



## Rethinking Oz: More than policy, the underlying mindset

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### Abstract

Do Australians see themselves as larrikins or victims? In this essay, I examine the entrenched assumptions Australians most commonly bring to their understandings of their present and future world. While some contemporary Aussies choose a unique voice, most others have swapped their British legacy for the can-do illusions of the Wizard of Oz. Will Australia break out of its ingrained thinking to create a new future? Does Oz realise that the attending problems cannot necessarily be solved by the industrialist, short-term thinking that bred them? The present authoritarian thought system reaches back through two millennia of Western civilisation, almost unchallenged. It lacks long-term vision. This industrialist perspective still largely defines the understandings Australians have about their choices for the future, limiting our creativity for dealing with the dilemmas and opportunities ahead. This mindset is linear, exclusionary and competitive. It seeks either to take charge of nature's rhythms or ignore them. An emerging mindset of networking, rather than top-down control, may be starting to clear the smog. This new way of thinking is organic, inclusionary and collaborative—and certainly aware of longer-term horizons. It could replace the buccaneering, conformist mentality with self-responsibility and respect for diversity. Recent attempts to reinvent Oz with long-term vision fail to stand outside the mindset that frames competitive Westminster politics, limited by its institutionalised confrontation and *either-or* thinking. Oz could well make a “pledge to future generations” when examining alternative mindsets.

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## 1. Introduction

An outrageously satirical publication, *Oz Magazine*, shocked establishment Australia during the 1960s. Its editors were convicted of obscenity and sentenced to 6 months hard labour. One editor, Richard Neville, then left to establish *London Oz* in 1967, only to be tried for corrupting Britain's public morals.

*Oz* is the affectionately irreverent nickname for Australia. *Oz Magazine* used to publish social and political critique amid lashings of humour and caricature befitting a hippy-era style of Aussie larrikinism. Young Aussies were shucking the wartime trauma of their parents, and their parents' values often borrowed from a confusing mix of Christian certainties.

Perhaps this Oz generation was merely continuing the days-long binge that kicked off right after the landing of British convicts and their keepers in 1788, as memorialised by Tom Keneally in *The Commonwealth of Thieves* [1]. Is there a larrikinism in the Australian psyche, or is there, as some British visitors suspect, a victim mentality, a hangover from our convict beginnings? Keneally told a television program he thought it ironic that a society beginning as a great outdoor prison for Britain's debased and criminal classes, only 220 years later threw asylum seekers into real prisons—people innocent under international law [2].

## 2. Foreign influences

Does the British legacy still colour the way Australians see their world? And is there any influence from the US or from the stirring Asian *tigers* in the regional neighbourhood? Let us examine the outside influences on Australian thinking, right back to the ancient Greeks, and see how western philosophy in various guises has construed the present worldview from Oz. It is a worldview that brought industrialism, that more recently welcomed American individualism, and that still clings tightly to an oppositional either-or, them-and-us black-and-white sensibility. These engender much of present public policy, although there are rising waves of change.

When young Oz resumed partying in the *Age of Aquarius*, Britain was still the country many white Australians called "home". With today's new media, many Aussies are determined to speak with a unique Australian voice. Others remain influenced by Hollywood, by diverse migrations and, even less so, by British-European traditions. Australia has gone to war in Iraq. It has had its own *dot-com* disasters and corporate disgraces. Perhaps most of all, today's citizens of Oz aspire to the winning-at-any-cost values of the ruling American mythology.

It was in the magic Land of Oz where Dorothy relied on the Wizard who "could do anything". Frank Baum's fairytale, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, is set among the material glories of an affluent world that calls for a special, can-do utopian spirituality to enjoy the great American dream. It offers a "curious blend of idealism, ingenuity, optimism, and hard-headed pragmatism that defines the American character" [3].

### 2.1. *New subservience*

Just which of these American characteristics did Australia seek to confirm, emulate or worship by entering a "security" alliance, unchallenged by most citizens, to invade Iraq in

2003? Australia defied the wider legal world, the United Nations and the Geneva Convention. Was its prime minister, John Howard, trying to link Australia to the most powerful economy the world has seen? Or was it the coincidence of a hard conservative ascendancy in both countries? After all, Australia had been negotiating a “free-trade” agreement with the US?

