

OFFICIAL



Postnormal

The APS Futures Capability Project Newsletter



December 2023

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In this newsletter

1. Project update
2. The Temporal Salon: Thinking expansively with Feminist Futures
3. Technique of the week: Visioning
4. 3 Cool Things

Hi there again curious minds and outside-the-box thinkers!

Welcome to this month's edition of POSTNORMAL: the newsletter from PM&C's APS futures and foresight capability project, "Policy Fit for the Future".

As we move towards the final phase of our project – which will deliver an excellent, but fairly conventional set of resources - we will continue to shamelessly espouse some of our less conventional ideas via this newsletter, POSTNORMAL. In our small space in the wider universe, we know the only constant is change. Exploring what the 'post normal' might look like is an ongoing series of discoveries in service to that one, momentous question humanity has

Futures: the discipline of exploring, anticipating and shaping the future. Also known as *strategic foresight*.

Futures is not about prediction (forecasting). It is about using collective intelligence with structured approaches (such as horizon scanning and scenario planning) to make pro-active decisions in a global environment characterised by uncertainty, complexity and change. It is fundamental for good policy and thinking beyond the short term.

Futures gives us the tools to **identify the future we want and take action now** to pursue it.

tried to answer for time eternal: **what the hell is going on?**

Even if we can't ever answer it, what's important is that we keep asking it and having a go. We certainly think we in the APS have a responsibility to the government and the wider public to, perhaps, not have the *full and correct* answer to that question, but the *best* answer. That's the ambition. That's the core goal of the APS. That's what providing frank, fearless and apolitical advice really means. And that's what futures is here to help you do.

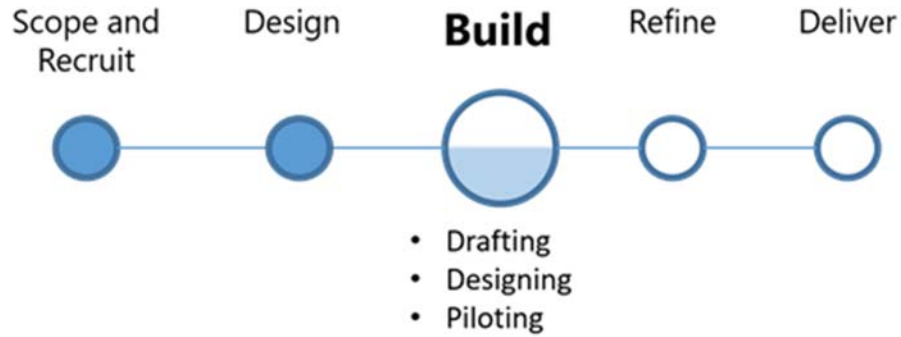
In this month's POSTNORMAL, our Temporal Salon article "**Thinking expansively with Feminist Futures**" invites you to consider if you are, in fact, really thinking outside the box on policy. Our "**Technique of the Week**", explores the process of **visioning** - highlighting the importance of not just exploring possible futures, but working towards preferred ones. Finally - our **3 Cool Things** will get you in the know of interesting futures activities across the APS, some inspiration to visit space one day, and a moment to appreciate a perspective on democracy.

If you're new to futures or our project, see the attached one-pager for a high level view on what we're doing.

As always, get in touch with us at futures@pmc.gov.au if you have questions or comments about the project, or want to explore using futures in your agency. Feel free to send this on to friends and colleagues – we're happy to add them to our subscription list on request.

Project update – Policy Fit for the Future

We are at full steam ahead now, about to enter the final phases of the project. We hit a major milestone in December – delivery of our whole of government SES strategic policy workshops, with over 70 SES from every major policy agency in attendance.



The workshops drew on the collective intelligence of the participants to identify and prioritise what challenges the governments may face over the coming decade – with a focus on emerging issues or escalating trends that were not front of mind for the government or APS but will require a serious step change in policy to address. One clear theme was dominant in all three sessions - we will keep you guessing for now what that is – it wasn't climate, which we took as a baseline assumption as a major driver of future challenges. We captured plenty of ideas on future challenges and 'no regrets' measures agencies could put in place to be more prepared for change and uncertainty. Look forward to our formal report on the sessions in January; it will be going to the PM&C Executive and Secretaries Board (and the executives of all participating agencies).

We've also attached the "**What If's**" we used to provoke thinking in the workshops. These are purely hypotheticals – not the view of us or PM&C. But they can be useful to support a quick, provocative conversation about how the future might look for the APS. We've included some blank templates if you're interested in using this format inside your own agency. Our project director, Will Hartigan, has previously used a similar format for assisting senior SES level strategic foresight discussions (e.g. at Executive Board) – it can be useful to take one challenging idea in your portfolio's policy space and base a strategic conversation around the potential implications.

