FUTURES ANALYSIS, PUBLIC POLICY
AND RURAL STUDIES

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Abstract

Futures analysis through scenario building has become a common tool in framing debates around the strategic planning of rural policy and rural development in Europe and elsewhere. This paper examines the take up of such techniques in rural policy-making in Britain. It begins by developing a sociology of scenario-building by government. In Britain, this concerns not only the generalities of contemporary political culture but also the specificity of New Labour politics (and, by implication, the influence on central government of discourses of rurality). It briefly reviews recently-commissioned rural futures studies, with particular emphasis on the Strategic Futures exercise, prepared for the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and the Tomorrow Project’s State of the Countryside 2020 prepared for the Countryside Agency – the statutory agency responsible for advising the Government on rural affairs. The paper then concludes by considering the dilemmas around knowledge production in rural scenario-building.
Introduction

Futures studies have proliferated in recent years both in the corporate world and among public sector bodies. Their origins lie in strategic planning by large organisations such as Shell and the Rand Corporation, but also in the *Limits to Growth* modelling exercise of the early 1970s (Meadows *et al.*, 1972). Futurology has even permeated the shelves of popular, non-fiction:

“This is an extraordinary time to be alive. The world is being transformed before our eyes from a technological twentieth century society into something altogether new and different. Are you ready for the future?” (Dixon, 1998, back cover).

Patrick Dixon’s book, *Futurewise*, (Dixon, 1998) is an example of the kind of futurology paperback available in the business sections of bookstores in airport departure lounges. “Either we take hold of the future or the future will take hold of us”, the front cover warns. The author continues, excitedly:

“That means planning to change tomorrow, future-thinking at every level, taking a broad view to out-plot the opposition. Being futurewise is about more than mere predictions, it’s about shaping the future, making history, having contingencies, staying one step ahead and in control” (p.ix).

Yet such rhetoric is merely the popular version of a widespread interest in thinking about what might happen in 5, 10, 20 and even 50 years. Scenario-building exercises are produced with increasing frequency from all manner of organisations. This is partly because of the belief that a better grasp of what the future may hold improves our scope to influence change.
According to Bob Tyrrell, former Chairman of the Henley Centre for Forecasting:

“without an understanding or an exploration … of what the future may hold we lack the freedom to make the most of our opportunities and to control our destinies” (Tyrrell, 1997, p.387, emphasis in original).

In Britain, the current ‘New Labour’ Government has instigated a wide range of futures studies. Now coordinated by the Government's Cabinet Office Strategy Unit, various futures analyses have been developed for the domains of bioscience, electronic networks, energy, geographic mobility, GM crops, high performance cities, small businesses, social exclusion, social capital, transport, the workforce and even the future of government itself (see for example, Performance and Innovation Unit, 1999; 2001). Strategic futures analysis lies at the heart of the Government’s political ideology and modus operandi.

Such studies have been particularly numerous in the sphere of rural policy (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs [Defra], 2001; 2003a,b; Moynagh & Worsley, 2003).¹ Rural scenario-building is a relatively novel, if problematic, phenomenon. It is problematic because of the nature of rural policy institutions and the associated discourses of rurality in Britain, but also because of the nature of the social science that informs the scenario-building process. Until very recently, rural social

¹ The proliferation of rural futures studies is not limited to the UK, however. For example, the European Environment Agency (EEA) has followed its study of environmental futures (EEA, 2000) with a recent scenario building project on the future of rural land use across Europe (EEA, 2004).
sciences and futurology have, for the most part, been pursued independently of each other. This is because of their different foci and intellectual traditions. It is also because of the ways in which rurality has generally been conceptualised in Western society. Overwhelmingly, the assumption has been that the sources of futures — the drivers of change and innovation — are invariably to be found in the urban context and, more particularly, within large, urban-based corporations and governmental institutions. Rural areas, therefore, are cast as inherently traditional and conservative. They lie in the domain of the past and are, at worst, passive recipients, and at best moderating ‘filters’, of exogenous forces for change.

The focus of much rural research is on the effectiveness of rural areas in adapting to, or resisting, the forces of modernity. Such an intellectual perspective does little to foster a future orientation in rural studies. Likewise, ‘futurology’, in looking for the sources of social or technological innovation, is seldom inclined to focus on rural areas or practices. Admittedly, rural studies has, of late, included explorations of the endogenous approach to rural development in which symbolic/cultural and social resources (local/regional specificity) can be recruited to drive socio-economic regeneration (see, for example, Ray, 1999; 2003). However, the dominant discourse in debates about rural change in Britain and across much of Europe still tends to cast rural areas as repositories of tradition and changelessness, rather than as sources of dynamism in their own right. Such representations accord with British political traditions. Casting rural areas as the repository of the traditional has long been one of the essences of British Toryism while the Labour Party, when in power, has tended to stress the need instead for the modernisation of the countryside.
We therefore see the role of futurology in public policy formation as a (political) sociological phenomenon worthy of study in its own right and we argue that there are particular issues that arise in relation to the application of scenario-building to the rural domain. Scenario-analysis — in the sense of a formal technique applied to timescales of a generation or longer — was devised and developed by and for large private sector organisations. Central to the technique is a sense of systematic, rational analysis: that any given exercise must seek to transcend presently held assumptions and the agendas of interest groups. However, the use of futures studies within central government and its agencies will be a function of the vigour of the abiding political ideology (that is, ‘modernisation’ in the current British context), and of the inherent nature of institutions. Despite the apparent enthusiasm of individuals within the UK Government (including the Prime Minister) to incorporate long-term and radical thinking into the process of policy formation, ambitions for the use of futures thinking may be severely constrained. These constraints include both those of a general nature that would affect all government-sponsored futurology — a function of institutions and the prevailing political culture — and those arising specifically from contemporary rural discourses.