And why, slightly earlier during the United Nations’ referendum on the independence from Indonesia of East Timor (now Timor Leste), had the Australian government been so half-hearted in shrugging off the label of US deputy sheriff in Asia-Pacific. This gun-slinging role did not endear Oz to its Asian neighbours. Nor did Australia’s procrastination in signing a non-aggression pledge with South-East Asia. Whether victim or larrikin, Australia now looks like an insecure kid fawning on the schoolyard bully to hide behind Washington’s alternative to diplomacy, machismo.

Despite claiming to help democrastise the Middle East, the decision on Iraq was never debated in Australia’s parliament nor referred to bureaucrats. Yet most voters seem not to care. Such autocracy is either founded in an individualistic worldview that ignores the other, or in a refusal or inability to learn from history. Australia fought in Vietnam for the sake of its US alliance [4].

## 2.2. *Denying the other*

Vietnam may have triggered an epistemological earthquake, taking Oz from Rourke’s Drift to the Alamo. Fewer than 200 British soldiers remained at Rourke’s Drift after their defeat by the Zulus. Outnumbered 20 to one, the British would have fought to the last. But the Zulus backed off. Each side still respected the other. The Alamo was different. Badly managed, the Texans were virtually wiped out by the Mexicans. Yet the US dredged glory from the ashes by demonising its enemy.

It is telling that neither Oz nor the US enjoys the continuity in cultural learning of most other Western civilisations. The mistakes of the Alamo strategy have been repeated in US military history, right up to Iraq, including the lack of post-combat planning after a roller coaster finish. For all their faults, European colonists, including the British, seldom underestimated their subjects, but willingly learned from them. The US has been less tolerant of difference. America’s founders left England as persecuted puritans and became the persecutors.

Not all Americans agree with Washington’s geopolitics. And its military policies do not condemn all that is American. In many ways, US enterprise has been an economic and political success. Witness its achievements in science and technology, and in management. But these hardly justify Australia’s latest global subservience.

## 3. **Changing visions**

What mindset frames Australia’s newest political cringe? Any worldview can enshroud someone in a perceptual mentality blind to alternative ways of knowing, limiting vision for creating different futures. If only people can stand outside their mindsets they can see the basis for their understandings. The earth may present itself as flat. But curiosity and inquiry about the movement of planets and stars, and the change of seasons, yield another perspective from which earth is understood as a sphere in space. Is there a lack of critical thinking at the top of Australian society?

### 3.1. *Individualism*

The present flirtation with Washington may be explained through American individualism that came to Oz in its political form, neoliberalism, under successive governments including “socialist” Labor,<sup>1</sup> back to the early 1980s. Individualism has come in spiritual stripes, too, in the *New-Age* preoccupation with self. Self-absorption can be self-reinforcing and hard to dislodge in order to include others.

It may be questionable to generalise Australia’s leadership as representative of civic society. But the majority view, or its apathy, becomes clearer during election campaigns when the leaders react to the present poll-driven climate. And television ratings similarly indicate how viewers construct their own realities, if only in part. Both Howard and Bush were re-elected late in 2004 with their steeliness fully exposed, 3 years after the New York’s World Trade Centre was toppled.

Australia’s US defence alliance began under Labor, now in opposition, during World War II. Friendships waxed and waned as American troops established Douglas MacArthur’s Pacific headquarters in Brisbane. Some Australians married Americans. Yet others resented the American presence, even then, especially those returning from service to find that GIs, flaunting their access to nylon stockings and American cigarettes, had stolen their lovers.

### 3.2. *Industrialism*

But Australia had grown up mainly British while the “home country” was transforming from rural to urban society during an industrial revolution. The push–pull mindset that drove industrialisation may have created many of today’s social and ecological problems. For example, it led Oz farmers to plan paddocks using Euclid’s geometry rather than follow nature’s contours to avoid soil loss. Accumulation of monetary capital by a private minority fed off the public’s natural and social capital. The costs have been loss of biodiversity, degraded land and water, and barriers to knowledge. Them-and-us industrialism has increased carbon emissions and stubbornly withheld resources that could save a child in poorer countries from starving to death every 7 seconds.

Can the problems of industrialism be solved by the same mindset that caused them? Or not, as Einstein asserted. For example, can global warming be turned back with new technologies, as the corporate optimists insist?

By the post-war industrialisation of the early 1950s, Australia was still a British outpost, even if enamoured of US military assistance and taunted by the immigrant Irish. Conrad [5] remembers how “Australia was as white as starch, and as stiff”. Malouf [6] reminds Australians of their genesis in the civilisation of Shakespeare, the Enlightenment and the Westminster system.

