
Our Country: Our Choice. What is Futures Thinking?

What is Futures Thinking? Malcolm Menzies, 1997.

Futures thinking: Is a process that aims to establish a vision for a preferred future and then to identify the issues, trends and choices to be addressed in achieving that future.

Futures thinking: Is different from forecasting, which extends current trends into the future, with results that are of limited benefit in a world of constant change. Forecasting has very little effectiveness beyond a five-year time horizon, whereas futures thinking tends to look forward a whole generation. Rather than forecasting, futures thinking involves 'backcasting' - identifying where we want to be and then working backwards to see what we need to do to get there. The plural 'futures' is used because futures thinking is flexible. It recognises that there are many possible futures; indeed a key aspect of futures thinking is the identification of potential alternative future scenarios and investigation of their implications. Futures thinking is important because many developments, particularly those that affect the development of people, or the country's infrastructure or economic base, or the sustainable development of our environment, are extremely long-term processes. In these cases it is important to set off on the correct path now. To find out in 25 years that we have taken the wrong turning would be disastrous, and futures thinking aims to reduce the chance of this happening. At a national level, a vision of the future would provide us with a benchmark against which to appraise policy decisions and to help avoid the damaging 'chopping and changing' which can arise from inappropriate short-term thinking. But futures thinking is not only of value at a national level - it has application in business firms and other organisations and communities. Futures thinking helps people 'think outside the square' and prepare for the possibilities and opportunities of change. Organisations which ask 'what if' questions about the future are more likely to effectively meet and deal with sudden changes if they occur. Where people explore possible futures together, they develop a common language and understanding, and their efforts are more likely to be aligned in pursuit of common goals. To be effective, futures thinking needs to be participatory. A vision cannot be developed 'on high' and handed down. If people have not developed some ownership of a vision through participation in its creation, they will not support it. Futures thinking is also multidisciplinary. It looks for connections between different perspectives and for insight into the key patterns that emerge. Our Country: Our Choices is an experiment in futures thinking. It: Has brought together a collection of views and aims to promote a participatory process. Now it is over to you, the reader.