

Australia 2050: An Examination of Australia's Condition, Outlook and Options for the First Half of the 21st Century

**Gregory Copley, Andrew Pickford
and Barry Patterson**

Reviewed by Tom Magee

Australia 2050 is an ambitious attempt to predict what lies ahead for Australia over the next half century. It is a collaborative work, drawing on the resources of Perth-based think-tank Future Directions International, especially its research committee chairman, Gregory Copley, and FDI's two staff researchers.

As the 2020 Summit and 2008 Defence White Paper process also show, attempts to anticipate the future are fraught with difficulty. This is especially so when considering the gamut of economic, social, demographic, political and security considerations to be faced by Australia over the next 40-50 years. At first sight *Australia 2050* could have been a valuable resource for the deliberations of the 2020 summiteers, the upcoming Defence White Paper team and similar studies such as the Bracks Inquiry into the Australian automotive industry. Sadly, in many of the topics analysed the book is of little assistance. It is particularly unhelpful in its discussion on Australia's economic environment, infrastructure and industrial capacity.

The authors rightly emphasise the risks associated with the decline of Australia's manufacturing base. However, other than identifying it as an issue of concern, they provide no hint as to how it could be effectively addressed. Their discourse on the sad and inevitable decline of the Sunshine Harvester Works is well-trodden history which does nothing to address the real impact on Australian industry of perfectly rational commercial decisions made in Tokyo, Detroit or Munich.

What changes to industry, taxation, foreign investment and other policies are required to set the stage for an Australian industrial renaissance? There are repeated references to the great assistance Edward Hargrave's box kite and glider experiments in the 1880s gave to the Wright Brothers at Kittyhawk in 1903, and the extraordinary military industrial capabilities that were developed during World War II. But the current realities of the sale of Tenix's defence assets to BAE Systems, and the forthcoming privatisation of the Australian Submarine Corporation (also perhaps to partly foreign ownership), are not mentioned. More importantly, no solution or more realistically, suites of solutions are proposed. This shortcoming comes as something of a surprise as Andrew Pickford's economic and business credentials are impressive.

Australia 2050 quite correctly highlights the critical importance of seaborne trade and its security to national wellbeing, especially oil security. No one seriously denies the importance of the Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) to a country as dependent on seaborne trade as Australia. What is surprising is that this book does not deal with the strategic

and economic reality that we are a net energy exporter. Australia is the largest exporter of seaborne coal in the world with huge reserves of LNG which, if exploited skillfully, could significantly reduce our current dependence on imported oil. The impact on our terms of trade and carbon footprint would be immense if these and other natural economic advantages were recognised and acted upon.

The discussion of the nation's nuclear future into the midcentury is shallow and short-sighted in both economic and strategic terms. BHP Billiton's Olympic Dam operations are estimated to contain fully one third of the world's reserves of commercially exploitable uranium. Australia has 40 per cent of the energy source that currently provides 16 per cent of the planet's base-load power requirements. Australia and Canada in co-operation, for example, could dominate the world's nuclear fuel industry in a more comprehensive and responsible way than OPEC currently does with oil. Moreover, there are potentially very serious strategic vulnerabilities and other consequences if Australia does not make its uranium available and do so responsibly. Neither geopolitical aspect is canvassed in the book.

The emphasis on the need for a long-term strategic approach to constitutional reform and the social cohesion, health and education of our population is sound. The commentary provided on governance is reasonable as far as it goes, though the reserve with which it treats the trend towards centralisation of power perhaps reflects FDI's West Australian base as much as it does contemporary relations between the federal and state governments. The argument for restoring Australian knighthoods merely elicits comparisons with the bunyip aristocracy proposals of the early 19th Century.

Nearly 100 of the 345 pages are devoted to appendices. Well used such a format can be helpful, however this over-reliance results in some dislocation in the logic and flow of the themes and arguments presented in the main text. A surprising number of the book's extensive footnotes refer to articles and papers written by Gregory Copley. Although there is no particular protocol or convention on such matters, reference to independent commentators and sources would have bolstered the credibility of the analysis and arguments offered. The editing is also of a poor standard. *Australia 2050* is littered with minor, though irritating mistakes which further detract from the overall impression it makes on the reader.

Australia 2050 is an ambitious attempt to address our national future over the next 40-50 years but is ultimately a disappointment in its failure to tackle this difficult task comprehensively or coherently. ♦

Gregory Copley, Andrew Pickford and Barry Patterson, 'Australia 2050: An Examination of Australia's Condition, Outlook and Options for the First Half of the 21st Century', Future Directions International, Perth (and Sid Harta Publishers, Hartwell Victoria), 2007, Softback, 347pp., RRP \$439.95.

