

From Future States to Images of Identity

I

As in most other Western countries, New Zealand government has a history since the Second World War of explicitly experimenting with ways of securing control over the future. In common with these other countries, the initial attempts emphasized centrally coordinated planning. It was assumed that the future is to a large extent predictable, through forecasting or extrapolation from the present. This meant, most importantly, a conviction that economic production targets could be set with the help of economic modeling and in consultation with relevant groups, and that these and other affected groups could be expected to manage their activities in accordance with the overall plan. In many countries, this idea did not work very well. In New Zealand's case, the production targets were too ambitious; there was a change of government; and the oil shocks of the 1970s were particularly severe for New Zealand given its distance from markets together with its dependence on commodity exports. A period of market liberalism followed, in which planning was a dirty word. And then in the 1990s – again as elsewhere – the government got interested in “foresight”. This was often understood as technology foresight, or the idea that economies were now, more than ever before, driven by constant technological innovation, and it was therefore important to know what technological advances were possible or believed to be on the horizon, in order to ensure the productive forces of a society remained or became competitive with others.

Delphi forecasting techniques were therefore popular at this time. But to varying degrees in different countries, the question of future technologies was also thought to entail discovering what kind of society was possible or likely in the future, or even what kind of society was considered desirable by those consulted on the matter. (Indeed, Paul Gandar, the chief designer of what was to become known as the Foresight Project in New Zealand, assured me in conversation that the process had been intended from the beginning to be something much broader than technology foresight.) Hence the interest of government in several countries, but particularly in New Zealand, in appropriating the technique of scenario building, which, as is well known, had originated in military contexts in the 1960s and become popular over the intervening twenty years in private corporations.

So now, in scenario building, we have quite a different conception of the future from that operating amongst governments in the 1960s. In simple terms, instead of looking at the future as an extension of the present, there is now, on the one hand, a higher degree of uncertainty about what is transpiring, but on the other hand, also more willingness to see the future as open and malleable. There is therefore, importantly, a certain tension at the heart of this contemporary conception, and this is translated into differing perceptions of what scenarios can be used for. What we might call developed or classical scenario building theory emphasizes the uncertainty. It is about building a “matrix” of possibilities around two or more key uncertainties or “drivers”, a process that gives rise to a spectrum of possible future states, neither one of which is likely to transpire as such. The idea is to

use the process as a learning tool for exploring the future prior to attempting to shape it in light of the scenario results. But there is also a popular idea of scenarios which is that you simply imagine possible future societies, which may be utopian or dystopian, or preferably, as far as policy makers are concerned, desirable yet realistic (i.e. normative), whereupon attention can be paid to “back casting”, or working out a policy path for reaching that destination. (See also Voros, 2006, pp. 49-50, for a similar distinction.)

One of the potential pitfalls of using scenarios, then, in addition to the possibility of not carrying out either process adequately, is not being clear about the end that particular scenario exercises are being primarily used for: managing uncertainty, or envisioning a desirable future. If we now look more closely at New Zealand’s experience of using scenarios at the government level, we can see the consequences of this lack of clarity.

There were two aspects to the use of scenarios during the Foresight Project that are worth looking at. One aspect concerns the scenarios actually produced by government officials. The other aspect involves the process by which individual sector groups were invited to construct scenarios of their own. My intention in what follows is to address these aspects in turn, and then, in light of the difficulties described, propose an alternative technique, national imaging, which might usefully precede scenario-building when consulting with citizens about the nation’s future.

Official Scenario Construction

At an early stage in the Foresight Project, the Ministry of Research, Science and Technology (MoRST) developed a set of “national scenarios” of the future and made it publicly available, partly to generate interest in the project and partly to serve as examples for the sector groupings attempting to use scenario construction as a central aspect of their own contribution to the project. The scenarios, as presented in *The Foresight Project Backgrounder* (n.d.) and in the pamphlet *Building Tomorrow's Success* (1997), were – very briefly – as follows:

1. *Possum in the glare*. This presents New Zealand unprepared for, and frozen by, the headlights of the “oncoming” future. The response, befitting a hardy animal such as the possum, is business pretty much as usual: “New Zealand muddles along by finding new markets for traditional agricultural products, and combating falling prices with new production technologies.” Agriculture is much more large-scale and corporate-based. Government has reduced economic assistance, and “there is a greater gap between those who succeed and those who fail.” The result is an entrenched underclass subject to ghettoizing and disease, and a deeply divided society.
2. *Shark roaming alone*. This scenario is built on the idea that New Zealanders have adapted quickly to new technologies (the Internet is specifically mentioned) and have successfully employed an entrepreneurial approach based on “small and agile” firms operating in “knowledge” industries, particularly biotechnology. Tax

revenue has fallen due to electronic commerce and “more flexible employment structures”, leading to reduction in welfare provision. These developments “have made us a highly individualised society of sharks.” So again there is a lack of “social cohesion”.