Second, we suggest rural social sciences, generally, have yet to devise methods for their academic participation in public policy scenario exercises. This is a problem insofar as academics and think-tank personnel are either required to perform as expert consultants in the process or are commissioned to undertake such studies themselves. Although rural social sciences are inherently associated with the wellbeing of rural areas, the disciplines do not yet have a coherent method to speculate on alternative
futures, some options of which might be of a very low order of probability indeed. This raises questions about the production of knowledge, and of the role of expertise and experience in the process (see Collins and Evans, 2002).

This paper is in three parts. The first offers the first steps in the development of a sociology of government scenario-building activity. In the UK, this concerns not only the generalities of contemporary political culture, but also the specificity of New Labour politics (and, by implication, in our specific case the influence on central government of discourses of rurality). The next section reviews different products from recently-commissioned rural futures studies: the Strategic Futures exercise, prepared as an internal discussion document for Defra from work carried out by the Henley Centre – an international strategic marketing consultancy (Defra, 2001); and the Tomorrow Project’s State of the Countryside 2020 prepared for the Countryside Agency – the statutory agency responsible for advising the Government on issues of socio-economic well-being and landscape protection in rural areas (Moynagh & Worsley, 2003). In the third part, we explore the issue of knowledge production in rural scenario-building activity. The dominant mode of working in British rural futurology has been the systematic synthesis of informed expertise, and the implications of this are considered.

Futures thinking in rural policy has been given a new impetus in recent years by Defra’s ‘horizon scanning’ programme, launched in January 2002. Defra’s definition of horizon scanning is:
“the systematic examination of potential threats, opportunities and likely future developments which are at the margins of current thinking and planning. Horizon scanning may explore novel and unexpected issues, as well as persistent problems or trends. Overall, horizon scanning is intended to improve the robustness of Defra’s policies and evidence base” (Defra, 2002, p.3).

The programme also signals Defra’s commitment to the using futures studies to inform public debate about rural areas and to influence the design of future policy interventions (Defra, 2003a,b). It includes scanning projects under four themes: ‘Rethinking the food economy’; ‘Coping with threats’; ‘Future landscapes’ and ‘Meeting people’s future needs’. To date, a range of projects on risks to the UK food chain, national bio-security, trends in sustainable rural policy and land use, and future fisheries and marine ecosystems has been commissioned.

Towards a Sociology of Government Policy Scenario-building

The recent fashion for rural futures studies comes in the wake of an increasing appetite across government for scenario analysis to inform strategic planning in Britain. In 1993, the Conservative Government launched a ‘technology foresight exercise’ in part inspired by German and Japanese approaches to strategic planning of technology and business development. This was a Post-Thatcherite effort to reintroduce a form of strategic state planning into the government’s investment activity, particularly with respect to science and science policy, and was promoted by Michael Heseltine, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. However, it was the arrival of the New Labour government in 1997 that gave greatest
impetus to the diffusion of futures studies. Its political rhetoric of pragmatism, modernization and reform gave rise not only to the slavish pursuit of “what works” but also unleashed a surge of so-called ‘blue-skies’ thinking to inform policy change. In 1998, the Government established the Prime Minister’s Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU)\(^2\) in the Cabinet Office to examine strategic and cross-cutting issues facing government, and a core work-stream was established to address ‘strategic challenges and futures’ (see PIU, 2001).

Foresight futures work also continued in other parts of government with the Department for Trade and Industry (DTI), for example, commissioning scenario analysis in 1998 (Office for Science and Technology, 1998) and in 2002 (DTI, 2002) from the Science Policy Research Unit at the University of Sussex. The two key axes in these scenarios are social values (ranging from individualist to more community-oriented values) and systems of governance (ranging from national and sub-national autonomy towards international interdependence). The resultant four scenarios — termed ‘world markets’, ‘national enterprise’, ‘global responsibility’ and ‘local stewardship’ — have become widely used among public sector agencies in other futures and foresight studies. Although these scenarios were not objectively derived and are open to criticism, their semi-official profile, and the fact that they were produced early in the current wave of futures studies in the UK have meant they have influenced much subsequent scenario-building, suggesting a form of ‘path-dependence’ in British futures studies has set in.

