# Enlisting Futures Studies in a Democratic Vision of Progress

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The United Nations Development Program opened its 1996 report with these words:

*Human advance is conditioned by our conception of progress ... [It is time to end] the mismeasure of human progress by economic growth alone. The paradigm shift in favour of sustainable human development is still in the making. But more and more policy makers in many countries are reaching the unavoidable conclusion that, to be valuable and legitimate, development progress — both nationally and internationally — must be people centred, equitably distributed, and environmentally and socially sustainable. (UNDP, 1996)*

In an era of 'post-nationalism' and the declining influence of religion, what might be the value base for a new and legitimate Australian concept of progress that is people centred, equitable and socially and environmentally sustainable?

T. H. Marshall (1950) linked the idea of citizenship to standards of progress: "societies in which citizenship is a developing institution create an image of an ideal of citizenship against which achievements can be measured and towards which aspirations can be directed".

Twenty years later, Kenneth Land (1974) pointed out that we cannot measure something properly unless we can first describe it. To design social indicators, said Land, "one is faced with the necessity of spelling out some more or less explicit model of society".

This is why statisticians and policy-makers who are exploring alternative measures of progress 'beyond GDP' are enlisting the help of professional futurists, and community visioning processes, as a means of "spelling out some more or less explicit model of society". In particular, the process of scenario development offers an opportunity to capture the complexity of a living community in a cohesive story that includes key reference points for appropriate measures of progress.

## Problems

Reflecting on the issue of measuring national progress from these two different perspectives – citizenship and the 'program logic' of measurement – throws up four specific problems.

### 1. Democratic legitimacy

This central and historically powerful idea of progress - and therefore of its definition and measurement – has a major impact on public policy and so on the lives of all citizens. When progress is universally assumed as a national priority, those who 'stand in its way' are often depicted as fools and Luddites or, in Michael Pusey's phrase, 'a kind of stubbornly resisting sludge' through whom 'reforms' must be 'driven' (Pusey, 1992). Then it becomes a matter of democratic importance to ask questions: what do we mean by progress? in what spheres? progress for whom? and most importantly, who should decide this?

### 2. Meaning and balance

Intrinsic questions of meaning and balance arise from the many-sided nature of progress. Progress in one sphere can retard progress in another, as we know from the environmental impact of economic growth. Should we not be seeking, as the UNDP suggests, a broader measure of progress and well-being, a more holistic, more organic and integrated notion, especially between economic, social and environmental dimensions, but also between material and ethical or spiritual criteria of progress— with perhaps more stress on "gross national welfare" than gross national production? (Ikeda & Toynbee, 1989)

### 3. Reference points

Third, there is this problem raised by Land: to measure national progress, we need both a map (a model of progress) and a compass (indicators of progress). The most effective system of national progress measurement will be directly linked to a set of clear benchmarks that properly describe what progress or well-being is in practice.

### 4. Measurability

A fully rounded account of progress or well-being will require us to measure and give due weight to qualities and values which, however important, are essentially intangible – or at least hard to quantify and often controversial. For that reason, they have often been avoided or underestimated, and have simply failed to register as significant components in national accounts of progress. Here I mean criteria such as citizenship, social justice, community health and the vitality of democracy, as well as a wide array of environmental indicators. Fallowfield (1990) warns us not to confuse the measurable with the important:

> *Man does not inhabit a social vacuum; thus failure to set those aspects of quality of life that we can measure in a wider framework will be a futile exercise. To discuss only the measurable components would be analogous to the old joke about the drunk looking for his lost keys under a lamp post, although he had dropped them elsewhere, because the light was better under the lamp.*

## Opportunities

These are difficult questions, but now is exactly the right time for Australians to be asking them: not just what we mean by national progress and how we should measure it, but the broader and logically prior question: what kind of a society do we want to be?

Why is it timely? Nearly twenty years ago, social analyst Hugh Mackay observed that "we have been plunged into a period of unprecedented social, cultural, political, economic and technological change, in which the Australian way of life is being rapidly redefined" (Mackay, 1993); and in the ensuing period, this process of definition has been only become more intensive. There have been changes in gender relations and family life; in the economy and the labour market. We have become a multicultural society but one still not without racial tensions; we have learned to tolerate high unemployment and the privatisation of public utilities and services, if not happily. We have begun to understand problems like global warming and the destruction of ecosystems, but failed to take effective action against them. Globalisation is making us more competitive and more interdependent, we are told, but it has also made us more unequal and less confident in our ability to shape our future. And there are growing signs of a decline in democracy, and a less compassionate, more unequal and more stressed society (Salvaris, 1995).

Clearly we are facing critical choices about our identity, our society and our future. At the same time, we have an extraordinary opportunity to do this openly and thoughtfully, in ways that might strengthen our democracy and social fabric.

A decade ago, Canada launched an extraordinary new civil society project that eventually became the Canadian Index of Wellbeing (CIW), and which began by asking citizens across the nation a series of fundamental questions about the values, priorities and future directions of their society. While at one level a rejection of Gross Domestic Product – and the notion that continuous increase in economic production and consumption should be the main goal and the key measure of national progress - the CIW is more importantly a project designed to engage Canada's citizens in a democratic vision for Canada's future, based on equitable and sustainable wellbeing, and measuring progress towards that vision. In Australia this year, a national project with similar hopes and goals has been launched: the Australian National Development Index.

The opportunity to bring decades of research and experience from futures studies to help citizens to imagine and describe the future they want – and are prepared to work towards – would at the very least meet Land's requirement of "spelling out some more or less explicit model of society". At best, it may be one of the greatest opportunities of our time to bring new life to democracy, allowing citizens to make informed choices between alternative futures.

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