



## Foresight's *FOUR* Frames

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### Abstract

*Strategic Foresight is usually understood to be a process for exploring possible and plausible futures, or an ability to better anticipate and prepare for what those futures may hold. This perspective may reflect the majority of foresight practice, but, intellectually and in terms of potential value, it is incomplete and unnecessarily constrains the scope and clarity of insights Foresight could provide. The article argues for Foresight to be deployed on the full context of the selected theme; on the dynamically evolving set of factors of four frames. The frames are the past, the present, the future, and the commitment those contributing to the Foresight bring to the exercise. Each of the four frames is influenced, more or less depending on the theme and the timing, by the state of one or more of the other three. A Foresight exercise that omits consideration of even only one frame weakens its output and may, in times of unexpected or extreme disruption for the theme being explored, render the output unusable without major adjustment.*

### 1. Introduction

Strategic Foresight, henceforth Foresight, is usually understood as a process for exploring possible and plausible futures, or an ability to anticipate and prepare for what those futures may hold. All published definitions of Foresight—and there are many, very different, definitions—reflect a focus on the future, and only the future. From an attempt in 2006 to assemble opinion on and facts about Foresight\*, two examples:

“Strategic Foresight is the ability to create and maintain a high-quality, coherent and functional forward view, and to use the insights arising in useful organizational ways. For example, to detect adverse conditions, guide policy, shape strategy and explore new markets, products and services. It represents a fusion of futures methods with those of strategic management.”

– **Richard A. Slaughter**. *Futures for the Third Millennium; Enabling the Forward View*, Prospect Media, St Leonards, NSW 1999, p 218

“(Strategic) Foresight is the integrated capacity to see, think through and do what needs to be done NOW in the light of history-altering implications of the weak signals of change, while

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\*Available from [jdsharries@bell.net](mailto:jdsharries@bell.net)

there is still time to act pro-actively and creatively and before hidden opportunities are lost and unseen threats have become crises.”\*

The perspective that Foresight is virtually all about the future seems accurate in practice. But, intellectually and in terms of potential Foresight usefulness, it is woefully incomplete, unnecessarily constraining the scope and the depth of insights Foresight can achieve.

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*“Willful blindness can be considered the antithesis of good Foresight.”*

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Foresight deserves to be recognized for its potential† ability to shine light on the *full* context of the selected theme, whether an issue, event, action or personality. This *full* context is an evolving and dynamic assembly of interconnected factors from the past, in the present, which the future may offer or impose, and, not infrequently the most important, the influence of those contributing to the Foresight exercise in terms of the nature of their commitment to the process.

Thus, Foresight has four frames of exploration, each of which is influenced—and at times governed—by elements of one or more of the other three. Omitting even only one frame from consideration in a Foresight exercise at least shortchanges the effort, because it leaves the output vulnerable to later needs or demands for adjustment‡ which may be unexpected or extreme.

## 2. Foresight Frame ONE: ‘From the Past’

The past is the foundation of the present; for virtually all§ of the present’s context. For the Foresight practitioner, the past in large part determines what (s)he *initially* brings to the discussion by way of assumptions, biases and interests, the tone and strength of their expression, and the level of willingness to hear and consider the assumptions, biases and interests of others.

During many Foresight processes, and with the passage of time, many do adjust their *initial* positions. The impact on and the importance for Foresight of adjustments to individual and collective assumptions, biases and interests are further considered below. Suffice it to note here is the new knowledge and understanding that each person gains of themselves and of their colleagues through their participation in Foresight.

The past is when lessons were learned that are reflected, more or less, in today’s opinions, policies, plans, and strategies. However, intellectual laziness, and worse willful blindness, in the past will have ensured many opportunities to learn important lessons were ignored or wasted. Willful blindness can be considered the antithesis of good Foresight. Therefore, exploring the past for those missed opportunities, for insights into why we did not ‘see better’ then, might improve our ability to see better now and into the future. This, arguably, is the most powerful reason why Foresight from the past can be so useful.

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\* [www.foresightcanada.ca](http://www.foresightcanada.ca)

† Foresight’s outputs and benefits can only be as good as the Foresight process is rigorous.

‡ Which might include throwing it out.

§ Natural disasters and their severity may be independent of what came before.