\(^2\) The PIU subsequently became subsumed within the new Strategy Unit in 2002.
We argue that a sociology of contemporary rural scenario-building needs to operate on three interrelated levels. First, rural futurology must be understood in terms of the general nature of government: of whatever era or political doctrine. Second, the contemporary situation will be a function of the New Labour ideology of ‘modernisation’. Third, the array of rural discourses that inform the views of rural residents, Defra and rural agencies and rural social sciences will need to be analysed; especially so as to avoid an overly rural-centric set of assumptions regarding the most significant drivers of rural social and economic change. The last of these, we will address later in the article.

Scenario-building is presented by its advocates as a device to enable organisations to think about the long term future. It incorporates not only contingency planning (planning how to cope with future crises such as acts of international terrorism or, in the rural context, the next major outbreak of an animal disease such as Foot and Mouth Disease) but also imagining normative visions of desirable futures to aim for, and undesirable outcomes to avoid. Organisations of all types can find themselves caught in the tyranny of the velocity of incidents, endlessly reacting to today’s problems. This is particularly true in the political domain. When asked by a young journalist what most preoccupied his government, British Prime Minister from 1957 to 1963, Harold Macmillan, famously replied “events, dear boy, events”. According to the MP Vincent Cable in a recent BBC radio broadcast (BBC, 2002), the reality of national government remains that “important long-term decisions are taken very often .... in a state of panic”. In the same broadcast, Geoff Mulgan — former Director of Demos, a London-based think tank, and subsequently head of the Government’s
Strategy Unit — commented that the time horizons for political thinking in national government, and therefore temporal frameworks in which policy is designed, have become so short as to be counter-productive. Writing in 1997, he observed: “there can’t have been many times in human history when so many problems have demanded fresh ideas and new thinking” (Mulgan, 1997, p.ix). Yet, paradoxically, whilst many of the pressing problems are collective ones, the world of politics “feels like a backwater, a declining industry struggling to keep up, rather than a place of imagination and energy” (p.ix).

Policies and public investments quickly become inadequate or inappropriate. The implication is that were the political process to take the longer view, policies and interventions would result that were more in tune with major drivers of change that operate on various long-term wavelengths. Whereas forecasting tries to predict futures by extrapolating from historical trends and present circumstances, scenarios are built by attempting to transcend the short-term and to speculate about possible futures (plural). Scenario-analysis is advocated as a catalyst for thinking and as a set of techniques to drive the deep reflection necessary for the timescales involved, most commonly for periods of 5, 10 or 20 years.

Yet, the UK Government’s sponsoring of scenario-building is not solely a matter of introducing a technique that would re-align policy-making so as to respond more closely with wide-scale social, political and economic forces for change. New Labour presents itself as being in pursuit of a reforming political agenda: a discourse of ‘modernisation’. This requires the Government to examine the future of labour markets, public sector service
provision, transport, energy production, the role of government intervention and so on. In the rural sector, additional futurological issues include food production (public subsidies through the Common Agricultural Policy, biotechnology and public health issues) and land use regulation. Moreover, it is in the rural domain where the application of futurology highlights certain ongoing tensions. The modernisation agenda comes up against the socio-economic plight of many British rural areas: in terms of historical trajectories and recent crises such as Foot-and-Mouth Disease. As a result, the inherent conservativism of much of British rurality is reinforced by the implicit and explicit mobilisation of political resistance (most notably in the guise of the Countryside Alliance but also including the environmental movement and others). The building of rural scenarios, when it enters the public domain, thus becomes an act of real-life politics. For New Labour, rural futures analyses can be seen as a means of counteracting rural traditionalism (i.e. Toryism). Through raising debates about longer-term socio-economic trends and drivers, more contemporary conflicts (such as around low farming incomes, for example) are displaced, which puts rural Toryism on the back-foot.

For Mulgan, scenario-building is about the encouragement of strategic thinking within government as well as identifying where the issues involved necessitate interaction between Departments. Yet there is widespread recognition of the divide that exists between, on the one hand, the logical necessity and benefits of scenario-building in government and, on the other, the reality of present-day society. First, the Departments of central government are, by their ethos, institutions. Their role in society is to promote certainty and confidence, to legitimise the status quo and,
according to the bureaucratic ethos, to discharge their responsibilities objectively and transparently. By definition, therefore, they are conservative and bureaucratic. It would seem paradoxical, therefore, for institutions to push their corporate imagination into long-term possible futures. It is partly for this reason, therefore, that the Government has tended to use outside consultants to undertake future studies that it commissions. However, this still leaves the question of how a government would impregnate its administrative wing with new, revolutionary scenarios, were there to be the political will to do this.

Second, the contemporary political culture is characterised by inter-party competitiveness and an aggressive and sceptical media, to which we could add a citizenry significant parts of which have attained Galbraith's 'culture of contentment' (Galbraith, 1992). As a result, politicians cannot afford to entertain competing ideas: the uncertainty and timescales of alternative futures. It is therefore difficult for public bodies to be identified as being directly responsible for generating such ideas or for appearing to subscribe to them. Given that scenarios are meant both to challenge current assumptions and to speculate on mega-trajectories of change, any government or mainstream political party that sponsors them is taking a risk.