### 3.3. *Cultural plurality*

By 1956, Oz had begun embroidering another newcomer into the British colonial tapestry: television. Malouf [7] saw the little black box as a mirror in which “we would see our real faces at last, and how many and various we were: women who argued and had

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<sup>1</sup>An exception to the usual Australian spelling of *labour*.

opinions; blacks, homosexuals, young people whose tastes and ideas were different from those of their elders”.

Australia came to face increasing cultural diversity. After mistreating its original inhabitants, assimilation was being challenged by integration—unity in difference. Yet reconciliation remains elusive. The national government still fails to say sorry.

In early television times, holding to its egalitarian legacy of mateship and a fair-go—at least for European descendants—Australia stood in contrast to America’s competitive individualism. Australia’s much stronger labour movement was then more systemic than in the US. But in the 1980s, just as Australia was accommodating multiculturalism—there were now immigrants from Asia—it took its biggest leap towards an American social model. It deregulated the financial system and enshrined a strong market-orientation. Now, its union movement has been subdued by a “liberalisation” of the labour market. Television helped juxtapose the infant multiculturalism with a harsh Americanisation.

Financial deregulation came with *economic rationalism*—ranking economics ahead of social, cultural and ecological *externalities*. Surprisingly, this came from the Labor government which, even today, retains a market-driven acceptance only marginally softer than the fanatic mercantilism of the conservatives.

But far from all Australians admire the swashbuckling American individualism now astride global politics and economics. By late 2004, America itself was an election issue. Depending where one stood, there could be anger or mirth in the old joke about the US: *In God we trust; others pay cash*. The Labor opposition awkwardly—some would say in cowardice—endorsed the preemptive Middle-East incursion.

### 3.4. *Dualism*

Oz officialdom may be falling back to the exclusion and insularity it started to shed two-thirds through last century when it began recognising indigenous Australians as voting citizens and liberalising immigration. In failing to challenge George W. Bush’s declaration, you’re either with us or with the terrorists, Australia calls on the binary *either–or* thinking inherited from ancient Greece. It denies reciprocity, mutuality, plurality and degrees of difference. At least in these dimensions, Australian leadership seems reluctant to challenge its mindset, its worldview, in favour of the pluralism more typical of Asia.

In his dualism Bush plays God. Such theocratic fascism, as Dator [8] puts it, prosecutes a Judeo-Christian fundamentalist view, particularly a simplistic protestantism where riches are the rewards for hard work and worship. Despite its own history of buccaneering, US fundamentalist theology is just as dogmatic as the fundamentalism that demolished the twin towers. Both still want an eye-for-an-eye. Their scripts have been handed down, immutable. When sets of intransigent eyes stare each other down, there is no room for empathy, nor for divergent or creative thinking.

Salleh traces dualism in Western political tradition from Aristotle through the Church Fathers to Locke, Hegel and even Marx. She sees no need to accept the dualism of either History versus Nature, or of Man versus Woman. Men are equally creatures of nature and our political theory should accept that sexualities form a continuum rather than a polarity [9].

Either–or thinking is widespread in Oz. Take the classic dichotomy of Western philosophy: individual unity or social cohesion? In other ways of knowing, the two notions

are not mutually exclusive, as assumed without question in the adversarial rhetoric infecting Oz's parliamentary and legal systems. Individual liberty and social cohesion can coexist. Perhaps this is necessary for avoiding the futility of having to choose between the personal and social good.

#### 4. Searching for identity

Tied up with Australia's worldview is the question: Is there a strong and clear Australian narrative that shapes the Australian identity?

Despite a British legacy and a new obeisance to things American, and like the fawning school kid, Australia is not quite certain of its national identity. Certain Australians remain reluctant to shed traits such as larrikinism, giving everyone a fair go, backing the underdog and withholding reverence to authority [10]. There is nostalgia (and amnesia) of the past and myopia for the future. Cultural battles persist over the European settlers' treatment of indigenous Australians and their right to land.

Is Australia just as unsure about its culture as it appears to be in politics and economics? Given its Iraqi adventuring and its merchant carpet-bagging, foreigners could well be justified in asking whether Australia is politically and economically naïve. Should Australia be so intently building foreign policy on an American platform when, as Galtung [11] argues, the US exhibits the hallmarks of a sinking empire. This, especially when Australia lives much closer to Indonesia, China and India.

For much of the 20th century Australia may have lived with a *cultural cringe* [12], a colonial deference to others' achievements, including an intimidating mass of Anglo-Saxon culture. British heritage colours, such as Brunswick green, still adorn Australian buildings. A 1999 referendum for a republic failed to end the constitutional monarchy tied to Britain, although this may be the product of cynical politics rather than national psyche.

