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Projecting the future

Foresight provides the ability to influence the future rather than to predict it.

RICHARD FREEMAN.

As we know, there are known knowns. There are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns. That is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns, the ones we don't know we don't know.

DONALD RUMSFELD, US SECRETARY OF DEFENSE, NEWS BRIEFING 12 FEBRUARY 2002.

The scenarios point to both risks and opportunities in the future. Of particular significance are the risks of crossing thresholds, the potential of reaching turning points in the relationship between people and the environment, and the need to account for interlinkages in pursuing a more sustainable path.

GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL OUTLOOK 4, UNEP 2007.

The need for, and nature of, foresight

While I am not a fan of Donald Rumsfeld, I think the quote above from one of his news briefings drew some rather unfair lambasting. It summarises, if one concentrates on its meaning and applies it to climate change, some important aspects of the science of climate change as well as defence policy questions. That is, there is a whole range of aspects of climate change, with some much more certain than others. There are also uncertainties and possibilities we are aware of, and may even be able to quantify in terms of risk. But, there is also a possibility that there are things about climate that we simply do not know, and which may totally surprise us.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was formed to provide foresight in relation to the possible human impacts on climate, with a

view to helping governments formulate wiser policy options and decisions in relation to climate change. Foresight is the act or power of seeing into the future, a perception gained by looking forward, and care or provision for the future. It is an everyday occurrence. Prudent people use foresight to decide or plan their actions so as to improve their future prospects. In this spirit governments around the world have recognised that human societies, through their use of resources and waste products are capable of changing the environment, including the climate.

Foresight requires some estimate of future conditions. In the case of climate change this includes projections of future emissions of greenhouse gases and particulates into the atmosphere, consequent concentrations of these pollutants in the atmosphere, and their effects on the climate. In addition, so as to