Beyond the workshop report, we are now fully focussed on synthesising the results of all of our stakeholder engagement, research and pilot futures trials into a fantastic futures primer, including a toolkit/playbook and a bunch of useful templates and case studies. Finalising that in January is our most important deliverable, so the team is hard at work to ensure we have something fantastic to share with all of you in a few weeks.

We've continued to partner agencies to run light touch, quick and dirty **futures workshops**. While our project is coming to an end, the Policy Projects and Taskforce Office (PPTO) here at PM&C may be able to help you out if your team is interested in exploring the future of a policy space, building futures capability, or doing some longer term strategy work. [Get in touch](#) with us to see if we can help. Our project

partners - [the Futures Hub](#) at the National Security College are also there to help you out to build futures expertise and help with structured activities.

The Temporal Salon

Lessons for the APS: Insights from feminist futures literature

I love futures. In the 4 months I've been working on the Policy Fit for the Future project, it's like I've come home to a happy place - an opportunity to consider different approaches to tackling our big policy challenges, linking thematic threads across silos and exploring a variety of visions for a better Australia. What more could you want?

For me, futures and strategic foresight creates opportunities for thinking afresh about policy. However, as a woman, I have wondered where I fit within futures? Futures workshops and research products often focus on sweeping (and sometimes highly abstract) global megatrends. I wonder if this global focus means we sometimes lose sight of other issues of concern to many Australian citizens. Are the possible futures we explore truly as diverse as our communities? How do we examine our own biases and avoid groupthink?

Considering our future through the lens of gender is a known and useful framing that can strengthen futures and strategic foresight. Decades of feminist literature and theory can offer practical insights and alternative perspectives to enrich futures for stronger policy.

According to [Gunnarsson-Östling](#) (2011), the discipline of futures is typically and historically underpinned by an Anglo masculine framing, which informs a series of biases and assumptions about what the present and future look like. A predominantly male perspective also influences what data and trends we consider insightful and useful. In other words, futures is not neutral or necessarily capturing a diversity of information or experience, especially that of women and girls. Inadvertently, futures can sideline issues that are important for women.

For example, Gunnarsson-Östling suggests that futures might not proactively look at private sphere (domestic) issues, as they are often considered less important or too complex. For women and girls however, issues like reproductive rights, domestic violence, maternity leave, equal pay, sexual harassment and violence - including street harassment - are present and real in their everyday lives. These issues can be important undercurrents that can affect broader trends in politics, economics society. We may too often take a 'top down' approach to futures, where we consider how global trends apply to us nationally or locally - we should remember that 'bottoms up' approaches have merit too, where we seek to build a better understanding of global trends by starting with the lived experience of people at a local or individual level.

Gunnarsson-Östling's review of futures literature from the late 1990's to the mid 2000's, offers two key insights around gender that can inform a more diverse approach to futures and strategic foresight:

1. Reflect on who is and isn't included in the future discussion - and why: Use gender to consider a broad range of assumptions such as:
 - Does your team have a preconceived idea around "the future" of the policy area?
 - How are women and girls featured in your policy visioning?
 - What data that might matter to women and girls is in the mix? Have you actively talked to other departments or even external organisations representing women and girls to know their views?
2. Weigh up the futures methods being used: Gunnarsson-Östling suggests that focussing on domestic or private sphere topics doesn't mean devising a "laundry list of women's issues". Rather, it means considering which futures approach might enable different perspectives to be considered. Gender (and other identity categories around age, mobility, ethnicity etc.) are again, useful here. For example:
 - Instead of a generic gaming experience, make it a girls only one related issue and game (UN-Habitat, the arm of the UN working on cities, runs urban safety sessions with girls using Minecraft for example).
 - Consider a culturally diverse female focus group on a policy topic?

The APS needs to be discerning around futures and strategic foresight. Personally, I think feminist and other literature (such as that written around Indigenous futures) can be really exciting when applied to the futures space as it helps shake out some new ideas. So - at your next policy discussion that reaches into the future, "gender-up" the discussion! I'm sure it will be worth it and reveal both interesting and important insights on the future for someone, somewhere in Australia.

Technique of the week – Visioning

Policy is fundamentally about shaping the future – changing the status quo in a way that changes future outcomes for governments, communities, businesses and citizens.

However, we often stop short of working through the implications of what success looks like, particularly at a strategic level and for major policy reforms. What *would* Australia look like if our schools were better funded? Or if we implemented significant competition reform? Or changed the balance of our tax system from income to wealth? Or legalised automated vehicles? What would the effects be for the workplace, our homes, exports, urban design?

