

Reflection on Thirty Years Involvement with Futures Thinking from a UK Perspective

Graham H. May
Futures Skills
UK

If challenged I am happy to describe myself as a Futurist, partly because I believe that it is inherent in being human to be involved in the future, but also because since the 1970s I have spent at least part of my time in thinking more formally about the future. Although at no time a full-time Futurist, Futures work is the one continuing theme. It began soon after becoming a lecturer in Town Planning in what was then Leeds Polytechnic in the north of England and has continued throughout my academic career and since retirement through occasional projects and running courses for a local group of the University of the Third Age.

Two books published in the early 1970s, *The Limits to Growth*, (Meadows, Randers, & Behrens, 1972) and *Future Shock*, (Toffler, 1970) started me thinking that Town Planning, at that time my chosen career, must involve the future because the plans we were making most probably had implications fifty or more years ahead. At the time planners, in the UK at least, used only trend forecasts even if they were occasionally dressed up in the early, but then very convincing, urban models. So began an attempt to develop Futures in the higher education context in which I was working, first as modules within Town Planning degrees (May, 1984) and later the MA Foresight and Futures Studies (May, 1998).

The Limits to Growth and Future Shock provided very different views of the future and perhaps it is because I found value in both, that neither eco-doom nor tech-fix came to dominate my approach to thinking about the future. Rather than take a particular view of the future, some of my colleagues, for example, concentrated on the idea of Sustainability, the focus of my interest became, how can we deal with the future in the present? From that, perhaps, develops my own preference for defining the field as Futures Thinking, because although we can certainly think about the future in the present studying, researching or seeing the future in the present can raise several difficulties.

There was, and still remains, considerable cynicism about any Futures work, reflected no doubt by the colleague who changed the name plate on my office door to "Mystic May." (At the time there was a column in one of the national newspapers by Mystic Meg.) Being convinced that there was a need for more careful thinking about the future despite the obvious difficulties of doing so provided the impetus for the first part of *The Future is Ours: Foreseeing, Managing and Creating the Future (TFIO)* (May, 1996) in which some of the problems of dealing with the future were

explored and some reasons for undertaking Futures work put forward.

In the UK during the 1970s and 1980s Futures was largely confined to a few enthusiasts, who occasionally discovered that they were not totally alone in their interest, and small units in companies such as Shell and BT (British Telecom). The Futures Network that had provided a forum for the exchange of ideas folded in the early 1980s as Planning and thinking beyond the short term were deemed unnecessary and politically unacceptable in the prevailing market ethos of Thatcherism. In order to survive, for example, Town Planning in Leeds, a public sector orientated course, had to be recast as Urban Development, with a more commercially focussed approach, but fortunately it was still possible to include a Futures option within the final year. My own development in the field was greatly helped by a year's sabbatical at the School of Management in Bradford University where two of the enthusiasts, Brain Twiss, joint author of *Forecasting Technology for Planning Decisions* (Jones & Twiss, 1978) and Phil Holroyd, formerly with Pilkington's Glass and who had been involved in the Futures Network, were located. Time for reflection and access to a library that had relevant material enabled me to write a number of working papers that were a useful starting point for *TFIO*.

The upswing in interest in Futures in the UK began in the early 1990s as some of the disadvantages of short-termism began to be realised. Work by the Science Policy Research Unit at Sussex University, particularly by Irvine and Martin (1984 & 1990), argued that the relative success of the Japanese as compared to the British economy was due to the longer term thinking in the Japanese foresight process. Seeing developments in Science and Technology as the way to improve the economy the UK Technology Foresight Programme was launched in 1993¹. With the exception of a short period during the second phase between 1999 and 2002 the focus of the UK Foresight Programme has remained science and technology, but there is other futures work by a range of government advisory bodies including the Sustainable Development Commission², the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution³ and the Committee on Climate Change⁴. Some idea of the extent of UK Government futures activity in late 2008 can be gained from a two page summary by the consultancy Outsights, *UK Government Futures* (Outsights, 2008) outlining the work that the firm has carried out and listing twelve departments that now use Futures thinking. To misquote Neal Armstrong, this may be, "A small step for Futures, but a giant leap for the British Government."

