



Discovering the Future

To a large extent, the future will be what people believe it will be. Enlightening us about the prospects and perils of the future is the role of the futurist — a new kind of scholar who may have a great deal to say about the preservation of mankind . . .

□ The future is one of the many things that defies control by human beings. It will proceed with an implacable disregard for whether it meets our wishes or not. Yet it is not entirely unmanageable; it will, after all, be nothing more than a set of conditions. We can always try to influence those conditions in advance.

Indeed we do this regularly without being conscious of it. For example, to carry an umbrella when it looks like rain is an attempt to change one's future from wet to dry. In the longer term, to save money is to remove a degree of uncertainty from one's future. In such cases, we foresee different possible futures for ourselves, and choose the one we consider best.

As with individuals, so with societies. The leaders of a society may attempt to mould the conditions of which the future will consist. They can never be sure of doing so, but their chances of success are strengthened if they are able to anticipate future circumstances. Identifying the most probable future circumstances is the work of the futurist, a new kind of scholar who has come to the fore in recent years.

Futurists are essentially well-informed speculators who postulate what will happen on the strength of what is happening at present. Their stock-in-trade is alternative futures — the possible futures available to a society if various courses of action are followed.

A neat description of the part which alternative futures studies may play in a democratic society was offered recently by Dr. A. W. R. Carrothers, former President of Canada's Institute for Re-

search on Public Policy. "The Institute's role is to mark out issues and assess options," he said, "as distinct from prescribing what the choices should be. It is the Institute's function to say through its studies: 'These are the things we should all think about, and these are the kinds of decisions which will confront us.' It is the role of the political processes to say: 'These are the actions we must take.'"

Most practising futurists take the same approach, although they may address their findings over the heads of elected and appointed policy-makers to the general public. These findings do not come from birds' entrails or crystal balls. At one time most futurists concentrated on long-term economic forecasting or planning — or science fiction, which brings artistic insight to bear on forecasting technological and political developments. Lately, however, more and more highly-qualified experts in various subjects have come to devote their careers to the study of the future in their specialized fields.

Among the participants at the latest annual conference of the Canadian Association of Futures Studies were engineers, bankers and psychologists, along with economists, sociologists, biologists, political scientists, and urban affairs experts. The extensive agenda included discussions on an array of topics from genetic engineering ("The Manufacture of Man") to the future of wildlife, religious faith and the automobile.

The assembled futurists spent much time discussing themselves and their work: the effectiveness of their methods, how to deal with distortions

in forecasts, etc. This is understandable, since the study of the future in a way that crosses the lines between academic disciplines is something quite new. Studies of alternative futures encompassing diverse academic subjects did not emerge until the mid-1960s. One of the first professors of an alternative futures course was Alvin Toffler, who later went on to fame as the author of the best-selling book, *Future Shock*.

Since then the academic world has been adjusting to the psychological wrench entailed in coming out of its rigid departmental cubicles and having its attention switched from the study of the past and present to the study of the future. The field has grown enormously, giving rise to vigorous debate among futurists over the merits of different research techniques. At the same time they have split up into schools of thought which often behave like warring camps.

"The end of the ocean came late in the summer of 1979, and it came more rapidly than the biologists had expected . . . Japan and China were faced with almost instant starvation from the total loss of the seafood on which they were so dependent. Both blamed Russia for the situation and demanded immediate mass shipments of food. Russia had none to send. On October 13, Chinese armies attacked Russia on a broad front."

The above, written in 1969, is a sample of the work of Dr. Paul R. Ehrlich of Stanford University, a leading member of the "Doomsday School" of futurists. Broadly speaking, the Doomsdayers deal in shock tactics to shake decision-makers out of the complacent attitude that the future will take care of itself. Vivid as their scenarios are, they are based on extensive sober research. In the one quoted above, Dr. Ehrlich, whose specialty is biology, predicted that the 1970s would bring the end of the whaling industry, the quiet disappearance of a number of species of fish from overfishing, and a failure of the Peruvian anchovy fishery (anchovies, those salty little fish served as canapés and on pizzas, are important to the world food supply as a leading source of animal feed).