3. *Nga kahikatea reaching new heights.* Here is also a society based on technological literacy and knowledge, but the presence of high levels of participation and community care, plus economic investment in “green enterprise” – sustainability and eco-efficiency – means the social division characteristic of the other two societies is repaired (kahikatea is the indigenous Maori name for a tall native pine which grows in close-knit, graceful groves). “This unusual blend of community and wealth reflects Maori heritage and values.”

The problem here is not one of plausibility. Indeed, it could be argued that some combination of the first two scenarios describes the turnout to date pretty accurately. The major difference between imagination and reality ten years down the track is that a sympathetic global economy in the intervening years has allowed both possum and shark behaviour to be viable responses for many: relative economic prosperity and significant reductions in unemployment, offset only by an expanding prison population, have been the result.

A related point of some significance is that the three scenarios were like a mirror image of the social divisions prevailing *simultaneously* in the 1990s as posited by commentators

such as Will Hutton in the United Kingdom (Hutton, 1995): a three-fold stratification comprising an economically inactive bottom group (the stunned possums), an insecurely employed middle group (lean sharks snapping at anything going), and an upper group of only 40% that had employment or other financial security (the graceful and well-watered kahikatea). In other words, rather than exploring possible and typically unitary future states, as was the intention, the scenarios merely *reflected the designers' manifold present back at them*.

Looking specifically at the technical design aspects of the scenarios, there is a two-fold problem. First, only one scenario is presented as a really desirable future, if we assume that no one would actively prefer to live in a divided society. People are therefore going to gravitate to one scenario, to the detriment of the exploration and discussion that the provision of multiple scenarios is supposed to foster. Secondly, the so-called “key drivers” of change – i.e. burgeoning new technology, globalization, environmental concern, and social and demographic trends, such as an aging society – are not *systematically* incorporated into the different scenarios. Scenario building, in line with an understanding of contemporary theories of complexity, gains more value from exploring how the same base combination of key elements, or matrix, plays out differently according to variations in the individual intensity or combination of the elements (see, for example, Fahey and Randall, 1998, for a detailed discussion).

The Department of Internal Affairs (DIA) subsequently produced an additional set of scenarios. According to the foreword of a booklet containing them (n.d.), they emerged

out of a suggestion that the MoRST scenarios “did not address sufficiently the issue of ‘New Zealandness’.” Superficially, the DIA’s scenarios were a distinct improvement on those developed by MoRST. All three had attractive elements and were presented positively, which meant that they were capable of enabling genuine dialogue to take place around them, independently of whether any “choice” would eventually be made. All three scenarios made good use of invented historical detail showing how the situation depicted came about, allowing a reader to enter into and explore the vision being offered (this was to some extent also true of the MoRST set). Again very briefly (to give a sense of their flavour is all I intend or can realistically provide), the DIA’s scenarios, which imagine a New Zealander returning after twenty years overseas, were as follows:

1. *Global New Zealand*: All economic activity has been multi-nationalized, there is a free flow of capital and trade, and Auckland, where the scenario is set, could be any predominantly English-speaking city. Similarly, cultural performances are international rather than national; education largely electronically imported; and public functions have been further privatized. Maori as a group have significantly improved their economic standing, but at the expense of linguistic and cultural identity. The “old egalitarian attitudes are a thing of the past”.
2. *Diverse New Zealand*: Rather than a homogenous internationalism, here the internationalism is flagrantly multicultural, or lifestyle segmented, but there is little place for the traditional New Zealand European (Pakeha) perspective (a weak and improbable feature, though it taps into the widespread myth in New

Zealand that Pakeha people lack a distinct culture of their own). In line with these trends, governance has been significantly devolved. “Central government now sees its role as simply providing national standards.” And Maori under this dispensation are both economically successful and culturally vibrant.