Yet Australia has some roots in its own wide, brown landscape, both bold and brash. Nobel Laureate in literature, Patrick White, may have illustrated this in the baroque that his biographer, David Marr [13], sees in his writings: elaborate excesses in ornamentation, vulgarity, disrespect for limitation and boundaries, and larrikinism. The characters are powerful and dramatic in a country of huge catastrophes, of huge happenings—bushfire and flood.

Australia's distinguishing legend used to be the landing at Gallipoli by the Australia and New Zealand Army Corps, the ANZACS. When Australia went into Iraq as a bit player, its political masters dredged up the ANZAC story, perhaps to whitewash the resultant quagmire.

Ironically Gallipoli was a military failure. The blush of Australia's youth, bubbling with testosterone, was felled by enemy fire from the Turks defending the Dardanelles. Aussies had left their towns and farms to answer the British bugle. They were shipped halfway across the world to join a European war against Germany and later the remnant Ottoman empire. By Putting ANZAC on a national pedestal Aussies may be admitting their cultural cringe. Or does it mask the "victim" legacy? Whatever, there are examples of smugness. As one "real" Aussie told the media recently: "We're Australian. We don't need a dress code. We wear anything we want."

#### 4.1. *A new narrative?*

The authors of *Imagining Australia* [10, pp. 11–13] seek a new shared story, vibrant and relevant, to create a common destiny and bind a society. But they want it, first, to resolve the tension between two competing groups. The urban elites are cosmopolitan and more tolerant of diversity than the Anglo suburban heartland. Horne's [14] "ordinary Australians" live in "ordinary streets" where the old themes and stories resonate. Any new story, the authors insist, must move away from the notion of "true blue" Australians since that can no longer unite a diverse Australia. Any rewriting of the national story must reconcile indigenous Australia with the wider society in a celebration moving beyond past recriminations.

The book suggests the Eureka rebellion against injustices by goldminers at Ballarat be reclaimed from the fringes of ideological debate to become the national legend. Eureka and its Southern-Cross flag say much about early egalitarianism, mateship, and fairness. But it has never found space in the memory of young Australians caught in a new ethnic mix and transfixed by the new media of a global economy. And it would not sit with the new workplace-relations policies that "free" the individual from collective action and industrial dissent.

Even before the Internet, there was television. For Malouf, it gave "us a new image of ourselves and a new version of local culture, a popular, commercial culture that we too, these days, export to the world. Most of all, it got us to open up. To break the great Australian silence" [7].

Tastes of the Mediterranean and Asia saw milk bars replaced by coffee shops, meat-and-three-vegetables with pasta and fish soups. The once sturdy hamburger with pickled beetroot, available at the Greek café with fly-string doors, has made way for the soft bun and relish of McDonalds.

It is easy to agree with Conrad [15]. The world may have looked down on Australia (which rhymes with failure, as Conrad reminds us) for being different from Europe, at least in culture and geography. The place once conjured images of fear rather than admiration. None went there.

But the time may have come when Australia is more alluring than disparaged, at least in some of the arts. Whatever the case, as Malouf [7] says, "Perhaps it is time to stop asking what our Asian neighbours will think of us, or the Americans or the British, and try living with no other audience than our own better, and freer, and more adventurous selves."

#### 4.2. *Political divide*

Whether or not Australia is politically confused, it is certainly divided. After the 2004 elections, its Australian citizenry—now called customers—was split down the middle. As with the US, having found an external enemy to knit the tribes together, an old trick, their leaders sought to divide and control. Both engineered fear to justify watering down civic freedoms so the fear mongers could protect the populace from terrorism. The two governments had swaggered into Iraq together. Their sabre-rattling had won their electorates despite bare-faced lying about intentions for a predation that turned sour.

The day after Howard won the 2004 election, he went to church. Did he give thanks for the deliverance of a fourth-term victory? Did he pray for the Iraqis? Or did he want people to think God had approved his relapse into an exclusionary White Australia policy,

turning away desperate refugees (only to incarcerate them and their children in appalling conditions)? And his turning tail on drowning boat people and his despotic dispatch of killing machines to Iraq, without asking? Did he seek forgiveness for the lies these misadventures entailed?

Whether going to church was genuinely personal or a deliberate flaunting of moral rectitude, Howard was characteristically more conservative in display than former US President Clinton who invited clergy to a televised prayer breakfast just after his long-awaited confession of sexual dalliance.