But the ‘past’—history—is becoming an ever more challenging study. This is because the record of history is increasingly a ‘work in progress’; competitive and disputed progress at that. Not long ago—arguably at some time in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—a sea change in the recording of history took place. It became both possible\* and acceptable for the past to be recorded and analyzed not only by the main actors; the leaders and winners in history’s great milestones and by ‘subject matter experts’ who attracted a publisher, but by any committed and reasonably literate person with a cause and a computer. Today there are three impacts of this sea change:

- history is being re-interpreted and rewritten all over the world, with significant impact† on geopolitics and economics. Disputes about, and additions and corrections to the existing record have damaged reputations, invalidated government policy, provoked forceful demands for apology, reparation and revenge, and, promoted calls for the impossible; a return to past circumstances.
- ‘modern history’—the record of events and their causes and effects since the sea change in eligibility to be ‘a historian’—is invariably debated, sometimes disputed and, fortunately infrequently so far, fought over. What this means for opinions, policies, plans, and strategies in the future is unpredictable and uncertain; a situation that seems to call for more and better foresight; foresight that looks ‘allwards’.
- precedent—so long a key, respected foundation of analysis, and decision-making and justice—may continue to be interesting, but will be less and less often constructively useful on its own. Instead, as precedent becomes more porous in the face of additional histories, it offers the opportunity for the self-interested to apply only selected parts, which almost certainly will provoke debate, probably disputes and possibly violence. For sure, battle-fields already exist where those demanding ‘new’ and more accurate histories struggle against an ‘establishment’ correctly fearing that if existing history is discredited, they stand to lose much. Invariably, as in all war, the side having initial advantage depends on many factors. Today, that advantage can be as easy to achieve as being the first to the internet with a sensational claim that is sufficiently true it cannot be totally and quickly discredited.

Foresight of the past has three stores of value—of usefulness:

- to learn lessons still un-learned; unlearned by design or default, and
- to unlearn lessons exposed by newly completed, corrected and accepted histories as wrong, and
- to help people come to terms with a world that is a “one room schoolhouse of seven billion-plus student-teachers” who are both writers and users of histories.

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\* Primarily due to the internet.

† National feelings have risen to the point that inter-state violence over differences in historical records and their interpretation is no longer unimaginable.

Foresight of the past is wisdom-building, *if care is taken to keep up well-enough with changes to histories to be at least aware of all the major versions*. It seeks the how and the why and the with-what-means Foresight of the past was, or was not, *or could have been*, important and beneficial. Foresight of the past is exploration to identify:

- cases of successful Foresight, and
- times when Foresight could have been used, but was not, and why, and
- cases and issues for which some application of Foresight would have been at least interesting, possibly useful and, with hindsight\*, important going forward from a specific point in time, and
- events, natural and not, the costs and unhappy consequences of which would have been less had Foresight preceded them.

### 3. Foresight Frame TWO: ‘In the Present’

The ‘present’ is when all Foresight is done. When and how it is done and what it produces are directly and absolutely determined by the people doing it. Since the biases and assumptions and interests that govern their input and analyses are, by and large, the product of their knowledge of and experience in the past, the importance of Foresight of the past is obvious. And, since all Foresight becomes history with the passage of time, adding to the ever-growing amount of knowledge and experience that are the resources of hindsight, how well Foresight is done now is not only important in its own right in professional terms, but a key determinant of the quality of Foresight that can be done in the future.

The present, unlike the past and the future, is a time when, in theory, ‘all’ that is can be seen and known. Therefore, paradoxically, it is the frame of Foresight when ‘blindness’ has the most faces. On the one hand, some blindness is inevitable. It is impossible, in practice, to see ‘everything’, so one does not have to be willful to be ‘blind’. As well, much that exists, and is happening today, is unhappy, uncomfortable, disruptive, or damaging. Such is human nature that, when we can—usually when the known cost is not too great, we avoid—do not ‘see’—such things, or we under-represent their impact and seriousness. Foresight done under these circumstances will suffer from incomplete or inaccurate ‘facts’.

In addition to the problems of information and data that are incomplete or inaccurate, it is often the case that a Foresight exercise is unduly influenced by what is loud, clear and certain ‘now’, however produced, but invariably by ‘experts’. In this situation the result is likely to be fewer high-value insights than when one respects that ‘now’ is fleeting and will never return, and that small (quiet) signals and (uncertain) wild cards ‘seen’ and imagined today—resources that ‘experts’ are loathe to accept†—can throw invaluable light on what the future may hold.

Foresight in the present is the frame in which the environment for Foresight on the future is designed and constructed. Current and foreseeable trends and drivers of context are explored

\* Hindsight is only very rarely 20-20. You can know ‘truth’, and you might even know only truth, but no one can know *all* the truth.

