

# Book review

## Safeguarding the Future: Governing in an Uncertain World

*Edited by Jonathan Boston*

*Bridget Williams Books*

*Wellington*

*2017*

*215pp.*

*ISBN:9780947518257 (pbk)*

**Keywords** *Futures thinking, Intergenerational responsibilities, Anticipatory governance*

**Review DOI**

**10.1108/JTF-05-2017-0029**

It is not often in reviewing books that I feel the need to read a book twice, but this book was the exception, not because I found it difficult to understand, but the very opposite, I found the book exciting to read. The words on the cover about a “presentist bias in policy-making”, caught my eye and was a clue into the focus of the book. As did the description on the first page, which stated that the publishers focussed on “short books on big subjects from great New Zealand writers”. These two clues certainly lived up to their expectations that this book would be a good read.

Given that we seem to be living in a world dominated by post truth, alternative facts, populist left and right-wing politics, 24-hour news cycles, social media dominance and short-term thinking, this book explores why it is necessary to take the long view and how this possible, so as to safeguard the interests of future generations. The purpose of this book in the author’s own words “is to identify and briefly assess [the] strategies, procedures and mechanisms, and then recommend a package of reforms to improve the quality of intergenerational governance in New Zealand”. This aim is certainly challenging, but the author strongly believes in his own words, that “good governance must be future-oriented” and that today’s policy makers must be made aware of the inbuilt bias in their current thinking processes, as this creates a “temporal bias towards the present”, and so limits our thinking and the actions required to develop our views of the future.

The book covers a wide range of issues in 180 pages of discussions, split into six

chapters. Chapter 1 provides an introductory discussion on why it is increasingly important to anticipate and safeguard the future.

Chapter 2 highlights the wide range of risks that governments face and suggests that politician’s tend to undervalue the long-term impacts of their decisions, by often yielding to short-term pressures. Chapter 3 explores in some detail the nature of anticipatory governance and how to can better understand the criteria we should use to assess its quality. Chapter 4 focusses on New Zealand and the quality of its policy-making institutions, and explores their performances against stated policy outcomes. Chapter 5 takes a more international perspective and suggests a number of actions that could be taken to strengthen anticipatory governance.

The concluding chapter offers a few thoughts on the issues discussed in the book, but warns that future liabilities are growing and may be irreversible, unless action is taken to imbed anticipatory governance into the existing government thinking. Each chapter ends with a short conclusion’s section, which highlights the main issues discussed.

Although this is not a tourism text book, it is the futures perspective adopted by the book that makes it of interest to tourism futures readers. Indeed, the fact that it is not a text book is one of its strengths, it reads like an interesting discussion between friends who are seeking if not answers, at least better insights into complex issues. Although it is difficult to be precise who should be reading this book, the main audience I suspect is the politicians in New Zealand, or to be more precise the civil servants who help form policy guidelines for these politicians. However, this suggests a rather limited readership, which undersells the wider readership this book deserves. It is interesting to note that unlike traditional academic textbooks, the author does not use the normal format of providing only extensive references from published peer reviewed articles to support his arguments. Instead, he uses extensive endnotes to provide evidence and references both to

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support his discussions as well alternative viewpoints, along with further reading suggestions to explore any particular topic.

This book acknowledges its limitations and does not attempt to be an advance thesis on futures thinking, although it would be unfair to describe it as an introductory text, as it tries to present the issues in a language and style that is accessible to the intelligent reader. The author acknowledges that the arguments in the book draws on the work he has previously published, including some theoretical debates in referred journals. What this book does, is to create a debate on why protecting options for future generations should be central to all government thinking.

Because I truly enjoyed reading the book, it is difficult to make any serious criticisms. If it has a weakness, this can found in the final chapter, which fails to give justice to the very insightful ideas and discussions developed in the previous chapters. Also even although the book was written from a New Zealand perspective, the lessons drawn could equally be applied to many other countries. Therefore in any second edition, it may strengthen the book to conclude with a more global perspective on the issues, and this may help the book to achieve the wider readership it deserves.

Finally, in terms of a recommendation, as I said before the book was a good read, as it provides a honest and clear discussion of the practical issues faced by a country which is trying to understand why developing futures thinking within the government is difficult to advance. What was refreshing is that it acknowledges the practical difficulties advocates of futures thinkers face, but it also highlights some of the practical steps that can be taken to encourage futures thinking. This book deserves a wider readership than just readers from New Zealand, and should be a must read and indeed essential reading for tourism futurologists. The book bridges the ever increasing gap between academic research and the issues facing those who work in the real (political) world. Even although it does not focus on tourism, the concepts, discussions and ideas presented in the book should be welcomed by tourism futurologists, as it provides some useful insights into how they can make their thinking more relevant and actionable for policy makers.

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