Anticipatory Democracy and Aspirational Futures

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Anticipatory Democracy

Anticipatory democracy is Alvin Toffler's prescription for humanity's response to the challenges of the future in his 1970 bestselling book, Future Shock. A few years after *Future Shock* was published, he asked me to edit a book, *Anticipatory Democracy*, which reviewed experiments in looking ahead and involving the public. In his introduction Toffler wrote: "The simplest definition of anticipatory democracy ... is that it is a process for combining citizen participation with future consciousness" (Bezold, 1978).

In *Future Shock*, Toffler argued that representative government was the key political technology of the industrial era and that new forms must be invented in the face of the crushing decisional overload – or political future shock – that we were facing.

Anticipatory democracy is a collection of tools and practices that allow the public to more effectively steer legislation. At the Institute for Alternative Futures, as we promoted anticipatory democracy we have developed "aspirational futures" approaches that help communities create the future they really want (Bezold, 2009).

There are other approaches that can also enrich the visioning process. For example, the Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) approach emphasizes the importance of our cultural myths and worldviews – the inherited narratives that we live out. The Integral viewpoint, using the Spiral Dynamics model, points out that many individuals live with different worldviews and that some do not value the worldviews of others. Becoming conscious of various levels of development is important for enhancing effective democracy.

The evolution of anticipatory democracy, and the advances and setbacks it has faced over three decades, reinforces the importance of developing shared vision. The more effectively efforts have developed shared vision, particularly across diverse communities, the more successful these efforts have been.

Whichever methods for creating a shared vision are selected, anticipatory democracy needs popular support and the support of top leadership. When the leader leaves, his or her successor often ignores the effort. Yet a number of programs have shown that significant involvement of the public can create a base of support that transcends specific administrations. One good example is Alternatives for Washington (AFW), a unique combination of leadership, novel involvement

processes, media involvement, and advanced facilitation. More than 60,000 people took part in focus groups, surveys or local meetings. Print and broadcast media cooperated in distributing educational material and surveys. Participants generated 11 alternative futures and voted on their preferences. This produced a set of policy preferences and the Governor then asked the public to take up the more difficult question of budget priorities (Stilger, 1978).

One criticism of AFW was the lack of engagement of state legislators in the process – leading to a lack of responsiveness. Yet the AFW remains one of the most significant programs because of its depth of involvement, the range of alternatives it considered, and its focus on both policy and budget priorities. Five years after AFW ended we asked the state budget office how many of its recommendations had been put in place: it was about 80 per cent, in spite of the lack of active engagement of the legislature at the time and hostility from the next Governor. The program had generated enough increase in public understanding to get the proposals passed even after a change of leadership (Bezold, 2006).

Aspirational Futures

The aspirational futures model has much in common with other approaches to visioning. For example, being aware of the "plausible" and the "preferable" is critical. The plausible considers what might happen, whereas the preferable considers what we want combined with some commitment to making it happen. Scenarios offer a powerful way to explore plausible future space, what is expectable and challenging, and to imagine paths to visionary outcomes. Developing scenarios that explore the expectable, challenging and visionary paths is a feature that distinguishes our aspirational futures approach to scenario development from others.

1. Environmental assessment and scenario development

Building awareness of change often includes an **environmental scan** of global, political, economic, technological, environmental and social trends. **Trends** are evaluated to identify **key forces** shaping the future – those with the greatest potential impacts and the highest levels of uncertainty. **Forecasts** are developed to project key forces or important elements into the future, typically 10 to 50 years ahead. To deal responsibly with irreducible uncertainties requires a style of thinking based on **scenarios** that embraces and explores uncertainty instead of repressing it.

Developing scenarios using our aspirational futures approach leads to a set of archetypes that explore expectable, challenging and visionary futures. The expectable, or "best guess" scenario is sometimes called the "official future". The second scenario asks "what could go wrong?" The third archetype scenario is visionary and explores a future where stakeholders successfully achieve visionary outcomes. Developing a visionary scenario forces organizations to be explicit about what success looks like, and potential paths to achieve it. A fourth scenario typically considers an alternative path to similar visionary outcomes.

2. Visioning and audacious goals

Trends and scenarios are "futures for the head"; visions are "futures for the heart." In this phase, the organization explores **aspirations** and develops a **shared vision** of the preferred future. It then sets goals associated with that vision.

Vision deals with the ultimate questions – about purpose, meaning, direction and reasons for existence. A living vision, as opposed to merely words on paper, is something people share, feel deeply about, believe is possible, and commit themselves to achieving. When people are committed to a vision, they will stretch themselves and their organizations to make it happen.

Within organizations, shared vision allows management to decentralize. People can be given more freedom to act independently and creatively when they have a clear sense of direction and know the importance of their own role in the realization of the vision. A shared vision can serve as a focus for collaboration and alignment of efforts by outside organizations.

3. Strategic analysis

Once a vision and stretch goals have been articulated, a strategic plan is needed to focus efforts on achieving the vision. Without vision, strategy is merely reactive. Without realistic strategies to achieve them, visions are only lofty ideals. Each of the proposed strategies must undergo a detailed analysis to consider internal and external requirements for success, robustness (i.e. likely impact in differing scenarios), risk, outcomes and audacity.

Conclusion

We face enormous challenges from nature, our social and economic systems, and our fellow men. Anticipatory democracy remains a much-needed advance for communities, nations and for global governance. We cannot anticipate every event, but our capacity to use futures tools is improving. These tools help us to understand the range of possibilities we face and to choose and create the future we want.

Processes like aspirational futures can help us achieve anticipatory democracy. That in turn will enable local, national, and global societies to weigh and express their values and consider what they want for the future. This will, I believe, ultimately lead to a world with greater equity.

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The aspirational futures visioning methodology is detailed at the website of the Institute for Alternative Futures (www.altfutures.org).