† I have never met an expert on the future, but have met experts who think they are.

to, primarily, focus priorities and make choices for Foresight to come, in terms of:

- which issues most need and deserve Foresight attention,
- which ‘lenses’,\* all things considered, should be employed, and
- what is obstructing and delaying wise anticipation of and thoughtful preparation for the future?

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*“The more we think about the future and prepare for what it may bring, the more likely it will turn out to be to our liking.”*

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The value of Foresight in the present depends directly on a complex combination of effort by and attitude of those doing the Foresight. If they are open and honest the following benefits can be realized:

- A reduction in blindness, both willful and not. Seen will be more of that which personal and professional biases and assumptions encouraged one to ignore or shortchange previously. And, unwillful blindness; unwillingness or inability to look for and see ‘allwards’, can be much reduced.
- More awareness of one’s own and others’ interests, how they influence and are influenced by both biases and assumptions, and how they are reflected in plans for dealing with issues and their implementation.
- A wake-up call about imminent threats, opportunities and complexity, and on how ready; i.e., competent†, one is to deal with them.
- A highlighting of ways that and reasons why ‘grand’ challenges influence our well-being.
- Better scenarios of life-cycle characteristics and dynamics of issues that deserve attention first and most, and, clearer indications of the competencies most demanded for such attention to be effective.

#### 4. Foresight Frame THREE: ‘For the Future’

As noted at the beginning of this think-piece, Foresight is “usually understood as a process for exploring possible and plausible futures, or an ability to anticipate and prepare for what those futures may hold.”

Unfortunately, Foresight for the future manifests a troubling paradox. On the one hand it *must* be the most potentially useful and valuable. The future will come. The more we think about the future and prepare for what it may bring, the more likely it will turn out to be to our liking. Also, because the future is uncertain and unpredictable, there are no ‘experts on the

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\* Foresight lenses include but are not limited to; climate, technology, security, economics, demographics, politics

† Competence Matrix - Harries

future'. It is where, for the moment, everyone is equal in terms of being 'right' about what is coming, needed, and how well we will respond. This is a valuable intellectual space; one in which imagination and dialogue can be exploited, when being 'right' is less needed and valuable than being open and thoughtful. Experience shows that individuals who are enemies on one or more planes of an issue, who hold diametrically opposed positions on an important matter, are able to explore together, calmly, *futures* of that issue, or of others acknowledged deserving of discussion, notwithstanding that, in their present-day context, disagreement is so extreme, dialogue is impossible.

On the other hand, doing Foresight is both necessarily and inherently disruptive in a number of ways. Any one of them can lead to such discomfort for one or more actors that the process is corrupted or constrained or, even, shut down.\* Potential disruptions include:

- the frustration, even anger, of highly-respected Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises SME when Foresight exposes aspects of their field, in the present or in the foreseeable future, in which they are not experts, or are not in a position to become so. The worst Foresight insight for an expert is a signal that their field may not even exist at some time in the future.
- the hesitation, or refusal, to include unwanted or bad futures in even a nominally rigorous Foresight exercise. Doing Foresight on only wanted or good futures—a normative process—is not recommended *unless*, in the manner of military campaign planning, a single future (the enemy is defeated) is explored for a number of ways to achieve it.
- individuals in control, or with powerful and valuable vested interests, become very unhappy if they learn they may not have control in the future, or that their interests are at risk in ways they cannot avoid and to a degree they cannot afford. It is the rich and powerful who are most often guilty of the willful blindness that corrupts Foresight.
- the output of a good Foresight exercise are insights that call for, if not demand, action—in particular, change to the status quo. Not infrequently there is some urgency to the insight. But individuals and organizations are very busy handling the demands of their day to day activities. Adding more tasks that have not been scheduled or budgeted for, or included in human resources plans, can be conveniently set aside by classing them as 'impossible'. In times of change, the status quo and wise and agile leading do not co-exist easily.
- insights from Foresight often highlight the fact that what seems to be needed in preparing for the future is outside or beyond the competence of the organization. Making the decision to establish competence for a future that is uncertain and unpredictable requires an uncommon brand of courage in both the leaders and the led.

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\* The National Defence College of Canada, a globally respected institution and programme, was shut down by federal officials who were 'disrupted' by the 44 participant-executives' annual answer to the question: What sort of Policies for What sort of Canada in What sort of World? The excuse given publicly for the closure was untrue.