Days after the same election, Australia's livestock saleyards were the place to read one line of the Oz pulse. Opposition parties do not win elections, one sage asserted; governments lose them. He had voted for the government because it had "not done enough wrong". Another cattleman complained the Green Party had won too many seats. Actually, it had fallen short of their hope to win balance of power in the Senate, thanks to a good smearing from the Murdoch press.

Bauman [16] may explain this mentality another way. The Orwellian Big Brother sought inclusion, getting people into line and keeping them there. Whereas, the Big Brother of "reality" TV seeks exclusion, spotting the people who do not fit, either banishing them or not allowing them to come anywhere near, in the first place. The old Big Brother is still alive, however, and better equipped. He is found mostly off-limits, in marginalised social space such as urban ghettos, refugee camps or prisons.

In the 2001 election, Howard had campaigned on making people relaxed and comfortable, exploiting Australia's attitude of "she'll be right". It was another pitch for feel-good, selling with the euphemism, a verbal device perfected in America. The government was reinforcing an apathy, a stagnant equilibrium, rather than a dynamic equilibrium that consciously prepares for resilience to change, as suggested by complexity theory.

Then the Oz government tailored its 2004 election pitch to voters in the mortgage belts aspiring to better financial circumstances, in an unlikely alliance with the wealthy, traditionally conservative voters, who fund the loans. Its detractors were the urbane and intellectual elites in league with the old-time socialists. The *aspirational*s were more concerned for their short-term budgets than the Green Party's accusations of official lying and a cynical exploiting of human misery for political gain; not to mention a blatant disregard for nature's ecology. With house prices booming, households had piled up record debt. As Hamilton [17] put it, after 20 years of creeping "affluenza", materialism and attendant self-absorption had invaded the daily consciousness of most Australians.

More recently, playwright Williamson [18] exposed an intellectual divide with his metaphor of *Cruise Ship Australia*, written after a floating holiday in the South Pacific. The aspirational Australians on board assumed they were destined for unending prosperity, and more cut-price deals. But such easy-going assumptions would not save them from the rocks of an uncertain future. They aspired to holidays like the cruise and to practically anything made of plastic, wood or steel. They were headed not to a palm-fringed tropical island, but to a sobering destiny: "We might not suffer, and perhaps our children won't, but our grandchildren will certainly live in a very different and less plenteous Australia," Williamson observed.

The Murdoch press [19] resounded with cries of immense snobbery. Too many artists had become sneering, carping critics of ordinary lives and values. They must shake free of their moral vanity. The editorial railed: "We will never get a great culture in Australia until

there are more artists prepared to understand, rather than demonise, this pragmatic turn of mind [of ordinary Australians]”. Williamson, perhaps loftily, perhaps in satire, did lament the failure of the cruising set to discuss Proust or George Eliot, as had some British passengers on an earlier cruise he had taken.

*Understand*, fine, but does pragmatism justify a primacy of materialism over intelligence, with a neglect of future generations? Williamson suspects the *furere* was politically motivated, from the very top, where an uncritical love-in with consumption mostly denies the long-term consequences. His critics were just as reticent to challenge the relentless pursuit of pleasure and financial reward, as to examine the merits of inquiring, reflective thought and cultural curiosity. The effects of unfettered consumption on the earth’s finite resources and the viability of the species seemed less concerning than the morality of elitism. Predictably, it was an either–or debate rather than a call for an integration of economic, ecological, social and cultural advancement.

## 5. Critical foresight

Can the aspirational imperative be explained as a response to the present widespread fear and a general lack of security; and to the fundamentalism of money and markets? I think so. Further, Australia’s policy-makers seem incapable of both critical thinking and foresight. By failing to address longer-term issues, Marsh and Yencken [20] have argued, they are encouraging opportunism, faking adversarialism and using wedge tactics.

It is annoying and embarrassing that, like the US, Australia, the biggest polluter per capita, has continually refused to sign the Kyoto protocol to reduce greenhouse emissions. We hear the cliché: it is not in the nation’s interest. For that, read not in the economic interests of the fossil-fuel industry which helps fund the incumbent government’s election campaigns. Money seems more important than people, a rampant fundamentalism that may be stealing the livability of future generations.