Events have not unfolded quite as Dr. Ehrlich foretold, but he has come much too close for comfort. Since he wrote the scenario, quotas have been fixed on the harvest of some types of whales while a moratorium on the hunting of others has been declared. The Peruvian anchovy fishery indeed failed in 1973 and has since only partially recovered. Some species of fish have been exploited to the point of near-extinction. These developments have prompted a quest for a world agreement among maritime nations to conserve the resources of the sea.

If the struggles of human beings are meaningless, why do they have the instinct to struggle at all?

It is now safe to say that Dr. Ehrlich's grim scenario will not play itself out in the dramatic fashion he predicted, but this may only be because he and others sounded their warnings in time to spur preventive action. Like all futurists, the Doomsdayers are asking questions of society. Their central question is one that might be put to an aging libertine: If you continue to behave as you do, how long can you expect to last?

The Doomsday School has exerted a powerful influence on the famous international futures studies organization called the Club of Rome. In 1972 the Club published *The Limits to Growth*, a study based on computerized projections which declared that mankind cannot support its own growth at its present rate of consumption. It warned that restrictions must be placed on industrial growth or the earth is heading for a cataclysm in the next century. Its findings have since been roundly criticized for being ill-founded and illogical by futurists of the more optimistic school.

The Doomsday School does have its weaknesses — notably the spirit of fatalism that tinges its thinking. Fatalism is a state of mind which denies that man may exercise any essential influence over what his future will be. It does not support itself logically. If the struggles of human beings are meaningless, why do they have the instinct to struggle at all?

Similarly, it is in the nature of people collectively to work towards solutions to their problems — not only current problems, but those they anticipate. The Doomsdayers themselves offer a

case in point. Many of their warnings have been heeded and steps taken to obviate the problems they have predicted. Still, some of them, fatalistic to the end, will say that preventative action is irrelevant because it is too late.

Many ordinary people today seem to agree with them. Armed with their pronouncements, every man can be his own Jeremiah, every woman her own Cassandra. It has become popular to pick one's favourites among which of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (War, Famine, Plague and Pestilence) will ride down on us first.

The media's penchant for disseminating misinformation should be kept in mind

In this age of information, it is perhaps inevitable that the most lurid visions of perdition should most engage the media's attention, and that the media should spread its uncritical view of these among the public. But if it is an age of information, it is also an age of misinformation. The greater the volume of material carried by the media, the greater the volume of errors, ill-informed rhetoric, and propaganda. When it comes to discussing the cosmic question of the survival of the human race, the media's penchant for disseminating misinformation should be kept prominently in mind.

For instance, writing in the *New Statesman* about the 30 world-renowned scientists, economists and philosophers who make up the prestige-laden futures studies organization called the SCIP Group,* Ronald Harker tells us that "the members of the group recognize that as the world's population expands the popular notion that there will not be enough to feed it began as a lie, largely propagated for selfish interests".

From their own and other impeccable sources, they have concluded that the one-tenth of the earth's surface under cultivation now produces the equivalent of an adequate diet for twice the world's people, and that food production has been growing faster than the population. To be sure, there is a critical problem of distribution. But to believe that the world will not be able to feed itself in the foreseeable future, Harker insists, is to swallow a calculated lie.

*Originally the Special Commission on Internal Pollution; it has since extended its mandate.

Similarly, people would be well-advised to treat sceptically warnings that the world is running out of natural resources. Consider this quotation from the Report of the U.S. Government Energy Study Group of 1965: "Rather than fearing a future day when fossil fuel resources will be largely exhausted and the Nation will want for energy, we are concerned for the day when the value of untapped fossil fuel resources might have tumbled because of technological advances and the Nation will regret that it did not make greater use of these stocks while they were still precious." Citing the above, newspaper columnist Frank Lowe last year speculated: "It is quite likely . . . that some of those experts who drew up that 1965 report are still in the forecasting business and are probably hard at work putting together our 1977 summaries of gloom."

