

Thinking the unthinkable





With foresight the frog might not croak

The world will throw up surprises, but forming clear strategies can avert catastrophe say Cat Tully, Alun Rhydderch and Peter Glenday

In June last year *The World Today* carried an article – ‘The Lost Art of Leadership’ – on how government and corporate leaders were failing to cope with an increasingly unpredictable world. The authors, Nik Gowing and Chris Langdon, opened with the almost unthinkable ideas that Britain might vote to leave the European Union and Donald Trump could be sitting in the Oval Office.

Both those events came true, and Britain and the EU are now faced with a challenge that few policy-makers had taken seriously. So what has been learned in recent months about overcoming the barriers to effective foresight – groupthink, institutional conformity, risk aversion and short-termism – which Gowing and Langdon identified?

Across the globe, familiar and long-standing trends are compounding to shatter the illusion of stability. Demographic change, technologies such as gene-editing and artificial intelligence, or risks such as increasing antibiotic resistance are set to disrupt the norms of international life, domestic politics and economics. And the map of globalization is being redrawn with the East at the centre.

Yet, like a frog in slowly heating water, we find it difficult to respond. Although the trends – and their associated opportunities and threats – have been apparent for a while, we have ignored the early warning signs, or waited too long before starting to act.

Our instinctive response is an excessive focus on the present, or passivity. We become over-confident in our predictions, or we think there is no point preparing for an uncertain and complex future. We are both unwilling to question our assumptions, and disempowered from taking effective action.

A classic example of over-confidence is techno-optimism, the assumption that technology will magically make everything better. The tech giants Google, Facebook and Twitter might be forgiven for not foreseeing trolls and fake news, but that is not the case with the Apple Health app. There was widespread surprise when it was released in 2015 without any reference to menstruation. The well-known lack of diversity in the tech industry served to create an online world that failed to reflect women’s concerns. If there is no thought to alternative views of the future, the benevolent potential of technology may fail. There is, however, a

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different path: by harnessing strategic foresight, a well-established approach that helps us to engage with uncertainty, it is possible to think through alternative futures to make better decisions today.

Foresight is not the same as forecasting or prediction. Predicting the future risks communicating a false certainty that can lead to complacency. Foresight, by contrast, helps to distinguish signals from noise and to better prepare for uncertainty and disruption. It is a capacity that individuals, organizations and society as a whole need to develop.

Strategic foresight is not new. Herman Kahn's scenario analysis of nuclear conflict helped President JF Kennedy work out what action to take during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis.

In the early 1990s in South Africa, scenarios worked out at the Mont Fleur conference established the compromises required from all sides to avoid catastrophe in the transition from apartheid. The Mont Fleur scenarios brought together all major political factions and the results were shared with a mass audience, being published widely in the media and referred to in public speeches.

In 2012 the Organization of American States ran a scenario exercise on the drug problem in the Americas. The process challenged the existing prohibition of drugs, helping to unlock a new evidence-based approach that would work better to reduce addiction and crime.

These examples illustrated how engaging with the future in a systematic way can provide the dual functions of 'propulsion' and 'resilience' that Thomas Friedman, *The New York Times* columnist and author, identifies as essential in what he calls the 'age of accelerations'.

'You need to be able to take a blow because you don't know when the disruption is going to come, but there will be disruption,' Friedman has said. 'At the same time you want propulsion. You want to be able to move ahead. You don't want to be just curled up in a ball.'

How can foresight help during these times that – while maybe not exceptional – at least have created exceptional levels of angst? The answer is to take the time out to reflect on alternatives, to challenge assumptions and to build the space for conversations that do not shut down alternative viewpoints.

Here is a small example from sport: when Australian security forces were pre-

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paring for the 2015 cricket World Cup, they identified the risks of corruption and match-fixing as pressing as traditional security concerns.

Foresight is not just a dialogue for the elite or decision-makers. It should aspire to give voice to the excluded, whether marginal views in organizations, or those in refugee camps and rice fields. And those voices need to be given space to be heard. The success of the Paris climate change conference in 2015 rested on diplomacy that allowed 196 countries to feel they had been included.

As the world's population grows, citizens across the world are asking for more participation in deciding their future. They need education and skills that prepare them for a world in which many jobs – predictions vary from 5 to 50 per cent – may disappear. This is why countries have started using large-scale foresight exercises to set targets for meeting the UN's Sustainable Development Goals adopted in 2015 to protect the planet and ensure prosperity for all.

Effective foresight requires a systematic process to identify the forces and factors driving change – some open to influence, others not – before developing policies and plans. The British Ministry of Defence is working on its sixth edition of *Global Strategic Trends to 2050*, providing open-source insights into the future. Foresight should not be divorced from action, and should be a data-powered mechanism for identifying shared goals for citizens, regions and countries in a way that is more meaningful than the traditional 'Vision 20xx' document which, as often as not, is just pie in the sky. In today's world, foresight must be lean and agile.

Finally, we must acknowledge that

despite heightened interest in developing alternative futures, it can be a difficult and risky endeavour. In fact, just as we most need an approach based on counterfactuals and alternatives, political leaders are preferring to ignore inconvenient truths – such as climate change – and are unwilling to take the time to explore unpalatable alternatives, such as the consequences of Britain's vote to leave the European Union.

The success of strategic foresight is hard to demonstrate and investing in the long-term does not always have the most immediate return on investment; in politics or business, you may be long gone before the impact of a decision is felt. Moreover, critical media, public pressure, or demands of shareholders can limit a desire to manage for the future.

We were involved in the launch of the British government's horizon-scanning exercise in 2006, which looked at 250 trends that would shape the future. The key interest shown by the media was to mock the idea of 'rights for robots'. Ten years on, the concept of 'electronic personhood' for artificial intelligence is being actively explored.

Today pressure is growing on leaders to focus on short-term rewards, excluding unpalatable possibilities. The challenges identified by Gowing and Langdon remain: how can leaders be rewarded for doing the right thing for the long-term?

McKinsey & Company's Corporate Horizon Index, published in February, demonstrated that long-term strategies in the corporate sector, where they existed, correlated with long-term success. But for this to really work more broadly, companies need to build an alliance against corporate short-termism, starting with the investors.

There are many ideas being developed across governments to cope with an unpredictable world. One example is the recommendation, in a United States Institute for Peace report last year: 'Build strategic foresight into the regular decision-making process at the National Security Council.'

We cannot overcome uncertainty or disruption, but we can overcome false certainty and despair.

This article is the work of Cat Tully, Alum Rhydderch and Peter Glenday of the School of International Futures www.soif.org.uk