

Lost in Space: Turning ideas into Action

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Wendy McGuinness & Hayley Vujcich

Wendy is the Chief Executive of the McGuinness Institute.

Summary

To be successful, a national strategy must be so attractive that New Zealanders want to implement it, not because they have to, but because they want what it can deliver. Over the last seventy years, a number of different organisations have undertaken public-good initiatives aimed at developing consensus about a united vision, a shared set of goals, or a national strategy. In this think piece, we look at the different initiatives New Zealanders have developed, a topic that will be explored further in an upcoming report, *A History of Future Thinkers* in New Zealand. We also question the role of silo-based reviews, and suggest that New Zealand needs to find better ways to develop consensus and actively ensure good ideas are not lost in space.

Lost in Space was a science-fiction TV series that ran between 1965 and 1968. Set in 1997, it shows the Earth suffering from overpopulation and natural resource depletion, resulting in a small group travelling on the *Jupiter 2* to search for a habitable planet for human kind to colonise. However, before the launch Dr Zachary Smith sneaks aboard to sabotage the mission. He accidentally becomes trapped onboard, and on lift-off his extra weight throws the *Jupiter 2* off course, causing the ship to become lost in space. Although New Zealand does not appear to have a Dr Zachary Smith (at least not to our knowledge), we seem to be good at launching ideas, but once they are released, we fall short on achieving our original mission.

The McGuinness Institute is interested in understanding why this is. While our *Think Piece 9* looked at New Zealand think tanks as 'idea factories', here we are interested in what happens once ideas have been created.



Publicity photo for the TV series *Lost in Space*, Irwin Allen © CBS

Previous attempts to turn ideas into action have been limited to reaching a comparative handful of people through methods that largely fail to engage or create meaningful outcomes. Table 1 (overleaf) identifies a number of public-good, consensus-building initiatives aimed at developing a united vision, a shared set of goals, or a national strategy for all New Zealanders. These have been driven by different

motivations: a desire to realign New Zealand because of a wasted opportunity; to identify and meet future challenges; to resolve disparities; or to preserve treasured values and experiences for future generations. Taken together, we believe recent initiatives (numbers 5–13 in Table 1) indicate a general desire by New Zealanders to reassess the country's strategic direction, as well as the challenges we face.

Central government has not always been successful in this area either. Some past initiatives to integrate policy on big issues have struggled to develop consensus, such as the Oceans Policy,¹ or have created division and conflict, such as the Foreshore and Seabed debate. If government is going to engage in debate on issues such as MMP and the Constitution,² emphasis should be placed on designing mechanisms which enable everyone to engage, and ensuring there is enough commitment to complete the process.

As indicated in Table 1, New Zealand has no shortage of people who are sufficiently concerned about our productivity, society or environment to want to put pen to paper. Our challenge may not be about finding good ideas, but defining and then collectively owning the problem we are all trying to solve. This means two things.

Firstly, we need to define the problem by separating it from its symptoms. We are concerned that silo-based reviews, such as the latest *OECD Economic Survey* (2009), address symptoms and therefore focus on short-term, ad hoc economic fixes, rather than providing clarity over the breadth of the problem. Instead, the OECD needs to prepare one integrated report, assessing the economic, social and environmental risks and opportunities over the medium term, and make recommendations based on international experience, but always crafted with the culture of the country in mind.

Secondly, we need to collectively own the problem. This requires learning from the successes and failures of past initiatives, like those listed overleaf. This is the purpose of our upcoming report, *A History of Future Thinkers in New Zealand*. There appears to be a relationship between successful initiatives and recessionary periods.³ Notably, initiatives 1–4 tend to follow key economic downturns, while initiatives 5–13 are arguably waiting in the wings. In other words, timing is everything. When things are tough, New Zealanders look for a collective way forward. Hence, New Zealand needs to be looking for innovative initiatives that will work.

Without effective mechanisms for developing collective intelligence over complex problems, New Zealand is likely to continue to drift. Our challenge is to find initiatives that turn ideas into action, rather than allow great ideas to be lost in space.

Table 1: New Zealand-wide public-good, consensus-building initiatives. (Note: more detailed descriptions are available on our [website](#).)