In the present climate, this is an almost insurmountable barrier facing scenario activity within government. Or rather, the barrier is to the use of scenarios directly to influence the design of government policies and interventions in the short term, through the process of back-casting (Dreborg, 1996; Höjer and Mattsson, 2000). If, on the other hand, the
purpose of scenarios is to influence debates in the public arena — to nurture a new ideology — in the realisation that government intervention might be limited or even impossible, then this would pose far less peril for governments sponsoring scenario-building.

Two Rural Futures Studies

Given these tensions between the principles of scenario-building and the dynamics of government, what has been the experience so far when the Government Department responsible for rural policy and its agencies have commissioned rural scenario studies? Here we examine two recent exercises in scenario-building for rural England. Scenario analysis identifies and assesses the key drivers shaping socio-economic and environmental conditions in rural areas and then attempts to sketch out alternative future scenarios. Scenarios are usually given ‘catchy’ names which help evoke how these future worlds might look. Our first example is a scenario-building exercise instigated within a Government Department.

*Strategic Futures exercise (2001)*

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) found itself at the heart of a series of food and farming crises during the late 1980s and 1990s. These culminated in the BSE crisis in 1996, when the potential link between Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) in cows and the new variant of Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (CJD) in humans had to be acknowledged by Ministers for the first time, prompting a ban on the exports of British beef. MAFF became an increasingly embattled Department, and recognised by
senior ministers of the incoming Labour Government in 1997 as a ‘suitable case for treatment’.

A fresh start was signalled in 2000 with the appointment of a new Permanent Secretary. Brian Bender, formerly a senior civil servant in the Cabinet Office, took over from Sir Richard Packer, who had been at MAFF’s helm since 1993. Bender established a new Policy and Corporate Strategy Unit to help ‘modernise MAFF’. The Unit’s remit was set out in MAFF’s 2001 Departmental report as follows:

“The new Policy and Corporate Strategy Unit will take forward long-term policy planning and the internal corporate change that will be required to reflect this. The Unit provides a clearer focus on both issues that cut across MAFF and long-term strategy” (MAFF, 2001, para 2.11).

Among its first tasks in early 2001, the Unit commissioned a scenario-building exercise to assist in the Ministry’s strategic planning. The study can be seen as part of the effort to rescue MAFF from its crisis ridden past by looking to the future. The work was conducted by the Henley Centre but was never published, as MAFF became embroiled in the Foot and Mouth Disease crisis, which broke in February 2001, and was then replaced by Defra in June (see Henley Centre, 2001, p. 12 & p.16). The objectives of the strategic futures project were set out as follows:

- to provide a strategic plan for the Department within which other strategies, like those for e-business and science, can live and develop;
• to help improve Defra’s strategic thinking capability and so to develop existing policies to meet likely developments in 5-10 years time;
• to provide a sense of collective understanding by Government, stakeholders and society as a whole about the issues faced by the Department;
• to help identify the Department’s strategic priorities for food, farming and rural areas for the next Spending Review, in partnership with stakeholders within and outside Government;
• to enable [Defra] to work better with our stakeholders to identify creative and innovative solutions and practical measures that can help us to achieve our strategic goals.

The first phase of the work identified a series of drivers which it was felt would shape the future environment. This phase drew on analysis carried out within Government, academia, international organizations and through independent research by the Henley Centre. Hundreds of separate drivers were identified and, through a workshop, these were structured into social, technological, environmental, economic and political categories and prioritized. Social drivers included: the growth of ‘empowered consumerism’; the search for authenticity and simplicity in consumption practices; residential preference for rural localities; the increasing impact of diverse cultural influences on consumer demand; and the segmentation of society into ‘disciplined’ and ‘undisciplined’ eaters. Technological drivers included: the miniaturization of everything; the spread of broadband and information and communication technologies; and the rise of e-commerce and genomics. Economic drivers included: the relative decline of agriculture; rising disposable household incomes; increasing income and
wealth inequalities; and international economic integration. Environmental drivers included: increasing pressure for action to reduce climate change; continued deterioration in biodiversity and the quality of semi-natural landscapes and habitats; and increasing public questioning of new genomic technologies. Political drivers included: the continued dominance of economic liberalism; the expansion of the European Union; the development of the World Trade Organization; and continued pressure for reform of the Common Agricultural Policy.

