

# Looking forward to the ‘long now’: linking a ‘futures’ mindset with sustainability

**Long-termism rejects the hedonism of Keynes, who famously proclaimed, ‘In the long run we are all dead’. When Keynes voiced his familiar epigram, the formidable Joan Robinson replied, ‘No Maynard, in the long run each of us is dead.’**

A recent Radio 4 Analysis programme<sup>2</sup> on government and long-termism focused on the emergence of ‘futures’ as a mechanism for coping with complexity and uncertainty in the ‘modern’ world. The challenge of dealing with the consequences of the present, as well as addressing not just one future but many – the preferable, probable and possible – lies at the heart of re-conceptualising sustainability within the ‘long now’ (a phrase coined by British musician and artist Brian Eno)<sup>3</sup>:

‘Now’ is the period in which people feel they live and act and have responsibility. For most of us ‘now’ is about a week, sometimes a year. For some traditional tribes in the American northeast and Australia ‘now’ is seven generations back and forward (350 years). Just as the [first] Earth photographs gave us a sense of ‘the big here’, we need things which give people a sense of ‘the long now’.

The Government appears receptive to foresight in the UK and to using the party’s majority to cross the time horizon of the next election and open the door to futures methods to tackle the ‘wicked’ issues that need public attention and investment. The white paper *Enterprise, skills and innovation*<sup>4</sup> set out the government’s role in:

identifying and anticipating the forces that are transforming the world in which we live in and helping people to respond to them. It must involve and prepare people and communities, at home and at work, so that they can be partners in change and not its innocent victims ... trying to shape ... global, social and economic [and environmental] changes.

Indeed, the Government’s own Foresight programme describes its rationale as ‘to illuminate the choices of the present in the light of possible futures’.

The emergence of long-termism and foresight is also being played out at the local level through the modernisation programme for local government. Futures research can assist with ‘doing the right things’ (and avoiding others) while also managing to ensure that we are ‘doing things right’ (performance management and delivery). Both need to be tackled in the debates about governance, how we manage our collective affairs, and how we prioritise and decide on what must be done and what must be avoided.

The development of the modernisation agenda for Britain also opens up opportunities for greater long-termism and futures work in pursuit of sustainable development, even if at the moment this seems to be in major tension with the ‘deliver, deliver, deliver’ agenda of the short-term. This paradox lies at the heart of the reform of local government and the development of local governance.

Recent press speculation has likened the power and influence of America in 2002 to that of the Roman Empire. But who will be leading the globe in 2000 years time? And will this be a completely outdated question conceptually anyway? Jamie Saunders explores the importance for sustainable development of having an eye to the future, and introduces the concept of the ‘long now’.

1 Cited by Richard Rose (1996) ‘States of inertia: are governments slaves to history?’, *Missionary Government*, Demos

2 *Once upon a time in Whitehall* was broadcast on Radio 4, 4.07.02 – to read a transcript go to [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/audiovideo/programmes/analysis/newsid\\_2056000/2056410.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/audiovideo/programmes/analysis/newsid_2056000/2056410.stm)

3 Stewart Brand (1996) *Reframing the problems* ([www.longnow.org](http://www.longnow.org))

4 *Enterprise, skills and innovation* (2001) published by DTI/DfEE

## Futures resources

Barbara Adam (1998) *Timescapes of modernity*

Stewart Brand (2000) *The clock of the long now*

K Erik Drexler (2001)  
www.foresight.org/Sept11/index.html

Sue Goss (2000) *Making local governance work*

Thomas Homer-Dixon (2001) *The ingenuity gap*

David Howell (2000) *The edge of now*

Graham May (1997) *The future is ours*

LGA (2000) *Futures toolkit for local government*

Cabinet Office strategic futures work  
(www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/innovation/2001/futures/main.shtml)

UK Government Foresight Programme  
(www.foresight.gov.uk)

Jamie Saunders (2002) 'A quiet revolution: opportunities for local futures in the UK', *Foresight: the journal of future studies, strategic thinking and policy*, 4(2), 10-20

(www.emeraldinsight.com/fs.htm)  
[Free access is possible either through a 30 day trial or if you are a member of the UK Futurist Network which is free to join via www.futuristsnetwork.org.uk/home.shtml]

5 see Jamie Saunders's article in the journal *Foresight*, 4(2), where this is developed further

6 A quote from Geoff Mulgan in an interview for Analysis (see note 2 above)

7 Kees van der Heijden (1996) *Scenarios*, John Wiley and Sons Ltd.

8 Janie Percy-Smith and Robert Leach (2001) *Local governance in Britain*, Palgrave

9 *Strong local leadership – quality public services* (2001). This is the local government white paper and can be downloaded at www.local-regions.odpm.gov.uk/sll/index.htm

10 UNESCO (1997) Declaration on the responsibility of present generations towards future generations (<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0011/001108/110827eb.pdf>)

In local places, with initiatives such as the wellbeing power, major opportunities for foresight, futures research and anticipatory management are being established along with developing processes that focus civic attention on longterm challenges and implications for personal, corporate and political action. This includes developing work on strategic direction and mapping local futures as a context for community leadership. If this analysis is correct, longterm thinking is becoming embedded within institutions of government at the day-to-day level.<sup>5</sup>

### Taking on a 'futures' perspective

The creation of local strategic partnerships (LSPs) – along with the UK Sustainable Development Commission (SDC) – can be seen as the emergence of 'intermediary bodies'<sup>6</sup>, as part of a more participatory element within democracy to enable 'strategic conversations'<sup>7</sup>. Their capacity to undertake debates about longterm issues could facilitate a collaborative and shared journey to help cope with uncertainty and complexity. At the local level, the role of LSPs in governance appears central in a world where:

contemporary local governance in Britain comprises a complex network of organisations working in partnership to formulate policies to address local needs and issues. Within this, local government continues to play an important part in policy and practice and in the structures and processes of local democracy<sup>8</sup>.