3. *Team Kiwi New Zealand*: Adverse economic and environmental conditions have brought about a retrenchment to the Pakeha and Polynesian population base. (Presumably, the opportunistic Asians have fled to richer pastures!) An unabashedly bicultural nationalism is fostered through public ownership of media, local programme quotas, and strong local content in education. Maori language is widely taught and spoken by both Maori and Pakeha, and there is a strong environmental conservation ethos. While international trade is still important, there is, under this scenario, enthusiastic acceptance of small enterprises and highly focused niche products, mainly agricultural.

However, even with this set of scenarios, there is a problem with the drivers, which limits the value of the exercise. The imagined choices respond to radically different circumstances, in which there are few if any common elements: for example, Team New Zealand is specifically said to arise out of adverse conditions, conditions which are not replicated or systematically varied in the other scenarios, making that choice appear to be an inevitable one in those circumstances. Therefore, the scenarios are not strictly comparable; as they would be if rooted in variations on the same matrix (if, for example, adverse conditions were combined in at least one other instance with *continued*

globalizing tendencies). The DIA scenarios can basically be boiled down into just one major variation – more globalization (scenarios 1 and 2) or less globalization (scenario 3) – and one minor variation within the more globalization hypothesis (cultural homogeneity, as in scenario 1, or cultural diversity, as in scenario 2). Effective scenarios are usually built around at least two key variations or areas of uncertainty, which would give rise to a minimum of four contrasting descriptions.

It would seem that the scenario-building process, in both sets we have looked at, has been led by designers' conceptions of what kinds of future societies are possible, rather than by allowing a fuller exploration of the possible relationships among the drivers to give rise to some potentially rather unexpected societal outcomes.

More broadly, it seems that the key driver component presents a significant problem for scenario design. By definition, drivers assume a strong determinism, all the stronger in appearance if they are realistically laid out in all their complexity and interrelatedness. It can soon appear that, as John Christie put it (1993, p. 189), "the future is already written", and while this is a not unrealistic view and it is important not to underestimate determinism, the conviction underpinning this article (as we will see more clearly in the second part) is that change can be influenced where there is sufficient collective action at a decisive moment. Work should *proportionally* favour developing the means for collective action over getting the drivers right. Moreover, it is all too easy to miss or underestimate a particular driver, and therefore scenarios can become irrelevant before they've had a chance to focus a debate over the options for collective action.

This is perhaps why – apart from the usual time constraints – the scenarios that were designed by MoRST and DIA lacked the detail and logical consistency to firmly anchor them in their drivers, and why, in practice, sectors were encouraged to imagine a desirable future without much mention being made of the need to ultimately consider the factors constraining the plausibility of those desires. This brings us to the second aspect of scenario building in the Foresight Project.

Sector Group Scenarios

While the template MoRST provided to guide sectors in designing their strategy asks participants to imagine from the vantage point of 2010 the path they had taken to reach their vision, the only question that focuses specifically on the constraints or influences that the sector was facing at the outset is the rather narrow one, “Were there any barriers to progress that had to be removed?” Admittedly, in the supporting notes on “preparatory work”, there is reference to the task of identifying drivers, but it appeared from reports presented at occasional workshops that most sector discussions tended to focus quite exclusively on the template and to avoid the hard and time-consuming work involved in both thinking about drivers and constructing alternative scenarios.

This was certainly true of the two sectors I was directly involved in, the social sciences sector and its offshoot, the cultural sector. The social sciences group did some of the preparatory work proposed by MoRST, but precisely *not* the drivers and scenarios work, which meant, for example, that there was no *self-reflection* – i.e. reflection on the

historical role of the social sciences, or on the nature and value of current disciplinary boundaries and investments. And although the Cultural Sector Foresight Group produced one scenario, as the author of it I can vouch for the fact that this was not designed so much to be reflective of the sector's own state and future, as to have the pedagogic effect of showing MoRST what a decent scenario should look like! This absence of background work was all the more disturbing because these were the very sectors where one could most expect attention to this kind of detail as well as the ability to carry it out. For obvious reasons, a lack of attention to drivers is no more satisfactory than an inhibiting emphasis on them.