The project’s second phase transposed what were considered to be the most influential drivers onto two axes. One axis – social values – ranged from the countryside as a place of production to a place of consumption. A second axis – economic governance – ranged from a market-led to a public-funding perspective. This produced four scenarios shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1 – Axes for Scenario Development in Defra’s Strategic Futures Exercise**

![Axes for Scenario Development in Defra’s Strategic Futures Exercise](image)
The Defra discussion paper emphasized that the scenarios were not predictions of the future, nor statements of government policy. (Indeed, this health warning was stated on the header and footer of every page of the internal Defra document). Nevertheless, they were framed as a tool to help policy-makers think about the longer term future, in this particular case the future in 2011. Under the ‘Crossroads’ scenario, the development of rural areas is dominated by commercial interests. Supermarket dominance of the food chain continues. Dependence upon the private car, and at the same time social exclusion, increases. Local distinctiveness is eroded and pressure to liberalise the planning system increases and is increasingly successful. Under the ‘Last of the Summer Wine’ scenario, agricultural support continues, but under a stronger environmental management imperative. Tax is hypothecated to fund public transport and the demand for authentic local foods increases significantly. The countryside becomes a rather ‘twee’ and idealized place, and home to an increasingly aged population. Under the ‘From Brussels with Love’ scenario, a protectionist Common Agricultural Policy continues, declining rural services require considerable public subsidy, and the environmental impacts of rural land management continue to cause controversy. Under ‘The Good Life’ scenario, farming declines to only 50% of rural land use as rural leisure industries thrive and the market for luxury rural tourism expands. Land values become more volatile but younger people move back to rural areas and civil society is energised.

The Strategic Futures exercise was used internally to provoke debate on the strategic direction of Defra’s policies. The scenarios also prompted some controversy on Channel 4 News when they were considered (wrongly) as
'extreme options’ being considered by Defra (see Henley Centre, 2001, p.16). However, the work was simply overtaken by events. The Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) crisis dominated MAFF’s work throughout the spring of 2001 until the Ministry’s demise immediately after the June General Election. In its election manifesto, the Labour Government committed itself to three separate reviews of aspects of the FMD crisis, including one on the future of food and farming. The Henley Centre work was shown to one of these, the Policy Commission on the Future of Food and Farming, chaired by Sir Don Curry, and helped inform the Commission’s deliberations. However, although crises such as FMD generate demands for fundamental changes of direction, they are generally not conducive to the long-term thinking that this requires. The ideas in the strategic futures work on rural futures thus became absorbed and dissolved in a narrower report on the competitiveness of the farming industry.

*The Tomorrow Project’s State of the Countryside 2020 (2003)*

A similar study was commissioned by the Countryside Agency soon after Defra’s Strategic Futures work. The study was carried out by the *Tomorrow Project*, “an independent charity supporting organizations and individuals in thinking about the future of people’s lives in the UK over the next 20 years” (Moynagh & Worsley, 2003, p.6) and was published in March 2003 as the Countryside Agency’s *State of the Countryside 2020* report. The project involved a desk-based review, interviews with policy experts in Defra, the Countryside Agency and elsewhere and with academics from the Universities of Gloucestershire, Nottingham and Leicester. Consultees were asked four questions: Where are we now? What will shape the future?
What possible futures exist? And ‘so what’? (p.13). The main drivers were deemed to be the global economy; the rise of consumer choice and ‘the experience economy’, the spread of information and communication technologies; the spread of skills shortages; the expansion of the middle classes and increasing pressures to achieve environmental sustainability.

From these drivers, the analysis went on to consider who will live in the countryside, the dynamics of housing development and the demographic complexion of migration to and from rural areas. It explored the nature of rural economies and livelihoods in four different geographical contexts – the ‘suburban countryside’, the ‘urban countryside’, the ‘rural countryside’ and the ‘ex-industrial countryside’. It then reflected on likely quality of life in terms of the natural environment, access to services, political autonomy, crime and social exclusion.

The exercise produced the following four scenarios: ‘The countryside means businesses; ‘Go for green’; ‘All on board’; and ‘The triple whammy’. All assumed sustained economic growth and were constructed around the extent to which the countryside becomes environmentally sustainable and socially cohesive. In ‘The countryside means business’ rural England develops in an environmentally unsustainable direction and is socially fragmented. ‘Go for green!’ describes a more environmentally sustainable future, but one in which the countryside is also more socially fragmented. ‘All on board!’ is a scenario in which greater social cohesion combines with less environmental sustainability. In ‘The triple whammy’, environmental, social and economic sustainability are combined (Figure 2).
The report was launched at a seminar in London in April 2003 before an audience of policy officials, politicians, academics and rural lobby groups. Much discussion focused on the desirability or otherwise of the different scenarios. Graham Wynne, the Chief Executive of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the UK’s largest environmental organization, said that he felt that the ‘go for green’ scenario was unlikely to be realised because its proponents lacked sufficient economic power. The most likely future he saw was one of ‘muddling through’\(^3\). It was suggested that the Countryside Agency should choose a scenario as the desirable end point, trace backwards to what sorts of policy decisions would be required to deliver it. In other words, such futures exercises should immediately inform action. Most participants agreed that the analysis was interesting and stimulating, but

\(^3\) This discussion is informed by participation at the seminar and by the note of the discussions subsequently circulated to participants by the Countryside Agency.
there was little consensus on what could be done with it, let lone which was the most preferable scenario to pursue.

*Making sense of futures studies*

So, here we have two officially-commissioned rural future exercises: one from the Department responsible for rural matters and the other from an agency with a remit for policy advice and innovation. The component scenarios are not radically different in each study, reflecting the methodological approach used in both cases and the relatively modest timescales involved (10 to 20 years).

