



What Future Do We Want?

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Can we make ethical equitable and exciting futures?

I am assuming you are here because you want to make better societies, and explore some options for doing this. Most of us want to make a positive difference, to make changes for others, even if things are good for us. Many of us also are worried about keeping what we currently have, particularly those changes we worked hard for over the past three or four decades. These included extending law reforms to provide public recognition and better services for women, those with disabilities, those from immigrant cultures and gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender communities, and, to a more limited degree, indigenous groups. My worry is that the pace of such gains has slowed over the past decade and there are signs of we are moving backwards.

How do we recreate the optimism that drove those changes so we can tackle newer inequities and embrace new possibilities? We need to start with some wider visions of the future we wish to work for, and find some common goals, some ways of moving out of the anxieties and feelings of despair that seem to lock many people into doing nothing or too little.

Let us start by thinking through some visions of Utopia, the ideal society we would like to live in and leave to our children. Firstly, let's put the social at the core of our future society, and focus on more than the economy and material wellbeing. Let's redefine our goals to focus on people and social wellbeing, which relate to how we do things, as well as what we do. I am suggesting making things better incrementally rather than creating some grand socialist or market-driven dream palace.

My Utopia is a roadmap for ways of moving on and exploring what we need to do to ensure life is better, not just for us, but for those with whom we share the planet. To feel able to move on, we need to see the possibilities, some sense of purpose, a light on the hill, or even many lights, even if elusive and always ahead of us. Oscar Wilde once described Utopia was always the next island to the one you just

arrived on – travelling well becomes the objective, not the destination, so there is no difference between means and ends.

Roadmaps need some suggested signposts for how we can move to more civil societies, so I am suggesting the following starting point for moving with a shared purpose:

Fairness and equity	Create social cohesion based on mutual recognition of rights to treat each other well, rather than fear of the other
Collaboration, co-operation and collectivity	Social communal connections and the maintenance of mutual trust to balance individualism and competition
Diversity and pluralism	Differences make for creativity while uniformity and conformity stifle imagination and variations
Complexity, conflict and tensions	Society needs to deal with these civilly to generate the necessary discussion, dissent, options and solutions
Responsibility and reciprocity	Building inter-active social connections which become the basis for social systems and orderly exchanges of resources
Generosity and altruism	The pleasures of sharing and giving are crucial to our sense of commonalities and non-commercial relationships
Rewards and recognition	Individual and group contributions and successes need to be noted and valued to reinforce positives and commitment
Dignity and belonging	It is crucial to be accepted and respected for who we are
Trust and trustworthiness	Ethical practices (“doing the right thing”) is core to general social trusting of those we don’t necessarily know
Rules and laws and enforcement as last resort	Provide the needed safety net of minimum standards for order and rights if mores and values do not assert control

The above list is my first attempt at some criteria for a good society based on recognising that we are social beings, and that it is the qualities of our relationships and connections to others that define how we feel about our lives. We are interdependent and value ourselves as linked with other people. The big question is whom we see as meriting our trust and being part of our society. There have been many polls since the eighties that have shown a loss of trust in most people and increased anxieties about the future. These studies have revealed:

- an increasing sense of inequality in our society which worries at our egalitarian beliefs;
- distrust of many institutions, including politicians and big business;
- increased fear of crime, even when rates are going down; and
- less trust of strangers.

These polls probably explain the paradox of our country both doing well economically and still feeling bad about the future. There are major rifts in our social links, both internally and cross-nationally, which undermine our sense of belonging to a wider world beyond “those like us”.

How do we start to put the fragments back together again? What has happened to make us feel much less connected? One big change is the disappearing public sphere. After many centuries of expectations of progress and growing government intervention and shared risks, we have moved back into, at least at the rhetorical level, assumptions about individual self-sufficiency – an assumption that sits oddly in our interdependent society.

The last few centuries of Western history saw moves first from peasants to city states, and to nation states; from traditional rulers to rules of law. At the same time, the expansion of knowledge and ideas has enhanced our sense of who we are and can be. Our cultures have become more global and our views have expanded. We may have lost some sense of local belonging, of being part of rich traditions and cultures, but we are more likely than ever before to recognise the universality of societies, our common humanity and our relationships

with different peoples and ways of living. Yet there are signs that some groups and even nations are seeing the post-modern world as threatening and even bad.