Apart from the ambivalence of expert opinion, it is evident that many of the apocalyptic predictions of a world energy drought are fatalistic in that they take no account of the human impulse to find a way out of trouble. In this case the way out appears to be through developing new sources of energy such as biological waste, solar, nuclear fusion, wind and tidal power.

Man has the capacity to make his dreams, or nightmares, come true

In this context, British scientist John Maddox has cautioned against viewing the future "on the assumption that the future will be like the present but more so". Mr. Maddox is an opponent of the Doomsday School, as is Herman Kahn, one of the founding fathers of futures studies and the chief developer of the scenario technique. In a recently-published scenario entitled *The Next 200 Years*, Kahn and his associates at the Hudson Institute of New York take issue with the Doomsday School's practice of trying to frighten western society into adopting safer and less wasteful habits. They believe the theory that industrial growth must be restricted for the sake of survival suppresses the incentive to take constructive action to head off future problems.

Kahn *et al* are convinced that economic growth will, and should, continue well into the next century; at the same time the world's wealth will become better distributed among nations than it

is at present. This optimistic scenario places considerable weight on the probability that human ingenuity will be directed towards innovations that will maximize the use of the earth's resources while minimizing environmental risks.

The greatest drawback they foresee is in self-persuasion: man's capacity for making his dreams — or his nightmares — come true. They write: "We believe that current prophets of peril are making predictions that could indeed be self-fulfilling, if only in the short run. For if enough people were really convinced that growth should be halted, and if they acted on that conviction, then billions of others might be deprived of any realistic hope of gaining the opportunities now enjoyed by the more fortunate."

The vast gulf in opinion between the deeply-pessimistic and highly-optimistic futurists has tended to make futures studies suspect. When researchers employing essentially the same body of information arrive at such violently conflicting conclusions, it is easy to assume that they are either practising a glorified form of guess-work or that they have ideological axes to grind.

The fact is, however, that most futurists belong to neither extreme school. They are simply trying to determine the most probable set of future circumstances under one set of policies or another. Even so, the wildest contradictions are not invalid considering the role of mass psychology. To a large extent, the future will be what people believe it will be.

In any case, contradictory findings are normal in every field of learning. In all sciences the body of knowledge is brought into focus by thrashing out conflicting conclusions. Futures studies can be expected to become more effective as the weaker theories are discredited in the normal scholarly process of subjecting them to informed criticism.

Futurists so far have faced a problem in making their work believable because some of it seems so far-fetched. A related difficulty has been in

making themselves heard by decision-makers. There has been some progress lately in bridging the gap between futurists and government and corporate planners, yet futurists complain that most public policy is still made in defiance of Edmund Burke's dictum that you can never plan the future by the past.

It could well be vital to the endurance of democratic institutions that futurists be heard in policy-making councils. The fear-of-the-future syndrome already has prompted suggestions that personal liberties must be circumscribed if mankind is to survive. "... The first major penalty man will have to pay for his rapid consumption of the earth's non-renewable resources will be that of having to live in a world where his thoughts and actions are ever more strongly limited, where social organization has become all-pervasive, complex and inflexible, and where the state completely dominates the actions of the individual," writes Harrison Brown in *The Challenge of Man's Future*. This is a chilling glimpse of 1984 — and let us not forget that the totalitarian state depicted in George Orwell's classic novel of that name held people in its grip by perpetuating mass hysteria and fear.

It is natural for people who are frightened to turn for comfort and protection to political strong men. The blandishments of the Orwellian Big Brothers of this world are never more seductive than when the future looks grim. Their method of gaining control over people never changes: they demand the sacrifice of the rights of the individual to the higher historical imperatives of the collectivity. They always claim that the future is in their hands and that only they know how to make it work.

For if authoritarianism feeds on fear, it also feeds on its close relative, ignorance. This should be borne in mind at a time when the future would seem to hold so many deadly threats. The prophecy that the surrender of human liberties will be the price of world salvation could indeed be self-fulfilling in the absence of clear-cut facts about the problems that are breeding around us. By gathering, testing and proving the facts, futures studies offer the opportunity to be prepared for these problems before they arise.