Visioning is a futures technique that involves imagining a preferred future – typically, if a major strategic policy goal was achieved - then considering both what we need to do to get there, but also the second and third order implications of success. Imagining what that preferred future could look like for different people (personas) can also help us make a stronger case for major policy reforms by clearly articulating to the Government (or other stakeholders) what policy success could look like for Australians from different backgrounds, communities, life stages, or in regional or rural areas.

More importantly, the APS benefits from a strong, clear articulation of what a policy is supposed to achieve at the strategic level - to guide current work; explore how plans may be affected by other drivers of change in the world; and also to consider the possible unintended consequences of a policy, positive and negative. As the [OECD](#) says, governments need to be “future fit” to more proactively shape and embrace inevitable change – in every policy domain, from climate to jobs to technology to social inclusion and equity. Doing this well is known as [anticipatory governance](#). Visioning is an important tool to start with, especially for building consensus on what the fundamental purposes of our strategic policies are, and how they may be achieved.

Steps to develop a clear aspirational vision

What is it suitable for? Creating a process to collectively develop a shared vision for a preferred future – what might Australia look like if X, Y and Z was in place? The process creates clarity in a policy space around what is being aspired to and a more concrete understanding of what is possible, for who and where in Australia. It can also be an useful starting point for working out a strategic plan for a policy and the key changes and steps required to achieve it.

Example workshop exercise:

This exercise works well for a policy team, small group of stakeholders, or SES. The intention is to create a shared vision of success as a basis for strategic policy development – crystallising the big picture for the future of your policy so you know the change you are seeking to achieve.

STEP 1 (10 MINS) – SCENE SETTING

As a group, discuss/confirm the thematic area and any parameters to be considered. For example:

- Vision timeframe (at least 10 years into the future is recommended, as people find it easier to visualise meaningful change over longer timeframes)
- What are some key principles or values that are most important for the vision? For example, the most guiding values of key decision makers as you understand them – wellbeing, security, equity, fairness, inclusion, prosperity?
- What might be in and out of scope for the vision?
- What could the vision will be used for?

STEP 2 (10-30 MINS) – CREATE THE VISION

Participants imagine what the future might look like by exploring the key features of a preferred vision.

- Individually, ideate on what a preferred future state could look like – encourage everyone to think about what would have to change in the world between the present and future state for policy success was achieved – and what the defining features of that future state would look like. (5 mins).
- As a group, agree on 3-5 key features of the preferred vision and a title for the vision. The key features need to indicate clearly how the preferred future is substantially and definitively different from the present state. (15 mins)

(For example, if your future vision was for a more socially inclusive Australia, your group might decide key features could include fewer people attending private schools so that communities are less divided by socio-economic status; childcare is free and widely available; our political and industrial leadership class would be more diverse and representative of broader Australian demography.)

STEP 3 (10-20 MINS) - IMPLICATIONS

- As a group or in pairs, identify three Australians (using personas – e.g. a student, someone entering aged care, a single parent, a tech sector worker, a nurse – feel free to use a combination) or communities (could be geographical communities or social or demographic cohorts) that would be affected by the preferred vision. In a few sentences, explain how they could be positively or negatively affected. (10 mins)
- As a larger group, share one or more of the personas or places identified and use them to reflect on your vision (does it change anything? Will there be winners and losers in your preferred future state?) (10 mins).

Timeframe

- 30 mins – 2 hours

Benefits

- An agreed preferred vision of the future with consideration of the key features that distinguish it from the present.
- Insights to inform policy, planning and risk management as well as futures process like back casting and policy road mapping.

Things to note

- Don't be constrained by the political, social, economic or environmental reality of today.
- Note that the focus of the vision should be on people's everyday lives in the future, not the present – ensure the vision is meaningfully different from the present state.

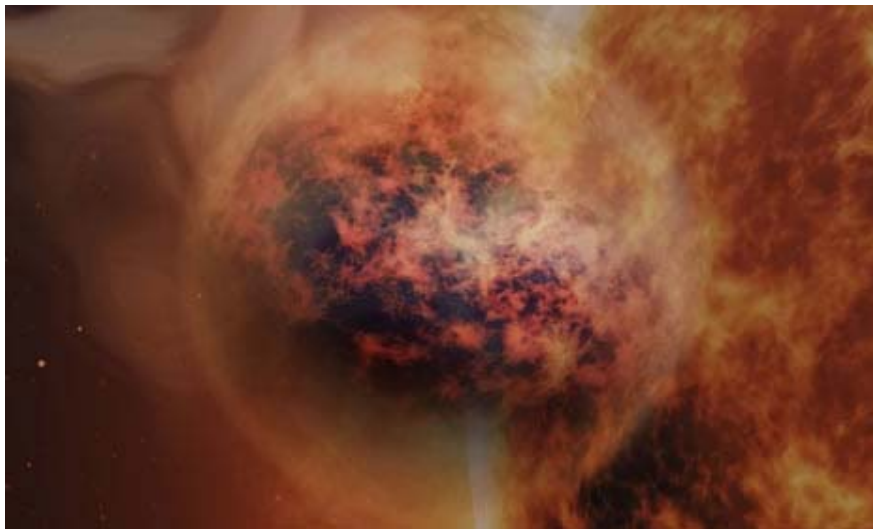
- If groups cannot agree on a shared vision, outline two but agree to work on one and move the other to a 'parking lot' for consideration later.