If community planning is to robustly address sustainability, it will have to shift from looking only at the preferable future – a 10 to 15 year vision – and encompass a longer term time horizon including the development of strategic contingency planning to cope with what the future might be. It may also need to acknowledge that there will be surprises and that the passing of time may knock any promises and certainties off course.

If LSPs and local councils are to ensure that local governance and community planning really do contribute to the achievement of sustainable development in the UK then it will be important that:

successful councils ensure that the voices of all get heard – not just the most vociferous, powerful or well-established... it means safeguarding the interests of future members of the community. Many decisions made now will have long term implications. These need to be identified, understood and designed into local policies<sup>9</sup>.

This safeguarding echoes the little known UNESCO Declaration on the Responsibility of Present Generations towards Future Generations<sup>10</sup>, which can be seen as complementing Agenda 21. Embedding this responsibility for future generations at the local level reforms the purpose of local government and more importantly shapes the development of local governance as the way in which we manage our affairs. The continuous bargaining and negotiation needed to 'muddle through' requires a re-conceptualised sustainability as its overarching intellectual framework. This mindset becomes critical to avoid even more unsustainable activity, wasted energy and conflict. Even the best sustainability solutions in the present may yet be seen in hindsight at some date in the future as inherited problems. It is therefore unclear what our own legacy will be.

We are dealing not only with a contested present but also a contested future:

Resources are finite, and communities' views and priorities can diverge and conflict. Consensus cannot always be reached, and so choices and compromises have to be made. That can mean creating winners and losers, trading short-term losses for longterm gains, or

foregoing one set of opportunities in order to exploit another. It also means making strategic choices for future generations not just dealing with immediate interests and issues<sup>11</sup>.

Thus a **modernised** local authority may be more about steering and enabling than directly doing, in which:

‘Steering’ or ‘enabling’ involves a different and more difficult – not lesser – role for government. ‘Steering’ is about strategic direction. It does not necessarily mean that the scope of government is thereby reduced. It may mean looking at different ways of giving effect to strategic direction, or, bluntly, getting someone else to do the work ... This is a process which requires bargaining and negotiation rather than command and compliance<sup>12</sup>.

This piece is not saying that the reality has caught up with these ‘invisible’ structural and constitutional changes. Resistance to change, cultures of short-termism and overload from initiatives related to ‘delivery’ appear to mitigate against this being a rapid revolution. However futures research can be part of the evidence base for progressing sustainability and for developing a shift in the terms and quality of debates, and to lay open the reality of living in a complex, uncertain and unpredictable world.

### The future of ‘futures’

LSPs and other reform measures can thus be seen as part of the evolution and adaption of our democracy and political institutions to cope with the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and to manage the legacy we leave to the 22<sup>nd</sup> and beyond. Prugh et al argue that:

Sustainability – which is ... a dilemma of collective action – is first and foremost a political challenge ... What sort of politics will most enable humanity to choose its future?<sup>13</sup>

Not what sort of party politics or manifesto commitments but rather what sort of political processes and institutions. It may be that those active in sustainability are operating as community leaders within this political evolution and are offering ingenuity in their ways of seeing, thinking and acting.

But although leadership may be critical in these turbulent times, we need a richer way to deal with the future – futures – in the present. Governance of futures should not be an exclusive process of elites, ‘a contained operation – it should be a fairly democratic process because we’ve all got an interest in the future’<sup>14</sup>. For as social, technological, environmental, economic and political change continues we must learn from the past for continuity’s sake, but be disrespectful enough to adapt and consciously design the future before us as best we can. If sustainability work does nothing more than challenge assumptions and presumptions it may be that it is doing enough, for ‘people use their ideas about the future to direct their actions in the present’<sup>15</sup>.

Sustainability practitioners and advocates may yet evolve into ‘futures scouts’, the cartographers and pioneers of the last great unknown – the future. We need to imagine not only the future we would like but also the future as it might be. As futurists, it may be that a key role is:

to inspire decision-makers with alternative futures and choices, demonstrating their technical feasibility, and warning of the consequences of inaction. But behind every corporate decision there is a battle for hearts and minds – and they have rules of their own<sup>16</sup>.

11 see note 9

12 Percy-Smith and Leach op cit

13 Thomas Prugh et al (2000) *The local politics of global sustainability*, Island Press

14 A quote from Graham May in an interview for Analysis (see note 2 above)

15 James Dator, (1998) *Introduction to political futures* ([www.soc.hawaii.edu/future/syllabi/polsci171.html](http://www.soc.hawaii.edu/future/syllabi/polsci171.html))

16 Jerome C. Glenn, Theodore J Gordon, James Dator (2001) ‘Closing the deal: how to make organisations act on futures research’, *Foresight*, 3(3), 177–189

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