much of our strategic development has of necessity been State led. Basically Grey's philosophy fed into the Greyhounds of the great Seddon liberal administration.

On the necessity for planning for development:

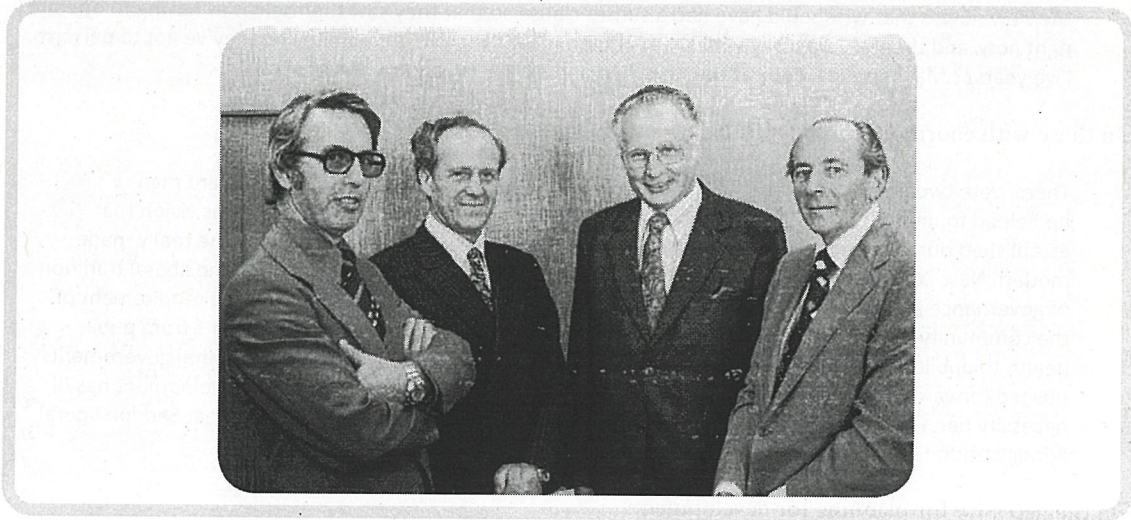
If you ask Bill English, where is the development coming in the next 25 years, can he tell you? No the State ... and its instrument the Government need someone to work up strategies. If not the Treasury – A Think Tank – A Planning group. The market is too small in NZ to lead. Look at what has happened. Our only global player is the dairy industry. The dairy industry is increasing at 3% annual productivity? Is that happening in any other sector? Our manufacturing sector has gone backward in the face of a misreading of what Free Trade can do for a small country. Where are our multinationals? Fletcher Challenge was, but failed. Can we build in other industries more multinationals like Fonterra? Say Solid Energy? We had one in Petrocorp but that was asininely sold off. As a result it's difficult to get major development in the only transformatory sector available to NZ, Energy. If the Petrocorp era had kept going NZ would have gone a long way towards self sufficiency in liquid energy. Without State leadership its difficult to get any major [sectoral] development, any major investment on a national scale ... We are the world leaders in geothermal, but the last generation failed to build on the first. We should have been moving on a steady state basis in geothermal and in petroleum – but there's no strategic direction or institutions to implement policy ... By now we should have been the Norway of the South Pacific running balance of payments surpluses and with a State Investment Fund. That, [strategic direction] is what institutionalised futures analysis in the Treasury, and each of the strategic government departments should be producing.

**Personal reflection: Jeanette Fitzsimons (CNZM), former co-leader of the Green Party, March 2011**

I am old enough to have lived through, and to remember this period of foresight in New Zealand's history. I clearly remember Future Contingencies 4: *Nuclear Disaster* being published in 1982. The publication conveyed a strong stance against nuclear proliferation and alliance given the dangers of nuclear warfare and immediately thereafter, I recall Robert Muldoon (Prime Minister) disestablishing the Commission for the Future. It brings to mind a bumper sticker on my son's car, 'For God's sake don't tell the truth, you'll lose your funding', an adage which stands true, applying to both universities and government funded groups in New Zealand today. We desperately need an independent group which can conduct a high level of research, that is sufficiently academic to be taken seriously, but with complete funding autonomy.

### 5.1.3 The New Zealand Planning Council, 1977–1991

The New Zealand Planning Council (NZPC) was established at the same time as the Commission for the Future, under the New Zealand Planning Act 1977. Unlike the Commission, however, it had a medium-term outlook (see Appendix 1). The Council was established with two central functions: firstly to advise government on planning for social, economic and cultural development in New Zealand, and secondly to provide stimulus for debate and discussion around important planning issues for the country, with an emphasis on medium-term policy (Fischer, 1981: 1).



**Members of the New Zealand Planning Council**

From left: Secretariat Head Ken Piddington, Chair Sir Frank Holmes, Minister of National Development George Gair and Secretary to the Treasury Noel Lough.

The appointment of a full-time chairman, Sir Frank Holmes, demonstrated the emphasis the government placed on planning at this time (ibid.: 6). Fourteen members representing a broad range of disciplines were initially appointed to the Council. The Minister of National Development, George Gair, was also made a member to ensure a strong connection between the Council and Cabinet (ibid.: 5). On the subject of its contemporary, the Commission for the Future, Fischer explains that to avoid duplication of information, the bodies agreed to consult each other on their work-plans as well as present these to the minister annually (ibid.: 20).

Four steering committees (SC) were established, each convened by a member of the Council. These were SC I, Economic Efficiency and Flexibility; SC II, Economic Stability; SC III, Social and Cultural Development; and SC IV, Regional Planning and Development. Four special working groups were also formed during the Council's first year, focusing on the specific areas of human relations in the workplace; population and migration; medium-term economic prospects, and taxation and income maintenance. In response to early criticism that the steering committees were too rigid, these were gradually replaced by single-purpose task forces to carry out specific projects. From the outset the Council saw it as important to respond to New Zealand's changing environment and evolve its structure and practices accordingly (ibid.: 7).

Between 1977 and 1991 (when legislation was enacted to dissolve the Council), the New Zealand Planning Council published numerous reports (see Working Paper 2011/01), which cover a broad range of areas and issues. These publications reflect the Council's desire to be 'a catalyst to encourage planning in organisations and in local and central government' (ibid.: 10). There is a focus on stimulating planning in areas integral to New Zealand's economy, and the Council was involved in planning activities with sectoral organisations such as the New Zealand Manufacturers' Federation, the Forestry Council, and various agricultural advisory bodies. The Council also:

... consistently promoted the cause of open government and presented a submission to the official committee considering this matter. It ... followed up this and other matters in its annual reports, such as suggesting a longer parliamentary term might be more conducive to better planning and management. (ibid.: 15)