3 Cool Things

1. *APS Cool Futures stuff.* AFP Futures Games - are the Olympics next? In exciting futures news, the Australian Federal Police (AFP) recently held their "Futures Games 2023" for the fifth year in a row. It was a complete success – we thought it was fantastic fun and a great learning experience.

The Games are an opportunity for the AFP, government departments, international policing agencies, and state and territory police forces to challenge their thinking and explore the future of policing. Many participating teams were new to futures methods and keen to try their hand at futures analysis. Teams needed to undertake a trend analysis, challenge it against other teams and develop a short scenario of the future. Our team was impressed by the full spectrum of work at the AFP and really appreciated the opportunity to experiment with a policing perspective. Thank you very much to the AFP and the Games Masters organising a great event – there were a lot of lessons for how we could do something similar in the wider APS. Keep an eye out for next year's Games!

2. *Planning your next galactic holiday?* [Recent NASA pictures](#) from the famous James Webb space telescope "revealed a planet where specs of sand fall as rain" – Wasp-107b, 200 light years away from Earth in the Virgo constellation.



Planet WASP-107b. Photograph: Klaas Verpoest/Johan van Looveren/LUCA School of Arts/KU Leuven/PA from the Guardian 16 November 2023.

The horsehead nebula. Photograph: Esa/Euclid/Euclid Consortium/NAS/AFP/Getty Images. The Guardian 8 November 2023.

And even more WOW – [the Euclid space telescope](#) has recently beamed back “dark universe” pictures as part of the European Space Agency’s work. We can see the “Perseus” galaxy cluster and the Horsehead Nebula – just two of the 8 billion (yes....billion) galaxies this project will observe using infrared and visible light. It’s a wicked combination with the dark matter that all makes this possible. Amazing. Plan your holiday, folks!





Galaxies belonging to what is known as the Perseus cluster. Photograph: Esa/Euclid/Euclid Consortium/NAS/AFP/Getty Images. The Guardian 8 November 2023.

3. *What is Democracy?* We recently undertook a thought-provoking futures exercise with the Strengthening Democracy Taskforce at the Department of Home Affairs. This led Will Hartigan in our team to reflect on this piece by E.B. White originally published in the July 3, 1943 issue of the New Yorker. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt used to read it out at subsequent gatherings at the White House, often finishing up with “Them’s my sentiments exactly”. We thought it would be a nice one to end the year on and consider what a similar response we might write in Australia in 2023 – or in 2033? Happy holidays!

We received a letter from the Writers’ War Board the other day asking for a statement on “The Meaning of Democracy.” It presumably is our duty to comply with such a request, and it is certainly our pleasure.

Surely the Board knows what democracy is. It is the line that forms on the right. It is the don’t in don’t shove. It is the hole in the stuffed shirt through which the sawdust slowly trickles; it is the dent in the high hat. Democracy is the recurrent suspicion that more than half of the people are right more than half of the time. It is the feeling of privacy in the voting booths, the feeling of communion in the libraries, the feeling of vitality everywhere. Democracy is a letter to the editor. Democracy is the score at the beginning of the ninth. It is an idea which hasn’t been disproved yet, a song the words of which have not gone bad. It’s the mustard on the hot dog and the cream in the rationed coffee. Democracy is a request from a War Board, in the middle of a morning in the middle of a war, wanting to know what democracy is.

Thanks for reading! Send us your feedback and feel free to forward this on to your friends and colleagues. If you're working in the futures/strategic foresight space in government, we'd love to hear from you. Once again, our address is:

This issue was drafted by Melissa Permezel with support from the PPTO APS Futures Capability Project team: Arthur Horobin, Katherine Knowles, Anton Falez, Faseeha Hashmi, Will Hartigan, and Alexander Tobal.

Please note due to the public facing nature of the APSC website, we have not included the attachments. If you would like a copy, please contact:

futures@pmc.gov.au