

# **A possible leisure society denied: experiences of the past and expectations for the future**

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The Second World War was followed by a remarkable period of growth and stability in the developed nations of the West, including New Zealand. As the ravages of war were repaired and new infrastructures put in place for an increasing population, unemployment was almost unknown. There was much for all to do - the effort was required and a better life was building.

By 1968, there were signs of social unhappiness particularly in USA and France where there were riots and disturbances. Many ecologists and business leaders were beginning to appreciate the damage caused during that period of growth, and in 1972, "The limits to growth" provided a clear statement of the dangers of such development. In New Zealand, as elsewhere, there was considerable debate throughout the 1970s on a number of environmental, social and economic problems. These problems were all consequences of human progress. While the problems were considerable, so were the hopes.

Two points became obvious: that to continue on the existing growth-oriented trends would risk global disaster, and that a solution was to move to a leisure or conservator society. The end of the growth period was a signal that it was time to concentrate on quality of life rather than on quantity of production.

I reacted to the challenge by a reorientation of my career. I moved from applied mathematics to the interdisciplinary topic of futures research. This involved the consideration of information from many disciplines in the social and physical sciences, searching for overall patterns in global developments and attempting to identify dominant trends and forces.

Many of the trends identified early in my early research have continued to dominate to the present. These include the decreasing fertility rate and the increasing numbers of women in the work force, and the increasing efficiency and replacement of workers by new technology. Such trends could allow for reduced hours of work and a significant increase in leisure. The fear was that without an appropriate reaction, the benefits would be lost and the country would experience very high unemployment and the associated social ills.

Later I came to realize that there had been a significant shift in developed economies as over-production in many sectors (chemicals, iron production, shipbuilding, etc.) was appearing on a global scale. This represented a change in a long-term cycle which had been observed many times before.

By 1980, I had further recognized that the growth in the power of international finance would continue, and dominate, multiplying the problem and blocking any solution. This was asserted by the title of my later book, "Excess capital" (1989). Investment was moving from production to loans as salesmen of capital roved the world, convincing national governments to borrow to solve short-term problems. New Zealand was not alone in starting off down that path.

There was a considerable body of research and discussion in Europe at that time from which we were learning. Indeed, while New Zealand efforts such as the Commission for the Future and the Planning Council have become a distant memory, such efforts continue both within national groups and in international bodies such as UNESCO and the UNU. New Zealand appears curiously isolated from much of the important debate on our global future.

A recognition and understanding of long-term trends allows us to comprehend where we are and what is to be expected. For example, the current globalization is a continuation of a process which has been observed for more than five hundred years. While the process is not likely to change significantly in the coming years, the path which it takes will be determinant. Consider, for example, the question of whether the USA be replaced by China or Japan as the center of world finance, and if so when? (The probability is that it will be many decades before such a change can be expected.)

Much of futures research is based on a belief that it is not possible to forecast the future, and that one should not try to do so, but rather to present a varied set of possible forecasts for the reader or client to choose amongst. I find that often confusing. My preference is to produce an analysis which describes and judges dominant trends, and which produces a most probable picture of where we are heading. This is a scientific approach of forecasts which can later be tested against reality.

Note that the aim here is to produce a 'most probable' picture, to understand what is actually happening rather than to carry out an exercise in wishful thinking. Indeed, it is often found that the more pessimistic forecasts turn out to be the most accurate. We all too often look towards the future with rose-coloured spectacles.

A most-probable forecast (not a desired future, but more realistic) is for an increase in inequalities and a failure to respond adequately to many social and environmental global problems, due to the continuation of the domination of global capitalism and an increase in the already extraordinary power of trans-national corporations. These groups are not only dominant and very powerful. They also have a considerable and self-belief in their system. There will be no collapse of the system from internal stresses. The favored minority will continue to benefit from the remarkable advances of new technologies; their future will be optimistic and rich.

Meanwhile the population of less developed countries will pass a sustainable level, and by around the year 2030 starvation, disruption and war will become widespread. The high tech super rich will share the world with the misery of the poor; this is today's world with the inequalities writ large.

Note that this forecast is very much one of business as usual for the world. Perhaps the most important question for us is how we can best organize our national community. This most probable picture of dominant trends has implications for many of the topic areas of this conference, as the domination of finance capital continues. Here are some examples based on the conference notice.

- There are limits to land availability and to water supplies, and agriculture may not keep up with growing populations.
- Damage to the environment will not be repaired and many other species will become extinct.
- Sustainable development will be blocked.
- The disruption following regional food shortages which are possible around 2020-2030 may be followed by migration of a new and much expanded generation of boat people.
- Already the growth of unemployment and poverty has seriously damaged the Maori family.
- In a time of global overproduction and cut-throat competition, better education cannot provide work for an increased work force (which now includes many more women than in the past).
- One important question is whether business for social responsibility can meet the challenge and join an effort to build a more optimistic future.

None of these questions can be answered in isolation. Note that the problem which we face is one of success, and of a failure to make a good use of that success. For example, we have a society in which more people want to work, and contribute. Past construction means that much of the national infrastructure is in place. Reasonable material needs can now be satisfied by the efforts of just a proportion of the potential workers (working at today's full-time rates) and the ongoing technological improvements will continue that process - the end of the technological revolution is nowhere in sight. Why can we not aim to produce what is needed *with as little effort as possible*, and to each live a full life with satisfying participation in the world of work and plentiful leisure for family and other activities?

The block has been the seizure of power by an international oligarchy, fixated on hard work, dominance, growth and profit. Much of the ownership and control of New Zealand has moved offshore. The majority of the stock market is foreign owned. And foreign owners export profits and jobs. Development work, for example, is more frequently carried out by a central team in the home country. The multiplier effect as wages are spent in local communities is increasingly escaping to benefit communities elsewhere. Those multiplier effects together with the steady repatriation of profit from New Zealand to other countries raise the very real question of the sustainability of the current New Zealand economic structure. If the present economy is allowed to drift, the pattern of overwork for some and underemployment for others will be strengthened, as income and social differences widen.

New Zealand should get better at thinking through complex problems and exploring the consequences of long-term trends. We did this 25 years ago but were ignored. Giant corporations plan ahead, why cannot we, the people? This country vitally needs a number of interdisciplinary think tanks to look hard at global developments and to consider what is best for us, not what suits the trans-nationals.

Poverty can only be reduced by understanding and dealing with the basic forces which create the poverty in the first place, and which have transformed New Zealand from a land of decency and equality to one in which poverty is important enough to form the theme of conferences such as this.