

# Foreword

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The aim of this foreword is to introduce the rationale and main themes of this volume. When we at the Australia and New Zealand School of Government were planning this research initiative, we were confronted by an avalanche of momentous events—especially crises and natural disasters. We had just gone through the Global Financial Crisis of 2008–09; Australia had just endured seven years of incredible drought; we were then hit by massive bushfires across southern Australia (in Victoria and Western Australia); then by a series of major floods across Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria over three successive years; then the massive Canterbury earthquakes occurred from September 2010 to June 2011, destroying much of Christchurch; and following that some huge cyclones wiped out entire communities in northern Queensland. Many of these disasters came at the cost of a substantial toll in human lives. We had also been impacted by many health scares: Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and bird flu in the early 2000s; the H1N1 influenza; and the equine or Hendra virus.

Elsewhere, the communities of South-East Asia had been decimated by the Asian tsunami in 2004, leaving more than a quarter of a million people dead; the south-eastern states of America were severely damaged by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, flooding New Orleans and closing much of the city; the capital of Haiti, Port-au-Prince, was devastated by a catastrophic earthquake in 2010, killing hundreds of thousands of residents; much of Europe was covered with volcanic ash from Iceland's Eyjafjallajökull volcano in May 2011, causing massive disruption to air transport; and in the same year the Japanese island of Honshu experienced a massive undersea earthquake that caused a huge tsunami onshore, which resulted in a series of nuclear meltdowns contaminating vast tracts of the coastal plains.

Discussing these events, we were aware of a growing literature on disaster and crisis management—some of whose leading thinkers appear in this volume; but as nations we still seemed unprepared and underprepared, even ill prepared, for such eventualities.

We were also conscious that trans-Tasman governments and their organisations had undertaken a substantial body of reform over many years and that they were now in better shape than previously to meet pending challenges. They have been reformed by New Public Management, have introduced better business systems and processes, have used markets and other sectors to improve

delivery; and have attempted to embrace whole-of-government responses to problems, and talked about including more citizens' engagement in forming policy and guiding its delivery.

Consequently, without being overly triumphalist, we were prepared to accept that governments *do some things very well* and are *doing some things to the best of their ability*. They are particularly good at dealing with the predictable, the expected, the routine and issues of business continuity. They can be good on occasions in recovery and rebuilding when disasters strike.

There are, however, other things governments are *not doing well at all*—and these issues are what we have turned our attention to.

Governments are not good at precautionary management and preparing for the future; they are not good at thinking through and taking the necessary preparations; they are not good at anticipation and planning, and managing for future risk; sometimes they are not even good at collecting or analysing the information necessary to prepare for future events. And this, we might say, is when they can reasonably predict future events. As Jocelyne Bourgon argues in Chapter 4, governments and their public sectors are not good at dealing with things 'beyond the predictable'.

In short, governments are not (yet) good at future-proofing the state or their societies. Moreover, to the extent that governments consciously think about these issues, they get sidetracked by expedient and short-term concerns and bogged down by the hegemony of immediacy and political time frames.

We know that Australia will experience bushfires again—possibly up to two to three major ones every decade—yet we continue to allow people to build and live in bushfire-prone areas. We know floods and cyclones will regularly recur, but do we take adequate precautions about the known risks? On both sides of the Tasman we continue to build in earthquake-prone areas, and do not require buildings to meet exacting standards.

Too often the best intentions of governments, and normative considerations of what best they should be doing, are outweighed by immediate political, economic and social pressures and the existing array of vested interests calculating their partisan advantage or minimising their disadvantage.

In this volume we do not just focus narrowly on natural disasters—their occurrence was merely one catalyst to encourage us to explore these themes. We have chosen a much wider lens.

We focus on four broad groups of complex future challenges, each with different and particular drivers. Throughout the volume, we consider

- population-based and demographic changes that place huge stresses on global systems—these challenges relate to population size, growth, their impacts on resources, food shortages, problems of ageing and long-term health care, social movements and social dislocation
- environmental problems and challenges from climatic changes—these involve the known and unknown, the acknowledged or agreed and disputed effects of threats to the global environment, and what we can effectively do about meeting these challenges
- our increased susceptibility to natural disasters that may be occurring and recurring at more regular intervals and with greater magnitude; we are interested less in disaster response and crisis management and more in *readiness* and how to *rebuild recoveries* to minimise future risks
- crises we inflict on ourselves: human-induced problems emerging from the economy and from changes in society—local, national, regional and global—these are varied in form and cause and include anything from financial crises to civil unrest and terrorism, risks to technological and security systems as well as cyber attacks, conflicts between minorities and majorities, and conflicts over social values and problems of social integration, bred by social and political divisions.

And although the volume is entitled *Future-Proofing the State*, we are also interested in how society future-proofs itself, and how it develops its capacities for resilience.

To future-proof societies calls for different thinking about our management of complex problems. Building solutions will necessarily have to involve multiple actors and agencies, be focused across policy fields, involving cross-disciplinary approaches and mutual trust and resilience. We will have to find ways to gain political ‘buy-in’ for longer-term solutions and turn the attention of our politicians to issues beyond the immediate and the predictable.

If we look back, we have historically dealt with problems of *market failure* (usually by seeing the state step in to provide, insure or regulate); then we have dealt with problems of *state failure* as government over-reached itself and unleashed perverse effects (usually by refocusing the state, deregulating and transferring functions to non-state providers); and now we are arguably facing *community failure*, a failure of local communities to retain social capital, to maintain robustness and systemic resilience. These are new challenges.

To explore these issues we ask four questions.

1. What are the long-term challenges we are likely to face, and how can we predict, estimate and anticipate our future better?
2. How can we transform our political, economic and social institutions to ensure that long-term issues receive proper attention, and that our policymakers in

government, in the community, in the non-governmental organisation (NGO) sector and in the private sector address these future issues more seriously?

3. What learnings from previous crises, disasters, failures and looming time bombs can be extracted to enable us to better manage as we go forward and meet similar but different challenges?
4. How can we work together to rebuild and reinforce some of the important mortar of our societies: trust, respect, awareness, societal resilience, and above all capacities to act and respond to whatever challenges come along?

It is worth remembering, however, that governments cannot exclusively commit to future-proofing. We ought to recognise that our governments do contradictory things—they are not just committed to incubating resilience but simultaneously to breeding dependencies and reliance among clients and constituencies; they are extending statist regulations and nanny-ing at the same time as they are preaching the virtues of self-reliance; they are still engaged in various forms of social engineering and orchestrating social outcomes while wanting communities to be more resilient and cognisant of managing future risks. It can be a difficult political environment in which to build future-proofing.

Finally, we began this project with the proposition that governments were not good at future-proofing and preparing for future challenges. We then identified the major problems and impediments that prevented them from doing so. But identifying problems and labelling them were the easy parts of our analysis; finding effective solutions was the much harder component of the exercise—the rationale for this volume is precisely to discover the effective solutions for future-proofing our states and societies.

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