What can we learn from the two exercises described above and government-sponsored rural futurology in general? There are two approaches to evaluation. First, we can evaluate a scenario exercise according to the uses to which they are subsequently put. As we have already noted, neither of them appears to have been incorporated directly into the government policy formation process which might undermine their value. We have suggested above that the transfer of futurological knowledge to the politico-administrative domain is likely to be obstructed or modified by present conditions. Yet, this does not necessarily mean that rural futurology is doomed. Brand (1999), for example, argues that society would benefit from the promotion of thinking about longer-term futures in any and all domains of life. The act of thinking about possible futures, according to Brand, stimulates an enhanced consciousness throughout society about the nature of problems and their solutions. A reforming government, therefore, might use scenario planning exercises to generate debates in the public domain,
cultivating social attitudes and beliefs prior to government intervention in the future.

The other approach to evaluation is to investigate the methodological and empirical bases on which any scenario exercise is based. This is the focus of the following sections. In the introduction we argued that futures knowledge will be very different in nature from orthodox social science. What, therefore, are the rules of engagement for rural social scientists contributing to the building of scenarios? And what would it mean for rural social sciences to pursue academic rigor when speculating about the future in 20 or 50 years time?

**The Types of Knowledge in Rural Futures Studies: Whose Rural Futures?**

Futures studies tend to be compiled for government agencies by consultants who have an interest in emphasising the structured and systematic process by which the analysis is conducted and the outcome – a considered review of a selection of contrasting possible futures and their implications – is arrived at. Methodologies include various stages, with safeguards, checks and balances, all aimed at making the analysis (and the scenarios) as sensible, plausible or ‘robust’ as is possible. The Henley Centre (2001), in their report for the Performance and Innovation Unit on ‘Understanding Best Practice in Strategic Futures Work’, for example, set out seven stages in the scenario development process. These include developing a range of drivers, testing their credibility through a workshop, subjecting them to an uncertainty analysis/dependency review and so on. Yet there is a critical
tension between the technocratic discourses within which scenario planning and analysis exercises are couched and the nature of the knowledge produced:

“Organisations embark on strategic futures work because they want to know what the future will hold. However, sometimes they confuse prediction with understanding. Managers want to reduce the anxiety caused by the uncertainty of not knowing. This immediately creates a source of disappointment, for it is never possible to know the future …. Organisations are able to make effective use of strategic futures work only when they accept that it is impossible to predict future outcomes” (Henley Centre, 2001, p.3).

This tension reflects that between two contrasting models of social science itself. One aligns social sciences as ‘hard sciences’ alongside natural and biological sciences and assumes that natural regularities exist and can be identified among groups and societies. Where these ‘social laws of nature’ have been identified, and adequate data are available, then it should be possible to predict at least the near future. A second conception sees the social sciences as reform movements that have “cloaked themselves in methodological rigor in order to exploit the pro-science bias of the very society they seek to change” (Bainbridge, 2003, p.634). Here predictions are more likely to be normative and prescriptive rather than descriptive, “advocating the future that ought to exist rather than the one that necessarily will exist” (p.634).

A difficulty is that the producers of scenarios have only limited influence over how the scenarios are consumed. Thus, the Henley Centre stresses that
“strategic futures work is about rehearsal rather than knowledge” (2001, p.18), but once they are received by the consumers of futures work scenarios can take on a life of their own. What are intended as imaginary constructs, or tools to assist thinking, can quickly mutate into forecasts, or even desirable policy objectives. Little wonder, then, that some Government Departments have been slow to share their scenario analyses with wider publics.

The dominant mode of working in current rural futurology in the UK is the systematic synthesis of informed expertise. Consultants quiz a small number of recognized ‘experts’ (usually within policy-making bodies, specialist interest groups and academia) or perhaps convene a brainstorming workshop. This may be coupled with quantitative analysis of available statistical datasets. This is the main approach used in the above examples and most other scenario exercises. However, in thinking through the implications for a futurological rural studies paradigm — as an academic pursuit and as a demand on public financing — the matter of timescales is crucial. The drivers of change operate on a range of waveforms of different frequencies over time. Brand (1999) argues that science (particularly, in our case, social science) needs to give more attention to the accumulation of empirical data along periods of time that correspond with the timescales of the drivers/systems concerned. However, as Brand acknowledges, this ‘slow science’ is not generally encouraged (in that it is very difficult to ensure very long term public funding for such projects). Yet the accumulation of long databases will be crucial. The futurology debate as discussed in this paper is not merely about how academics and others could participate in the current crop of scenario-building projects; it is also about
how (rural) social science will be conducted in order for its contribution to futurology to be more effective and rigorous. Brand thus calls for very long-term, sustained, longitudinal studies. We would add, also, that such studies should be undertaken on the basis of social and spatial units of observation that are sufficiently fine that they can be recombined into larger units of analysis as necessary.