One result is a sense of fear that we have lost the secular, democratic, egalitarian assumptions that were once part of our lives, assumptions grown from more than a century of increasing acceptance about the role of the public sphere in joining us together through public institutions and schools. We flogged the family silver and as a result we have fewer such symbols in our community. While it may not be as symbolically important to the rich, public spaces, publicly owned services, public schools, public hospitals, sporting facilities, libraries and other services were owned by all of us, so using them was looked upon as a right, even if we didn't always choose to exercise it.

Privatised and sub-contracted services may be more efficient (though that isn't always clear), but they do not clearly identify their offerings as public entitlements. People are encouraged not to expect to be publicly served, but instead to see themselves as self-reliant, carrying their own risks. The public sphere has been redefined as a somewhat inadequate safety net rather than part of what ties us together. These were the neo-liberal concepts that also redefined the public and private spheres so relationships, emotions, care and nurture were either ignored or commodified. In short, too much emphasis on market forces has overwhelmed the importance of human relationships.

These disconnects make people feel more fearful, less generous and more self-interested. Those who feel disengaged, disrupted and perturbed may feel the only safe place is their own home as they retreat to past securities. The rise of more authoritarian neo-conservative politics, fundamentalist religions and nationalism can be seen as reactions to too much uncertainty, too many individualised perceived risks and too many freedoms, which together have created rifts between us locally and more broadly.

We need to recreate some of the sense of connectedness and mutuality we had before collectivity, belonging and interdependence were conceptually over-ridden by consumerism, markets and choices.

We need ways to reconnect more widely, so we can have the good will necessary to recreate inclusive, equitable societies.

This conference is about communities in control, presumably of our own destinies, so let's look at how the groups represented here can contribute to an even wider agenda. Let's start by looking at the possible roles of community groups, and what these groups do well.

At their best, community groups:

- Are participatory/democratic processes
- Reflect local/relevant needs
- Are flexible/responsive to members/users/participants
- Are advocates for needs (even unpopular ones)
- Create relationships of trust with members and users
- Are Creative/innovative and offer new ideas and leadership
- Fill gaps and identify needs not being met
- Allow people to develop and share skills
- Provide a forum for ideas, debates and solving of differences
- Give space for people to pursue special interests/passions
- Have a commitment to ethics/social justice in their practices and communities
- Are voluntary and by their nature selective of those who have an interest in being there.

That's the good news but there are weaknesses. Community groups can:

- Be controlled by factions/fractions
- Represent particular interest groups at the expense of others
- Enforce "the way we do things round here" on new members
- Exercise power for its own sake
- Exclude new ideas and "trouble-makers"
- Patronise and/or exclude the powerless
- Chase resources at the expense of meeting members' needs
- Act like a business to the detriment of services and local needs
- Be co-opted by too many government contracts or tied donations

- Act as social control agents for governments or power groups
- Follow passions that may not be for the public benefit
- Be voluntary and therefore less able to fulfill particular accountability requirements.

These flaws make it impossible to generalise about the sector or to make any clear statements about its role. It is too varied and vulnerable to be effective as the primary deliverer of universal services that people have as a right. Its strengths of diversity and interests which act as a universal social glue also create weakness.

The sector needs to be independent of government – there should be two discrete sectors with different roles. Government is not a good initiator of ideas; this role is often best performed by the community sector. There are many within the community sector who do care about more civil societies and who could be effective participants in a futures development project. We need to think about ways that groups who do care about better futures can combine to provide the type of leadership we lack at present in the sector. What this requires is deciding on the steps we need to take to make the strategy possible.

Let's start with a new vision of the public sphere.

My road to Utopia is publicly paved so it clearly symbolises the need for a common way to move forward that is open to all. We need to think through what should be publicly owned, both for practical and symbolic reasons, rather than the present confusion between the spheres. We need to articulate some clear boundaries between the roles of the public sphere, the commercial sphere and the third sector.

I know this goes against some of the current moves of partnerships and consortia between government, NGOs and/or business but I think the risks of the present moves exceed the benefits. Collaboration sounds good but when it involves compromises and power shifts that deprive the public of both the right to know who delivers services and the necessary roles of advocacy, it is time to raise questions. We need to reinvent the public sector, which was thoroughly undermined in the

neo-liberal era when it was told to behave like a corporate despite being incapable of running anything effectively itself.