Initiative	Year	Detail	Numbers to Date	Outputs/Ideas	Duration
1. NZ Institute of Public Administration	1934–1974	An unofficial and non-political body founded to promote the study and importance of public administration and policy.	~ 80 writers	~ 20 publications	40 years
2. Commission for the Future	1976–1982	Funded by government to study the possibilities for the long-term economic and social development of New Zealand. The output from this work was, to all intents and purposes, discarded. Copies of some documents form part of the Futures Thinking Aotearoa (NZ Futures Trust) library and are stored privately in Wellington. These have been scanned and are available on the McGuinness Institute website .	~ 400 staff, experts + opinion polls	~ 20 publications	6 years
3. Porter Project	1990–1991	The project originated from a 1990 report by the NZ Trade Development Board, titled <i>A Goal for New Zealand: Ten by 2010</i> . The aim of the Porter Project was to develop New Zealand's strategic direction in order to upgrade the country's economy and wealth-creation capability.	~ 2000 participants	1 book	15 months
4. 20/20 Group	1992–1994	Part of the NZ Futures Trust, this initiative aimed to identify trends likely to occur by 2020, the impacts, issues, and choices New Zealanders face in determining their preferred future.	14 participants	~ 5 papers	2 years
5. Knowledge Wave Conference	2001	The goal of the conference was to find practical ways to secure New Zealand's long-term future as a smarter, more prosperous and successful country. According to the auditors' report (2001), the total cost of the Knowledge Wave Conference was approximately \$1.95 million. ⁴	~ 450 participants	44 recommendations	3 days
6. What Matters Most to New Zealanders	2001–ongoing	A non-partisan network-based initiative, Anew NZ seeks to create goals that envision, measure and create what matters most to New Zealanders.	~ 2500 on mailing list	120 leadership visions 2 publications	Ongoing
7. Household Vision Survey	2001	Run by NZ Post to promote the introduction of Kiwibank, the survey asked New Zealanders to submit postcards on their visions for the future. Afterwards Futures Thinking Aotearoa (formerly the NZ Futures Trust) analysed the postcards and the resulting initiatives were published on Anew NZ's website.	~ 10 000 responses ~ 7800 participants	16 themed visions	1 year
8. Knowledge Wave Leadership Forum	2003	Overseen by the Knowledge Wave Trust, the Forum aimed to generate ideas to return New Zealand to the top half of the OECD.	~ 450 participants	130 ideas and actions	3 days
9. The NZ Institute	2004–ongoing	Formed after the Knowledge Wave Leadership Forum in 2003, this initiative aims to generate new and creative debates, ideas, and solutions that contribute to building a better and more prosperous New Zealand for all New Zealanders.	~ 8 researchers ~ 35 members	5 projects 63 publications	Ongoing
10. <i>Project 2058</i>	2006–ongoing	The McGuinness Institute aims to propose a national strategy for New Zealand.	~ 20 researchers ~ 15 experts	19 publications	Ongoing
11. For Māori Future Makers	2006–2007	Undertaken by Te Puni Kōkiri, this initiative aimed to identify factors that may affect how Māori participate in future economic systems.	3 researchers	1 publication, 8 papers	1 year
12. FutureMakers	2008	A joint venture involving Victoria University's Institute of Policy Studies, Landcare and Secondary Futures, aimed at increasing capacity to 'make' New Zealand's future.	5 staff, 38 experts 71 members	8 papers, 1 educational tool	7 months
13. A Measurable Goal for New Zealand	2008–ongoing	An online project launched by the New Zealand Stock Exchange and HRL Morrison & Co which aims to promote well-being through a shared goal for New Zealand.	Blog: 71 participants Facebook: 210 members	Blog: 113 comments Facebook: 24 posts	Ongoing

For complete references and to find out more, visit our [website](#): www.mcguinnessinstitute.org.



The McGuinness Institute is a non-partisan think tank working towards a sustainable future, contributing strategic foresight through evidence-based research and policy analysis.

McGuinness Institute, Level 2, 5 Cable Street, PO Box 24-222, Wellington 6142

Phone: +64 4 499 8888 Email: wmcg@mcguinnessinstitute.org Website: www.mcguinnessinstitute.org