

Speech at the official launch of Koi Tū: the Centre for Informed Futures

Sir Peter Gluckman

Government House, Auckland

Wednesday 4 March 2020

Tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa.

I would like to thank Dame Patsy from her enthusiastic support.

From the time I first mentioned our embryonic concept to her a year ago, she has encouraged our thinking.

I have been privileged to have had diverse roles: as an academic, as the first Chief Science Advisor to the New Zealand Prime Minister, as Chair of the International Network for Government Science Advice, and now as President-Elect of the International Science Council.

In these roles I have witnessed the challenges of long-term thinking on issues that are complex, and where there is an inevitable collision of knowledge, disciplines and expertise intersecting with contested values. These issues have been made immensely more difficult by the appearance of the misinformation age, fake news, and contested facts that are too often intentionally manipulated for purposes that can only undermine democracy. For democracy without informed publics is nothing but what Philip Kitcher, the renowned philosopher, would term 'vulgar democracy'.

And yet we face an unprecedented time in human history – disruptive technology emerges and diffuses at faster and faster rates. We embrace technology, yet it challenges us. It has impacts on every aspect of the human condition: democracy itself is being affected; the impact of humans on the planet has become undeniable with climate change and environmental degradation; social systems, and the way we relate to each other have been fundamentally changed by the digital world, with both perceived positive and negative effects. Demographic change is profound through longer life spans and increased migration. Identities are increasingly confused – no longer do we live in simple communities with clear self-identity. Mental health issues are rising, especially for young people. We are now facing the question of whether our inherent innovative capacities have led to unintended consequences that are now confronting us in very fundamental ways.

Societies face tough but essential decisions – decisions that need to transcend partisan politics and the political cycle. How can we reengage citizens? Trust surveys indicate that citizens across the western world have little faith in governments to solve their problems. We in New Zealand

are perhaps less affected than most countries, but we cannot be complacent. How can we fight the misinformation age? How do we decide what technologies to adopt or restrict? How do we deal with the inherent incompatibilities and tradeoffs between economic wellbeing, resilience, and sustainability framings? How do we sustain our resilience and cohesion in the face of these rapid and profound transformations?

These are practical matters that require academic consideration that not only takes advantage of all the disciplines of natural and social sciences and the humanities, but also reaches out and embraces the knowledge of communities, businesses and leaders of civil society. No longer can academics look at these issues from within their encapsulated ivory towers.

It was this logic with the deep experience, connectivity and breadth of expertise within our small team, that we proposed to the University to develop a novel and innovative enterprise: an engaged think-tank focused on these existential challenges. Initially, we set out under a temporary brand while we developed our strategic plan. Together with our Board, chaired until recently by Stuart McCutcheon, and with his impending retirement now by Bridget Coates – along with Sir Chris Mace, Rangimarie Hunia, Evan Williams, and Andrew Grant, we have developed a clear strategic plan and have named the Centre, *Koi Tū : the Centre for Informed Futures*.

An important part of the Centre's proposed activities will involve true engagement with civil society, policy makers, and the private sector as partners, and engage the full range of knowledge disciplines. The term 'informed' is intended to highlight this approach. From the outset, beyond our overall goal of battling the misinformation age, our goal is to avoid partisan and short-term issues, and instead focus on the longer-term issues which have much more limited attention from traditional policy-making – hence the word 'futures'.

Our plan focuses on long-term issues of complexity in four primary and interrelated areas of substantive and existential concern to New Zealand, other small advanced countries and indeed globally. These are:

1. **Societal resilience and social cohesion:** there is increasing evidence that multiple factors associated with rapid economic, institutional, technological, demographic and environmental change have the potential to have major impact on social cohesion and societal resilience. We already lead a global analysis of the factors involved.
2. **Decision making at all levels of governance and society in addressing the challenges of sustainability:** Governments and societies are faced with complex trade-offs between multiple dimensions of economic, cultural, social and environmental domains in making decisions about a sustainable future. Yet, the concept of trade-offs gets little honest attention in public decision making.

3. **Human capital development:** in particular, ensuring that the citizens of tomorrow are well able to cope with the very dramatic changes in the contexts that they will face. We will particularly focus on the child and adolescent.
4. **Societal decision-making regarding emergent technologies:** The ongoing digital and data transformations and emerging transformations in life sciences create enormous ethical, societal, economic and political challenges for individuals, for civil society, for government and between governments. We need to find better processes to deal with rapidly emergent and pervasive technologies.

Our team is growing with partners across the University and elsewhere in New Zealand, and globally with many distinguished colleagues from around the world. We have two here tonight – Prof Karen Hussey, an economist who directs the Centre for Policy Futures at the University of Queensland, and Prof Matthias Kaiser from the University of Bergen, where he has been director of the Centre for the Study of the Sciences and Humanities.

We have many global partnerships. For example, we are leading a project with UN agencies and the European Commission on how to create processes for integrated policy making related to sustainability. Domestically, we have associate members in most universities, and partnerships developing with Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei, the Pasifika community and high schools.

We have one other key goal. We cannot do this by ourselves; we need engagement with communities and leaders in New Zealand, and we need engagement with the global intellectual community. Our goal is to become the second home to some of the best thinkers on these issues by funding in-depth visits, not for brief engagement but for serious partnership as we undertake our work. The Norman Barry Trust has funded our first such visitor, Prof Matthias Kaiser, arguably the leading European scholar on these issues, and he is with us for some months.

We are most grateful to the University of Auckland and particularly to Stuart McCutcheon for encouraging us in this development and underwriting its start-up phase, and to those donors who have already come forward to support our development which has set us on a solid basis. However, we will continue to rely on philanthropy to avoid capture. As we deliver on this vision, we hope that our community of interest and support grows.

I again thank the Governor-General for her support.

Thank you.