The Limitations of Scenarios

The most important thing in scenario building of any stripe is the imaginative richness of vision that is produced, with the proviso that this vision is reasonably realistic, and that is best achieved by subjecting scenario formulation to *widespread discussion*, in which there is a fair chance that the drivers will come to light in something approaching their actual complexity. Building in the necessity for broad participation has the added advantage of reducing the likelihood of the scenarios being interpreted as predictions. It may be, however, that any real change, or choice of an alternative future, must actually to some extent *defy* the drivers, perhaps even counteract them. This is possibly why revolutions often seem to come out of the blue. Defiance of the drivers, of course, cannot be achieved without a good understanding of them. But the key requirement is collective action, whose trigger may be quite unpredictable. And good (i.e. realistic) scenario design

may actually inhibit this by seeming to discount the possibility of making a difference through decisive individual or group action.

Scenarios at the national government level may be most effective when used to develop a response to a specific bifurcation point, the approach of which can be known in advance and is inevitable, and which therefore demands unequivocally that some sort of action be taken. Wallerstein (1991) warns of the rarity, in actual practice, of escape from determination through bifurcation points, but a distinction can be made in my view, according to which we can identify those bifurcation points that are *amenable* to collective action. A very good example would be the bifurcation point emerging for New Zealand around Britain's entry to the European Economic Community in the late 1960s. This event was clearly signaled, and its implications were quite straightforward and analyzable. In a situation like this, a range of possible responses can be identified and worked through using detailed imaginary narratives, and a democratically agreed and fully publicized strategy selected. By contrast, the oil crisis of the early-mid seventies would not have been so receptive to scenarios – at least in the short term – as it happened very suddenly and its duration and extent could not have been easily foreseen at the outset.

The other situation where scenarios may work well is where they become the focus of *ongoing* evaluation and revision, along the lines of the regular envisioning conducted by the Ministry of International Trade and Industry in Japan (SmithKline Beecham, 1994).

In other words, scenarios are used to identify, inform, and monitor a choice of direction that would be revisable in light of changing circumstances.

II

Now in the second half of this article, I would like to present an alternative way of proceeding; one which does not eschew scenario-building entirely, but which is based on the view that the technique is too ambitious, too socially unitary, too implicitly long-term to be really useful as a *primary* focus for government planners. This view assumes that any account of a more realistic approach to managing the future must have two dimensions. One concerns the overall orientation to the future, which encapsulates the attitude to take towards time in general. How is time to be conceived and lived? The second, and subordinate, aspect concerns the actual mechanisms by which the future can be managed.

Perhaps an even prior step, though, is to give up thinking of the future as something to be *managed*, since this kind of thinking may be part of the problem. Clearly, it is a matter of anticipating, and also being prepared as far as possible for what cannot be anticipated, and “managing” is an appropriate term in these respects. But it is vital that this be combined with something more *creative*, along the lines of the Foresight Project’s envisioning but more anchored than that mechanism was in the *realizable* as well as the

desirable, to use terms employed by the French *prospective* tradition (Godet and Roubelat, 1996).

Even “shaping” – a popular contemporary choice, which has the appealing advantage of acknowledging both that the work must be ongoing and that it must build on materials already given – assumes, in my view, an unrealistic possibility of unity and control on the part of human agents. Better, I think, to accept at the outset a more modest notion of finding individual and collective ways of *influencing* a future that is always already in the process of formation; a future in which we can never be other than immersed, as opposed to standing outside. By “influencing” the future, I mean *joining with intent* the confluence of the myriad trickles and torrents that makes up the present. This sense is congruent with an understanding of complexity or “emergence” – both as scientific theory and as ontological practice – that stresses a possibility of guidance, of recognizing and carefully attempting to further what are shaping as desirable outcomes. In terms that resonate with my earlier criticism of scenarios, Ralph Stacey (1996, p. 187) provides an illuminating elaboration of this argument:

Members of an organization, no matter how intelligent or powerful, will be unable to predict the specific long-term outcomes of their actions. They may specify any long-term state they wish to, they may have any dream, fantasy or vision they like, but they will never be able to determine the sequence of actions required to actualize it.

An Ethic of the Ephemeral

To take the first dimension referred to above: what attitude to take towards time? We are looking for an attitude that can cope with, even delight in, the transitory and unpredictable nature of events, without succumbing on the one hand to a debilitating nostalgia about what has passed, or on the other hand to an unrealistic attempt to recapture a romanticized past of transcendental or natural harmony. It would be an attitude that can acknowledge and accommodate both *the absence of eternity*, and *a lack of necessity* in the sense of there being no firm historical laws determining human action.