Politics in Australia, as in the US, is now dictated by big corporate interests. Immediate profit is more important than long-haul viability, even for present generations. Sport, which is bigger than religion for Aussies, has been corporatised. No longer, the traditional culture of cricket: play the game; be a gentleman in defeat. Criticism of any loss entails more blame than analysis. Winning is all that counts. Sport is tribal confrontation for competitors and fans alike. The higher incidence of violence among boozen-sodden fans is evident in emergency wards after a sporting final.

Government departments and agencies have been corporatised. And, with Iraq, so has war. A corporate stance is supposed to be more efficient than other forms of organisation. But, do the vaunted corporate efficiencies, supposing they are real, benefit more than the shareholders or senior management? Long bank queues may be efficient for investors. What about customers; and the tellers who have lost their jobs?

Governments, such as Australia’s, have become social engineers, ensuring that electors are fearful enough of their personal safety to vote on issues of security. Consequently reflective people, including intellectuals, are sneered at, locked down, less able to question and to experiment with new ideas.

Dissent is dissuaded. The power brokers endorse leaders who cling to wisdoms that cannot be revised. Critics of the basic text are ostracised. In order to win or hold power, and increase defence budgets, politicians are reacting in turn to the electorate’s reaction against uncertainty.

As with Williamson, criticism is smeared as elitist. It is not in the interests of suburban battlers. This is the “institutionalised philistinism” of Furedi [21] who sees it written into policy documents on the arts, and into access policies of universities and museums, giving rise to “our dumb society”. If there is public ignorance, even the halls of higher learning must share the blame.

## 6. What is Australia’s mindset?

Without serious self-reflection it can be hard to adopt alternative views of the world. As in Vietnam, the US largely fails to understand how Iraqis generally have a very different social system and culture, and thus worldview, from Americans. Equally, no doubt, the Iraqis do not understand the American mindset. An Iraqi citizen is very likely to have been brought up with an entirely different sense of self and others, with different belief systems, ways of life, literature and landscape. Even the neighbouring Iranians do not generally share the same mindset as Iraqis.

The dominant mindset in Australia (see Table 1) is almost certainly that of modernity’s materialism. Yet central thought patterns are still traced way back to Aristotle’s linear logic. The dominant mindset overrules the elements of an alternative thinking which is more common to traditional Eastern worldviews and today’s creative thinkers. It is more masculine than the alternative, which is more feminine, even within the West.

The alternative elements are picked up in more recent examples of green-building design, sustainable agriculture, recycling of water on a single property, solar and wind power generation, *permaculture* and tree farming. These are examples of going with the flow of nature, rather than controlling it. There are alternative examples in domestic life, with men staying at home while women earn the income, or where both rotate traditional gender roles; and in organisational life where networks of task teams replace single entities on the steep pyramid that reflects the traditional structure.

Table 1  
Comparison of mindsets

Dominant mindset (predominantly masculine)	An emerging mindset (predominantly feminine)
Embraces preferences for:	Embraces preferences for:
Combative competition with zero-sum outcomes— <i>either-or</i>	Collaboration with positive-sum outcomes— <i>and</i>
Domination of humanity over nature	Integration of humanity with the rest of nature
Isolation, exclusivity	Openness, inclusivity
Standardisation, conformity, convergence, stifling difference	Diversity, exploration, divergence, using difference creatively
A single worldview, one opposition	Plural worldviews
Simplicity	Complexity
Demanding certainty	Working with uncertainty
Analysis	Synthesis
Mechanistic, linear thinking	Network (systems) thinking
Hierarchy of control	Organic self-organisation, coordination
Short-term horizons	Long-term horizons

The government refuses to recognise the numerous indigenous nations, defined by their different language and culture. There must be only one nation-state and indigenous flags have no official status. But examples of plurality are emerging, as in multiple-use land. Under fairly limiting rules, certain original landholders may harvest for food otherwise protected species, such as turtles and dugong, in territory declared as national park.

Holding stoically to any single mindset can quarantine people from alternative perspectives and from different futures. They are denied other logics and thought systems for understanding life, its pitfalls and opportunities. Thus creativity is stifled. Creativity demands thinking that is recursively aware of *self* in relation to *other*. It celebrates differences in mindset patterns and levels of abstraction. It imagines and moves across a range of alternatives.

The mindset template in [Table 1](#) is itself limiting. It is chosen for emphasis, to illustrate opposites, thus denying plurality. It is the product of a dominant bipolar mind—either—or in itself—something this paper seeks to critique. Space permitting, it would have been richer to present numerous sets—permutations and combinations—of mindset elements. In fact, any mindset is likely to contain elements from others. For example, a company director could support a network structure in creative software firms while supporting hierarchical structures in organisations where top-down control is important for repeating mechanised processes, as in mining.