Schwartz (2003), on the other hand, suggests another, rather different component. An awareness of historical analysis, he argues, reveals the crucial role of ‘powerful ideas’ as drivers of change (and/or resistance to change). The invitation here is for futurology systematically to incorporate ideas: ideologies, technological inventions; and conceptual frameworks such as characterisations of society. This requires a theory of the derivation and ascendancy of ‘big ideas’. Schwartz argues that over the appropriate timescales, one can see an evolution of ideas: that the emergence and then acceptance of an idea thereby enables the emergence of its successor ideas. This leads Schwartz to argue that, armed with a consciousness of historical process, futurology exercises should be asking, explicitly, “what ideas do we need now”. In this respect, the practice alluded to above — of scenarios being constructed out of expert consensus (that is, a majority or least controversial view) may not always capture the most powerful drivers; a technique by which to capture the maverick (outlier) opinion may also be necessary.
Rural Futures and the Scope for Action

In this paper we have begun to develop a sociology of government scenario-building, by briefly examining the structure and dynamics of the actors involved and identifying which discourses are informing the scenario-building process. Scenario analysis was initially developed as a planning tool in the corporate sector, but has been embraced by those parts of government responsible for strategic analysis, particularly policy units and strategy units. The analysis of drivers is usually conducted by commissioned external consultants, although sometimes through the use of scoping workshops involving ‘insider’ policy specialists. Notably, in the sphere of rural futures analysis, there is a strong degree of commonality in both the main drivers selected and the axes used to produce future scenarios — economic liberalism versus intervention and protectionism, and individual versus collective social values. It is useful to ask (though space does not allow in this paper) why these axes should be so common, and what might others look like.

We have also explored the implications of scenario-building activity for academic rural studies. Some social science disciplines have recently been debating their utility in terms of influencing public policy. In human geography, for example, Martin has argued that “much contemporary social and economic geography research renders it of little practical relevance for policy” (2001, p.189) and has pleaded for what he calls a new ‘policy turn’ in the discipline. He identified a need to take rigorous empirical work more seriously and halt the drift towards ‘thin empirics’ (see also Peck, 1999).
Rural futures studies commonly draw in academic social scientists to inform the selection of drivers, the production of scenarios and consideration of their possible implications for policy choices. The audience for such studies is supposed to be those responsible for strategic policy development. Thus, in one sense, engaging with futures exercises provides social scientists with an opportunity to answer Martin’s call to “visualize alternative futures” and engage with “fundamental debates over the direction of society, economy and environment” (p.203) and so engage with policy-making. However, in another sense, the process of futures studies themselves provides a rich research topic, as actors engage with each other to debate their competing visions of the future, and at the same time often question the epistemological basis of scenarios and scenario-production.

The two case studies illustrate the discourses and issues involved in (rural) futures analysis. ‘Modernisation’ is at the core of New Labour’s programme, and although modernization entails worries about the past and about the present, above all it entails worries about the future (Finlayson, 2003, p.94). The use of scenario analysis epitomizes one of the core dilemmas and contradictions at the heart of the New Labour Government’s project. New Labour is a managerialist government working within a neo-liberal orthodoxy. This paradox produces what Finlayson calls the “strange pathos” of New Labour:

“They really want to change things, and think they know how to, but have no real understanding of how change happens and so find themselves frustrated, becoming more inward-looking, zealous and increasingly buffeted by
events. They are, in the end, the victim of circumstances they feel are beyond their control” (2003, p.11).

The question of what can be changed or influenced through public policy interventions, and what are exogenous (‘market’) forces that simply have to be responded to, is central to how scenarios are consumed and interpreted, for there is little purpose to futures analysis unless it is used to make decisions in the ‘here and now’. But the question of what lies within the realms of action tends to remain unanswered, as does the question of whether the legitimate scope for action changes over time.

Think tanks such as Demos and the Institute for Public Policy Research have thrived on the production of reports highlighting transformationary social trends such as the ageing population, the pension time-bomb, the rise of the ‘new economy’ and so on. Such changes are almost always discovered to have profound implications and their discovery is essential to making New Labour’s modernization programme a strategy of problem generation, and even one of “governing the future” (Finlayson, 2003, p.94). This is a distinctive form of political rationality.

Rose and Millar define a political rationality as:

“The changing discursive fields within which the exercise of power is conceptualized, the moral justifications for particular ways of exercising power by diverse authorities, notions of the appropriate forms, objects and limits of politics and conceptions of the proper distribution of tasks among secular, spiritual, military and familial advisers” (1992, p.175).
Within the contemporary discourse of modernization, wider economic and social changes are given an air of inevitability. The political and social challenge is to face these changes. We must ‘modernise or die’. Charles Leadbeater, a think-tank based futurologist respected by Prime Minister Blair, has argued that the economic and technological transformations embodied in the ‘new economy’ cannot be avoided. “We have to go through it … we have to steel ourselves to press on, not really sure what lies ahead, but knowing that retreat is no alternative” (Leadbeater, 1999, p.3):

“This is why modernization can mean a lot to those who advocate it, as it seems like the only way to respond to a situation that is out of control. But it is, at least in part, the discourse of modernization that generates these problems, just as it generates their solution. The solipsism is lived as much as it is spoken” (Finlayson, 2003, p.95).