French philosopher Sylviane Agacinski, in her book *Time Passing*, finds such an attitude in an “ethic of the ephemeral”. This is not, as it might immediately be supposed, living for the moment, though nor does she advocate depriving oneself of the pleasures of the present by mourning in advance what will inevitably pass. It is not a matter of abdicating responsibility for the future. An ethic of the ephemeral, on the contrary, recognizes the limits of human vision, indeed the fact that these limits are constantly shifting, and seeks to work responsibly within them according to their unique contingencies.

With the assumption of his finitude and his contingency, resigning himself to the “short view,” modern man puts truth back into the present, even if this present, far from being presented in the light, emerges from the shadow that envelops the past and the future. Modern consciousness is no longer that of the Enlightenment but, rather, the recognition of having to think and decide within the limits of a certain present, with its share of obscurity. (2003, p. 20)

Agacinski sources this ethic in – but does not restrict it to – an artistic movement, modernism, that perhaps had its fullest expression in the period of history given that name but which is not, in fact – in Agacinski’s application of the term – limited to that particular duration:

In breaking with the classical, timeless ideal, the modernity of art . . . thus implies a valorization of the passing, from fashion to the larger sense of the word. Baudelaire defines the modern artist as one who knows how to see and to perpetuate the beauty of his own time. Therefore, if they bear the particular mark of their epoch, the works of the past can also be called modern. Modernity never stops referring to the present of the one who attempts to define it, on the condition that he knows how to take into account this present, to seize the truth and necessity of the moment. This taking into account implies no progressive vision of the future but only a sense of the uniqueness of a situation, even of an opportune moment, what the Greeks called *kairòs*. (pp. 18-19)

Navigating by Sight

The implications for the conduct of social and political affairs that emerge from our embrace of an ethic of the ephemeral lie in what Agacinski calls “navigation by sight”.

We have no means of escaping temporality or history. But tested by an ephemeral world subject to dazzling metamorphoses we recognize that time is an assistant to

both good and evil. We can neither predict the future nor have faith in it, since in any case, things do not happen as we want. Thus it is necessary to “navigate by sight,” to agree to experiment with the short term and in limited areas. The certitude that no one can calculate tomorrow’s global effects of decisions made today – even if attempts at such calculations are vital – is one of the reasons we urge a slowdown of history. (p. 10)

To agree to experiment with the short term and in limited areas. This is consistent with the corollary that Stacey draws from his conclusion reported above concerning the long-term outcomes of complex systems: “because complex adaptive systems are the product of their precise history and because it takes time for small changes to escalate in such systems, their *short-term* behaviour is predictable” (p. 87; italics added). While this tentative and gradual approach may seem at odds with the scale of the political and environmental problems confronting us in our contemporary “risk society” (Beck et al., 2003), it has the virtue of recognizing that drastic shifts on a mass scale are an unrealistic prospect at present. If manageable trials at various levels (local, national, international) can be carried out and, if successful, used as models for broader acceptance, a measure of the possibility for reversing some of the major threats, or gaining a better working knowledge of the risks, will eventually emerge and can be further built on as recuperation quickens.

Agacinski does not give any indication as to *how* this “testing” – or what I think could more accurately and suggestively be called *provoking* – of the future, or better, *a* future,

might be conducted. I would like to suggest one possible mechanism for engaging in navigation by sight, for making use of the short distance in time which is our horizon of effective action – “a small straight line in which who knows what event will mark a bend we can no longer see beyond” (p. 66). If detailed planning is impossible, and hands-off neo-liberalism equally so, we can only come back to a broad and democratic envisioning, *one example* of which would be the collective identification or what I will call shared *images* of identity or purpose. I believe we can find such a mechanism by returning to and adapting the scenario-building strategy adopted by the Foresight Project.

As mentioned earlier, a problem with positing a number of scenarios or possible futures, all quite different, is that people will inevitably focus on choosing one of them (without, of course, agreeing on which one), even if the planners hedge their offerings about with disclaimers that any eventual “reality” will be a combination of elements drawn from several scenarios. By contrast, scenarios consultant Ute von Reibnitz (1997; see also Schwab et al., 2003) advocates the formation of just two, sharply contrasting scenarios, which, in her words, “cover the so-called ‘corners’ of the scenario funnel.” Von Reibnitz continues:

Why do we need to take into account very contrasting future situations? Because nobody knows what the exact outcome of the future will be. If you are prepared for very different future situations you will be able to deal with any scenario between the two extreme archetypes. . . . In order to deal efficiently with different

challenges, risks and opportunities in the future, a master strategy which fits to both scenario extremes has to be developed. (199, p. 3)

This approach, then, departs as well from the idea of providing only balanced scenarios – that is, where each contains a mix of attractive and unattractive elements. Rather, this technique stems from an attempt to cover the field of possibilities, likely in practice to divide into a best-case scenario and a worst-case scenario.