- Foresight is done by everyone only on a personal and immediate level. Even when output from good Foresight is available, it is often ignored or poorly exploited. It is seldom easy being different. Cassandras live a vulnerable existence. When one is different and turns out to be wrong, it may not only be pride that is at stake, but much more, and the whole organization may suffer.

Nevertheless, Foresight *should* be done, because the future will come. If it is not faced up to strongly enough and early enough to shape it, the future will shape us, forcing us to react....if we can....if we survive its surprises and shocks.

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*“Foresight of the future is about generating awareness of what the future may hold and constructing commitment to prepare for it, from this moment on.”*

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Foresight is not the same as ‘futures studies’. Whereas both accept that the future is neither predictable nor predetermined, espouse the holistic view, and design scenarios and develop insights from a range of different disciplines, actors and contexts, they are very different. Foresight’s premise is that outcomes in the future can be influenced by implicit and explicit decisions in the present, whereas ‘futures studies’ make no effort to influence the future, only to know and understand it.

Foresight of the future is about generating awareness of what the future may hold and constructing commitment to prepare for it, from this moment on. Using one or more of a long list of tools\* in combination with invention, creativity, imagination and innovation a number of different futures at some date in the future can be described in detail, each consistent in and of itself. Each story is then ‘backcast’ to the present in an iterative fashion. The results of backcasting are scrutinized for common aspects and patterns. The common aspects and patterns are the insights directing attention to gaps, inconsistencies and opportunities—real or perceived. These include:

- capacities and competencies available now may not be those needed at a specific date in the future so can be retired, and
- lenses and drivers being deployed for Foresight in the present may not be the best at a specific date in the future, and
- existing policies, policy-making and policy-selection ways and means may be, respectively, irrelevant, ineffective or inappropriate in the future.

The usefulness of Foresight for the future will depend on the context of the future, which is unknown. Its value, however, rests both on what it offers as it is being carried out, and how meaningfully its output—insights—promotes improved and more confident commitment to

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\* See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/futures\\_studies](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/futures_studies) and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/foresight>

preparing for the future. The following list of ‘value’ of Foresight for the future has been adapted from that published by the since-shuttered\* Office of the National Science Advisor of Canada.

- anticipate multiple, plausible futures.
- explore, without constraints, prospective developments in the 5-25 years horizon.
- highlight emerging opportunities and threats.
- better understand the range of key factors and drivers of change.
- more relevantly accommodate risk, contingency and diversity.
- provide a platform to rehearse ways of dealing with potential critical challenges.
- create transition strategies to move more effectively towards preferred futures.

In summary, the goal of Foresight for the future is to build capacity and competence to shape the future, from ‘now’ on.

## 5. Foresight Frame FOUR: ‘Within’

People decide Foresight will be done. Foresight is then done by people. People decide how any output—insights—from Foresight will be used, if at all. And people decide if a Foresight exercise will be the last one done, or the first of many, or the start of a continuing exercise in shaping the future. Therefore, arguably, and as stated in the introduction, the most important of the four Frames of Foresight is that ‘within’ each individual.

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*“Effective Foresight depends far more on collective effort and commitment than on individual brilliance and specialist expertise.”*

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Much in the preceding material either calls for or implies the importance to good Foresight of honesty and openness, and not a little courage. People who know themselves well, and accept what they know, and are willing and able to work with the inherent and inescapable disruptions of Foresight, will do the best work, for three reasons:

- every human being has unique hindsight. (S)he thinks, sees, knows and behaves based on a unique and ever-changing suite of biases, assumptions and interests. Knowing one’s own personality and behavioural suite and being willing to learn that of others, is key to good Foresight.
- effective Foresight depends far more on collective effort and commitment than on individual brilliance and specialist expertise. Very few of today’s important threats

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\* 2006



and opportunities are amenable to solution by individuals acting on their own, or by single communities, or even by single countries. Everything on the forward horizon reinforces this fact.

- those who are willing and able to adjust their biases, assumptions and interests as change unfolds the future will have the greatest ability to exploit change well and opportunity to enjoy the outcomes

## **6. End Remark**

Foresight is the ability to ‘see’ **allwards** in time and place: forwards, backwards, upwards, downwards, left and right, and most important of all, *inwards*. If one does not know oneself, “willful blindness” will be inevitable, and, it will be impossible to do Foresight and one who is confident will help in shaping and preparing for the future.

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