Thus what can be changed is the central dilemma facing the producers and users of futures analysis. And for Government-sponsored futurology, this question is filtered through a particular political perspective that casts some processes as amenable to intervention, while others lie outside the realms of public policy, as inevitable and inexorable. This dilemma comes into sharp focus through the process of backcasting.

Defra have recently begun commissioning further scenario analysis work under its horizon scanning programme, and contained within this work is an increasing interest in backcasting. Within the horizon scanning programme, the ‘Rural Futures; scenario analysis and backcasting’ project is intended to

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4 On the dust cover of Leadbeater’s book, Living On Thin Air, Blair is quoted: “Charles Leadbeater is an extraordinarily interesting thinker. His book raises critical questions for Britain’s future”
help operationalise the Government’s vision in its Rural White Paper (Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and MAFF, 2000) by mapping out scenarios of what the countryside will or could look like in 20 and 50 years time, and to identify the stages in reaching these scenarios (see Future Foundation and Centre for Rural Economy, 2004). Scenario-building and predictive analysis has been employed to assess current and emerging drivers, trends, risks and opportunities so, the argument goes, that society can be better prepared for and resilient to future shocks and trends. A particular interest in the project is in ‘backcasting’ — i.e. the application of scenario thinking to the policy process — where the steps are identified by which a desirable future scenario can be realised over time (Dreborg, 1996; Höjer and Mattsson, 2000).

Backcasting is a term introduced by Robinson (1982; 1990; 2003). It was first employed in energy futures studies, and has since been widely adopted in the fields of sustainable development, transport and waste management. The main distinguishing characteristic of backcasting analysis is a concern, not with what futures are likely to happen, but with how desirable futures can be attained.

“It is thus explicitly normative, involving working backwards from a particularly desirable future end-point to the present in order to determine the physical feasibility of the future and what policy measures would be required to reach that point (1990, pp.822-23)”.

Robinson (1990) suggests backcasting can be applied to scenario analysis of changes over 20 to 100 year timescales. Its use in the context of
government-sponsored rural future studies is problematic in some key respects. *First*, it contains an implicit model of social action that does not sit well with the prevailing approach to what lies within the realms of governmental influence and what lies outside. If backcasting suggests the need for policy interventions to address drivers such as, for example, the liberalization of the global economy, and this trend is taken by government as a given outside of governmental control and influence, then the process leads to a dead-end. *Second*, it is likely that few drivers are inherently ‘rural.’ Thus, influence over many of the drivers of change affecting rural areas is likely to lie well beyond the policy remit of rural institutions. A key question therefore arises of the analytical purchase of ‘rural’ in rural futures studies.

**Conclusions**

Several research questions emerge from this analysis. The first is better to elucidate the role of futures work in agenda-setting in public policy for rural affairs. Public agencies commission scenario analyses, but how are these studies ‘consumed’ by interested parties, and what influence, if any, do they have on policy debates and policy development? The second is to examine whether different sorts of models of futures work in general and in the realm of rural policy in particular. Do these models, moreover, pose challenges for the British approach to rural futures work? Third, in developing the relationships between ‘science and society’, what role might scenario analyses play in broadening participation in policy-making.
This third question of the roles and relationships between expertise and lay experience is one that has begun to preoccupy scholars in the social studies of science (see, for example, Collins and Evans, 2002). It leads on to the question of whether rural experts are necessarily always the best or only informants in scenario-building exercises when timescales of, say, 35 years and longer are attempted. Rural studies (rural sociology, agricultural economics and so on) can be seen in large measure as the pursuit of solutions for the problems facing rural areas and the constituent populations. Directly or indirectly, rural studies serve as an advocate for the desirability of the existence of that which it observes and analyses. Although containing critical theorists and action researchers, the mainstream of contemporary rural studies has not traditionally been about speculating on radically alternative futures. Even the methods of futurology generally pursue a linear approach by projecting forward from where a society or organisation presently is. Not that this is necessarily a bad approach, but any new paradigm might benefit from the inclusion of normative approaches, in which one starts with ‘a (desirable) future’ and works backwards.

Futurology is simultaneously scientific and unscientific (Blass, 2003). In attempting to construct a future using systematic methods, it tries to be dispassionate, following the logic wherever it might lead. Yet at the same time, implicit in the desire to undertake explorations of possible futures is a compassionate dimension: a compassion for the well-being of future generations. In this paper, we have shown how futures analysis is becoming a new political rationality in rural policy in Britain as studies proliferate and begin to influence policy-makers’ understandings of trends, opportunities, threats and the possible scope for action. Rural futures studies are
developing more and more refined techniques, but remain a technocratic form of analysis and policy-making. Even though they displace many popular concerns (about risks and immediate policy choices, for example), the democratic and participatory aspects of such exercises are currently rather weak. A challenge is therefore to develop futures studies techniques which open up involvement among a broader range of participants in the policy-making process.
References