Partly, no doubt, encouraged by government involvement, but also because, for example, there has been growing interest in Sustainability and concern about Climate Change, there has been a parallel growth of commercial and interest group activity. An internet survey conducted by the author in early 2008 found over twenty UK based consultancies plus a number of non-profit organisations, such as the Tomorrow Project⁵ and several companies working in the Futures field. The establishment and expansion of Shaping Tomorrow⁶ is a good indication of the development of interest in Futures across a wide spectrum. Although based in the UK and having a business base Shaping Tomorrow has a much wider constituency.

There has also been an expansion of futures work across Europe where the European Union and several of the member states have again been important forces

for growth. An indication of the scale of futures work in Europe can be gained from the European Foresight Monitoring Network⁷ that lists over 2,000 initiatives, briefs and other documents.

As one of my main concerns has been to encourage the development of Futures Thinking looking back over the last twelve years since the publication of *TFIO*, not that the book had any significant influence, has been encouraging. Clearly Futures work, particularly in the part of the world with which I am most familiar, has grown enormously and experience in its use is far greater than it was. Any attempt to provide a guide to futures methods, as Part 2 of *TFIO* tried to do, would have both the advantage of much more material to draw on and the disadvantage of having to select from it.

This encouragement is tempered by disappointment that the MA Foresight and Futures Studies could not survive and although other opportunities did arise, mainly with colleagues at the University of Manchester, including interesting work with the British Council and UNIDO in Ukraine, the loss of a university base has been limiting. More widely the lack, to my knowledge, of any significant development in Futures education in the UK despite the growth outlined above seems to me to raise doubts about the sustainability of Futures work. There is within the university sector considerable research in which Futures thinking plays an important part and a number of short training courses and conferences but few, if any, mainstream Futures courses. Why might this be a concern?

The growth of Futures work in the UK and Europe has taken place during a period of economic prosperity and as governments and companies look for areas to cut as they face more difficult times could Futures thinking be at risk? The danger may come in a number of forms. Most obvious is the accusation that all this foresight did not foresee and hence prevent the economic downturn. That there are those within the Futures community and beyond who did warn of potential problems to come is unlikely to help. Neither is the defence that Futures thinking is not about prediction but the exploration of possible, probable and preferable futures, to help society make decisions in the present, because the understanding of the limitations of thinking about the future that practitioners have, is not generally shared by the consumers of the work or the public at large. This is where the absence of education in and about Futures could be critical to its continuing development. While it is probably generally understood that the study of the past has value despite being an incomplete guide to present decision-making there is less understanding that the thinking about the future in this way may also be important. In consequence this increases the danger that Futures/Foresight raises unfulfilled, or rather, unfulfillable expectations, which when disappointed as they surely will be could lead to a backlash. In the UK, and to a degree in Europe as a whole, the identification of Foresight with Science and Technology, while the other Futures activities are associated more with the issues with which they are concerned, may also have limited appreciation of the range and value of Futures work.

The inherent uncertainty in dealing with the future conflicts with the apparently reasonable belief that the job of forecasters and futurists of all kinds is to provide certainty by predicting the future. If they cannot do that there is no point in their existence. It requires an understanding of our relationship as human beings with the

future and the need to act in the present in the face of uncertainty and paradox to appreciate how Futures Thinking can, but perhaps more importantly cannot, help. It is this lack of understanding that leads me to question whether, despite the developments in the UK and Europe, Foresight is quite as embedded as it may seem. I hope I am wrong, but, possibly because the use of the word Foresight promises more than can be delivered, the future of Futures in this part of the world remains uncertain.

Correspondence

Graham May
Futures Skills
28 Margerison Road, Ilkley, LS29 8QU
UK
Email: g.mayilkley@talktalk.net
Phone: 44 1943 609538

Notes

1. See www.foresight.gov.uk
2. See <http://www.sd-commission.org.uk/>
3. See <http://www.rcep.org.uk/>
4. See <http://www.theccc.org.uk/>
5. See <http://www.tomorrowproject.net/>
6. See www.shapingtomorrow.com
7. See <http://www.efmn.info/#>

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