Because I am, like Stacey, skeptical of the ability of scenarios to adequately match the complexity of actual emerging events, my variation on this idea is to take a step back and to think of the two scenarios as *orientations toward the future* rather than as either desired destinations or expected outcomes; that is, as an encapsulation of how a given society or other grouping should or could address its collective affairs and its relationship with the planet on which it relies. The scenarios can then be understood as *images* of collective conduct or identity, one being the preferred image and the other being a fall back position in case the first proves unsustainable. The vital point is that the preferred orientation *not* be conducted in such a way, or to such an extent, *that resort to the fall back position becomes impossible*. In other words, borrowing Agacinski's navigational metaphor, the second scenario acts as an anchor in case the ship of preference gets into difficulty.

To the extent that the two images might be representative of major and minor *conflicting* preferences or identifications, as is probable, this allows us to imagine how we could use

the tension between the two contrasting images as a means of feeding an ongoing democratic debate about pathways (here is where scenarios could play a role), out of which – in interaction with events – the actual future will emerge. In this way, seemingly inevitable social conflict could be kept within bounds that safeguard the overall collective. In the terms offered by Chantal Mouffe (2005) in *On the Political*, it is about providing a way to expose the “conflictual consensus” at the heart of society without this leading to exclusion or outright antagonism.

Two Images for New Zealand

Staying with the nautical imagery, let me now illustrate by posing two feasible but sharply contrasting watercraft images for New Zealand. (Let me add straight away, however, that I am not necessarily assuming the continued historical existence of “New Zealand” or even the desirability of its continued existence, although the case for its continuation is lent credence by its particular geographical integrity and its reputation as a significant societal project or experiment, a social laboratory. My intention is merely to illustrate what would be applicable to any regional or cultural entity that was able to exert a degree of social autonomy.)

1. One could be called something like “Luxury Liner NZ”, except that this rather grandiose label does not really fit the facts. It has been repeatedly established (e.g. Laugesen, 2004, p. C3) that a significant proportion of New Zealanders are not seeking opulent levels of wealth (even if certain prominent business people repeatedly accuse them of merely “cruising”!). Furthermore, the clear evidence in

front of us is that the pursuit of luxury for its own sake is environmentally unsustainable. So let's plump for a similar but rather more modest and realistic label: "Jet Boat NZ". This craft is sleek, streamlined, technologically advanced, and fitted out with the most effective and efficient materials currently available. This seems like an extremely apt representation of the present government's aspirations for its citizens. It is built for speed, to compete with and overtake the OECD craft ahead of it. It is state-of-the-art, making use of small-scale but highly innovative technology (in which, as a happy coincidence, New Zealand, through the work in particular of Sir William Hamilton, has been a pioneer). It encapsulates concentrated work and fast-paced leisure (the "work hard, play hard" ideal beloved of contemporary advertisers). It lends itself to constant improvement in design and manufacture, therefore to "growth" and "progress". However, on the debit side, it is highly reliant on and exploitative of the world's diminishing stock of fossil fuels. It is basically single-paced, not built for idling, enjoying the scenery, relaxation, quiet meditation. It is noisy, brash, imposes itself on its neighbours. It needs a certain level of water to function in, and is not much good in a rough sea. Ultimately, it's not at all adaptable to varying conditions, and in fact can break up under stress. So, it's feasible, but nonetheless a rather risky basket in which to put all your eggs.

2. The other image I propose be called "Life Raft NZ". This craft is broad-bottomed but maneuverable. Its essence is maximum preservation of its occupants. In the fullest sense, its orientation is global. Life Raft NZ, because of its geographical

nature and position, is potentially a life-support system for the entire planet: soils, plants, animals, as well as people. A life raft is eminently functional but it, too, incorporates the possibility of recreation in its association with white-water rafting, a pursuit which does not interfere with its environment but works in accord with it, speeding up or slowing down, turning or tilting, as steerage and water *together* dictate. Here, too, there is plenty of room for cutting edge technological enhancement. On the debit side, a life raft is not going to catch up with anyone (apart from those floundering in the water), if that is what is desired, nor is it particularly comfortable. Everybody has to work hard and in unison to propel a raft over the flat or rocky stretches.