### 6.1. *Challenging the dominant mindset*

I have seen how open alternative thinking threatens the entrenched worldview, sitting in on a local-government meeting engaging with the community. There are several citizens' representatives, two or three elected councillors and at least one senior bureaucrat. Well-meaning retired engineers, from the conservation movement, bring their mechanistic worldview to a discussion on social relationships. The participation is yet another project to be managed as if people were bricks and mortar, without purpose and voice. Their world has Gantt charts and bullet-point presentations. They emphasise goal-seeking rather than goal-creating. They resist any bid to redefine expectations, roles and responsibilities of the process in an inclusive workshop. They fail to see that their predetermined objectives and their resistance stifle shared understanding and plural choices. They assume that glitches in human relationships can be willed away with a few edicts, without “wasting” time and money.

We see here:

- denial of organic systems whose alternative realities and possibilities do not conform to their simple clock-like worldview;
- contentment with analysis, though not the analysis of others, and a resistance to fine-tuning the preordained design;
- need for standardisation in report style; and
- short-term perspectives even among those wishing for long-term ecological integrity.

This same municipality is introducing new ways of recycling water and encouraging rainwater tanks to be reintroduced in homes. But its leaders still assume that bolder engineering solutions are better, like new dams, or extending existing dams, to water foreseen population surges.

It is refreshing that anticipation is coming into community engagement, even if the horizon is limited merely to 2015, and particularly in a country that junked its Commission for the Future. However, little official foresight looks out longer than 2025. And most authorities prefer forecasting and trend analysis to using futures tools such as *emerging issues analysis* and *backcasting* from a preferred vision. For example, in transport planning, there remains a tendency to forecast traffic growth for planning new freeways and parking stations, rather than backcast from a vision of car-free zones.

In Australia, Salt [22] predicts a big shift of population towards the coast. Given sea levels could rise, why side with the US to be two of the most conspicuous dissenters from the Kyoto treaty on climate change? Must Australia eke out the last gasp from a senescent industry—fossil fuels, coal—to risk inundation and cowering before heat waves that are already whipping up storms and bushfires? Must the government appease election donors rather than consider future generations?

## 6.2. *Stocktaking the future*

Hard-headed politicians and business executives may believe Australia's dominant mindset has served the nation well. But will it take people into an uncertain future? Will it redress the entrenched problems of industrialisation, the assault on social and natural capital, and neglect for future generations? An alternative way of thinking is vital if there is to be an investment in the future. This would help assure better equity and quality in education and community health; more empathy, peace and social justice; reconciliation between indigenous peoples and the wider population; fewer suicides of young men; and perhaps less violence in all respects.

Alternative thinking takes courage. It challenges others. And it can be personally unsettling since it undermines the received truths that many people have worked so hard to internalise in traditional institutions which reward the student's memory of the mentor's notes. But, as Sardar [23] reminds us, "Only when we dare to think the unthinkable can we break out of the straightjacket of established trends and trajectories; and only by divorcing ourselves from the dominant trends within the global system can we hope to shape viable and desirable futures." Like him, I see the conceptions and inspirations of the dominant system as a product of Western civilisation.

Australian leadership could well heed Sardar's advice. Although slowly changing, more critical long-term foresight would help challenge long-held assumptions in institutions from elementary education right through to the realms of policy and legislation. Courageous new tools of thought could reframe policy, not simply fiddle at the margins, taking into account gender equality, ecological integrity, coexistence of diverse civilisational and cultural frameworks, and local and global ethics. Insights derived in this way would inform the grand public discussion that is sorely needed in contemporary Australia.

One agenda item would be a new public imagining of viable new forms of governance and policy making at the national and state levels, like that being introduced, if slowly, at municipal levels. Dator reminds us that the US was constituted in the pre-industrial and has not changed. He suggests governance be redesigned according to newer scientific and philosophical perspectives, including those of Darwin, Freud, and Einstein, as well as systems theory and chaos theory [8].

## 7. What now?

The journey to the future is not through the past, although we can learn from mistakes. Discussion is emerging in some pockets. *Imagining Australia* [10, pp. 11–13] calls for a more dynamic, vibrant and outwardly focussed country than at present. Democracy would be reformed to encourage greater public participation and improve the quality of decision-making. The nation-building zeal would be recaptured with a national project, not based in engineering feats, but in improved higher education and environmental modernising of the economy. Its authors advocate a lift in population, but this is questionable on social and environmental grounds, but perhaps internationally necessary. They also want to reimagine Australia's role on the world stage with a more expansive global agenda to help strengthen the international community and build a richer safer world.