The past decade has seen some very interesting positive changes in the business sector, but mixed changes in the not-for-profit categories, as these have taken on many government functions and outdated corporate cultures. I have done some work on corporate social responsibility and have written elsewhere on the need to focus on ethical practices for core business functions. The NGO sector needs also to look at its own functioning as it has been seduced into taking contracts that undermine its independence and ability to advocate.

The last few years have muddied the differences between the sectors. The state behaves like a business and contracts out many of its functions, too many not-for-profits have become like big businesses doing the state's bidding, and it seems that only business, as a sector, has talked about ethics and moved away from its single bottom line. I would like all three sectors to acknowledge their primary roles.

We need three-pronged reforms tactics:

1. New-style government services that are responsive, accountable and flexible but still offer entitlement; services that are legislatively and politically driven and part of the public sphere. The state as a direct service provider is necessary to create the levels of security, of shared risk, that underpin the frameworks for a more trustworthy society. People need to be linked by a recognition that citizenship requires both common entitlements and obligations, offered by those we elect to serve us.
2. An expanded role for businesses as responsible corporate citizens that create value for the broader community, its workers and the environment, as well as for its shareholders.
3. A vigorous, independent community sector that is both a vigilant guardian of and advocate for social equity, as well as ensuring that the state and business do the right thing by society at large.

Together, government, business and community need to generate:

- Cultural and leisure based sectors that ensure that we connect socially, creatively and physically in both community and cultural spheres;
- Educational sectors that serve the pursuit of ideas and knowledge, not just market and economic-based aims;
- Universally available quality services in areas that should be outside the market such as education, health and personal support and care services, based on needs, not ability to pay;
- A lively, responsible and responsive market sector that is innovative and creative, as well as aware of environmental and social needs;
- Connected up people, linked through technological means that allow for strong communication and relationship building, as well as integration of paid work and community needs;
- Environmentally sustainable communities and organisations that work collaboratively to reduce excessive consumption, and create equitable and effective use of energy and water.

Where to from here?

How do we start such a project? It's hard to identify a source for developing future oriented discussions at the moment. The universities have vacated the role of public intellectual hot houses. The existing think tanks are limited in range and by their adherence to particular politics. While some are doing interesting work, they are not making much ongoing impact on broad debates. At the moment I can't see either the state or business sector taking up these issues, nor can I see the NGO peaks move on them either.

Maybe this type of initiative should not be based in one sector alone because it is about all of our futures, not the future of any one sector. We should be looking for a new type of structure and ways of operating that could model the vision of the future outlined above. We need new types of social coalitions and collaborations that can work co-operatively towards some common goals. We need to work out ways to form collaborative clusters out of the many existing groups and the good local, regional, national and international initiatives that are already happening. The question is whether these can rise above

sectoral interests and find ways of working together that do not destroy our independence and separate voices. This requires a funding base that has no donor strings attached apart from a commitment to common goals.

Such a linked group would create and resource broad public debates on the futures people would like to see, and promote the necessity and criteria for more civil societies. It needs to support the positives and counter some widespread assumptions that are undermining the institutional changes that are needed to create less anxious and more generous societies.

The challenge is to offer the excitement of broadly based ideas for better futures, for social systems that would offer more truly civil societies. The once-powerful high ground visions of change have been lost over the past couple of decades and need to be replaced with possibilities for new and exciting ways of moving forward.

There are a few tasks that I can suggest:

1. Start a Foundation of Ideas for an Equitable Future which collects and disseminates ideas for making the future better and how to do this. This requires independent funding.
2. Use this for advocating, collating, promoting and, where necessary, researching equity which is not beholden to government or business.
3. Establish gaps in present research (which is too often limited by being commercially or government funded) such as shared risks and responsibilities in relation to public services, and the virtues of NGOs.
4. Create goodwill and optimism by expanding trustworthiness and equity.

This is a long-term project but maybe out of today we can find some starting points. There are many good things happening out there but

too few attempts to link these up and make sense of them and why they work. Even fewer are the attempts to collate and promote in any systematic way the communal collective viewpoints and knowledge that we have gained over time.

Rather than nostalgia and attempts to move backwards, we need new ideas of social competence and more civil societies to counter the negatives of our main political viewpoints. On the eve of a Federal election, it is easy to see the limits of political perceptions and the lack of focus on what makes people feel good and do the right thing by others. It needs changing and maybe we can kick-start the processes.

If we don't, who will?

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