Clearly, there are other fitting possibilities, even within the nautical theme. A catamaran might be conceived in order to give prominence to a bi-cultural conception. Phil Lough, the chairman of New Zealand Trade and Enterprise (Tradenz), has already made a contribution to this conversation in a recent press release by depicting New Zealand as a sailboat, perhaps a more fitting image for a country strongly subject to prevailing forces: “We are too small and too remote to take our hand off the tiller and trust the trade winds to take us where we want to go” (Tradenz, 2004). And note also that this type of planning is not intended to be exclusive of other forms of planning – including scenario-building – being linked to it or applying in other areas of government. Rather, this imagistic envisioning is proposed as a *manageable* way of beginning a conversation about the future in which all can participate. An image, or set of images, can easily be built up collaboratively; explored; evaluated; revised. No special expertise is required. Indeed, it

need not – and perhaps ideally would not – be organized by government. It also seems an appropriate – timely – technique in the present circumstances, when the need is to grasp the big picture in a time of unprecedented threat and urgency that affects everybody, namely the crisis of the natural environment.

But conceivably, the process could go beyond discussion and be explicitly acted on: that is, the images could provide touchstones for actual ongoing policy decisions by the appropriate level of government. To conclude, it is worth thinking about how this might operate.

As I said, it would be a matter of pursuing one option while preserving the possibility of the other. I have assumed nothing yet about which image might be taken up as the lead and which as the anchor. That would be a democratic decision of the citizenry. Either way around is conceivable. Take as an example how the official inquiry into research on genetic modification, undertaken in New Zealand around the turn of the century, *could have* proceeded using my proposal. Under the aegis of Jet Boat NZ, work on genetic modification would continue but for the time being would be restricted to the laboratory; or, if field trials were held, they might be restricted to an outlying island designated for that purpose. This would not prevent a highly sophisticated technical facility from being built up, with expensive products and techniques released for export to countries which had embraced GM. However, at the first clear overseas evidence of GM being harmful to the environment, Life Raft NZ would be invoked and the whole enterprise shut down. In the reverse situation, where Life Raft NZ was the lead scenario, every measure would be

taken to maintain New Zealand as completely GM-free: no laboratories, extensive screening of imports, exclusion even of processed food imports containing GM. (In a more enlightened system of international governance, indeed, New Zealand could offer itself as a GM-free storehouse, where any economic disadvantages accruing to New Zealanders as a result of this role would be compensated for by international agencies.) However, if it became proved beyond doubt that GM was completely harmless, or its effects were completely manageable, a Jet Boat NZ approach to research and application *in this area* could then be adopted. This is also by way of offering reassurance that the concept of Life Raft NZ does not entail breaking up all modern technology and reverting to subsistence farming.

To take a different sort of example: petrol-driven cars, which are obviously highly damaging to the environment. Jet Boat NZ – in the spirit of responsible experimentation with the future – might put a provisional line in the sand at current levels. Existing roads might be improved, but no new roads would be built until it was clear that (a) new technologies were leading to the reduction of carbon build-up in the atmosphere, or (b) environmentally neutral fuel alternatives were widely and cheaply available. Under Life Raft NZ, on the other hand, measures would be introduced immediately to significantly reduce the number of automobiles on New Zealand roads. Similarly, electricity servicing would, under the Jet Boat NZ rubric, be driven by reduction of consumption through efficiency measures rather than by new generation, as desired by government, business and the OECD. And in the labour market, we would be getting (over)employed people *away from* work as well as getting unemployed *into* work.

These are just a few issues, but others would be dealt with in the same way, on a case-by-case basis; or, in certain circumstances – for example, in conditions of general ecological breakdown as a result of drastic climate change – mechanisms would be in place to manage a general transition to Life Raft NZ.

Conclusion

As I intimated earlier, these images are not so much visions of the future as (also) alternative models of social identity, possible models of collective will and endeavour that emerge from and belong in the present, in our current circumstances such as we presently understand them, but that do not necessarily endure once those circumstances change. In using so often the word “collective” I do not assume that *complete* consensus or unity can be achieved at any particular time, but rather that it is a dynamic phenomenon, a juggling act. As socially responsible individuals all we can do is join the building of alliances, which may beget other alliances, as will be appropriate for effective action at different levels of social conduct. At each level, imaging might be used to foster a capacity for reflection.

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