Marsh and Yencken [20] show why long-term strategic analysis is important. They examine recent changes in the political landscape, including the growth of interest groups and the increasing cynicism about politics and politicians. Much of that cynicism, they suggest, relates to the inability of the familiar competitive two-party system to reach common ground about strategic issues. They detect inadequacies in research and technical analysis, and in public engagement and consultation.

While recognising the limitations of competitive politics, neither set of authors suggests changes beyond the Westminster system which institutionalises confrontation and either-or thinking. They do not explicitly examine what new mindset is needed—epistemological changes—nor how to alter the thinking that would enable the projects they suggest. Is education the key?

Their idea of more effective community participation is welcome. But neither book has sufficiently explained the need for an informed community, able to critically appraise public ideas and to be conscious of the array of workable options for deciding future pathways; projecting only from understandings and misunderstandings of past and present. Critical foresight would help imagine and invent alternatives, and assess the consequences of their choices for themselves and future generations.

Perhaps Australia needs an office of the future, or better, an embedded futures perspective in government and community institutions. Futures thinking, critical and creative, is being recognised in the school system, but needs more dedication. And it must be reinstated in higher education where it has been downgraded.

But change through education takes at least a generation. In the meantime, wider community learning is necessary, not only to challenge the present tokenism in community consultation, but to have a fully thoughtful and conscious community before too long.

The global economy gaining momentum serves mainly the powerful, with only token concern for the impoverished and disadvantaged. What role is there for Australia, a middle-ranking power? At best, it can expect to influence others, not control them—and it should not. Rather than ally with the bully, I think Oz could offer to be a critical friend or honest broker. But it must show an eagerness to learn from these friends, perhaps not before ceasing to patronise smaller Pacific Island neighbours.

As for technology, Australia need not blindly follow others into an artificial future. It has a cleaner environment than most industrialised countries. Backing ageing coal-fired industries, for example, is simply pushing and pulling nature. Perhaps, Australia could do much more to lead in developing gentler technologies that team up with natural energies,

much as judo does. And it may be time to build exchanges on nurturing and creativity, rather than insist on trade in return.

It could be time to fully empower what Salleh [9, pp. 3–14] calls the invisible global majority, women. They could be the missing agents in history, and therefore nature, in our troubled times. Women, collaborating with indigenous movements, may have the restorative powers to address the containment and harassment from male-controlled institutions.

There are clear examples of alternative mindsets at work. For example, the national conservation movement has collaborated with both farmers and big business on projects for ecological rehabilitation, including the Landcare movement. A few local councils are growing reed beds in stormwater channels and giving away plants indigenous to the locality for any one willing to replace them with hydrangeas and gardenias.

However, these examples are far from widespread. Perhaps most farmers and other business owners see the conservation movement as impeding their right to profit from exploiting natural resources. Meanwhile reconciliation fails to hit the list of major issues, and racial tension continues to make news. It is still possible to hear of indigenous Australian culture being vilified for having been too primitive to invent the wheel. But it is hard to deny that they discovered controlled burning for land management, were aware of the dryness of the continent and knew where to find water, and invented a prototype aerofoil, the boomerang.

Yet the power of ideas cannot be denied. They may have been more important than technology for social change. It may be time for Oz to update its narratives from the military and the industrial to align with a preferred future vision. Here is where I believe futurists can act more assertively and media-wise to introduce insight and foresight into the public discourse as society's grand strategists for sustainable futures.

There would be merit in learning, too, from Wendell Bell, an American futurist. His *Pledge to Future Generations* [24] subscribes to: caring for future generations; choosing work that contributes positively to humanity; helping halt environmental deterioration; stopping population growth; opposing all war, terrorism and violence; supporting the advance in children's health and well-being; enhancing cooperation among diverse cultures; understanding our place in the universe; upholding human rights and civic participation; and experimenting with forms of governance, including governance at the local community level.

Senior government lawmakers and administrators, and business executives, far too seldom address the ethics embedded in Bell's wisdom. They can claim to be too busy—but with the short-term. And fads and buzz words tempt a quick fix for *one-minute managers*. How can busy people be challenged to think about the consequences of their decisions and actions? Perhaps they need to be reminded of the future well-being of their own children and grandchildren. Along with new narratives, such deep personal concern could create very different future cultures [25].

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