

"THE WIRED CITY - IMPLICATIONS FOR PLANNING" BY GEORGE CLARKE

SCIENCE AND SOCIETY IN AUSTRALIA - Public Forum, November 9, 1974

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Evolving such social, cultural and political processes and institutions could be the next new frontier for the next new generation of scientists.

Planning for large, open, interactive social and technological systems seems impossible. The natural sciences techniques based on direct causative chains just don't work. Social planning is not engineering. Social planning problems are wicked problems. The formulation of the problem is the problem. The basic problem of the human race is how we reshape our social and political institutions to enable us to manage our conflicts and make our decisions about what actions we are going to take as a society.

A problem can be described as a discrepancy between the state of affairs as it is and as someone thinks it ought to be. We have the science and the technology to do almost anything we want to a degree unknown before in human history. I believe that the present state of affairs is that we don't have adequate social, cultural or political processes for determining how we want to use technology in particular fields. The state of affairs as I think it ought to be, is that we should be able self-consciously, participatively to shape our lives, our life styles, how and where we want to live. But we don't yet know how to arrange our discussions so that we can in fact successfully make any large-scale social plans. This is the greatest challenge of the second half of the Twentieth Century.

Planning is a social learning process - learning about what we want, where and when. Planning is the key function of modern government. Government should be increasingly thought of as a learning process, as Donald Shon says in his book "Beyond the stable State". We have to find ways of exploring together what we could have, including, for example, the telecommunications facilities that the Australian Post Office can tell us about, their costs, benefits, and implications.

We have to identify conflicts, we have to discuss possible trade offs, we have to reach some consensus about the trade-offs we are willing to make, and the immediate priorities for action. We have to observe the results of that initial action, achieve feed-back and then go through the whole cycle again.

The success of the planning process, the social learning process, depends on how much we can speed up this cycle. With urban plans these days, it's my own view that basic strategies, policies and priorities for short term action should be reviewed and revised every three years at least. The cycle should be gone through quite comprehensively with regard to every major urban area at least once every three years instead of as in the past, only once every 10 or 20 years.

However, most scientists and technologists wish to go through very, very complicated, sophisticated, mathematical, analytical processes which are very time consuming and very expensive. It's usually impossible for them to do their work sufficiently quickly in order to enable the cycle to proceed as it should. There are many things, of course, that telecommunications can do to help in this social learning process of planning and government. Computers of course are in fact doing a lot already, helping to get us information more quickly, helping to have access to wider and wider amounts of information.

Traditionally, social groups are organised through institutionalised political processes to elect governments, including local government councils. Governments or councils set priorities, they make choices of allocations of resources - that's accepted in all fields but it's not yet accepted in science and technology. We have notions of scientific freedom and so perhaps we should say it's not the business of governments to interfere with scientific freedom. But it does seem increasingly to be the business of our social and political institutions to direct technology to the satisfaction of defined social needs.

In this respect the announcement today by the Minister for Science of the setting up of a group which might look at this sort of problem in Australia is very heartening. I believe we will have to do more and more of what the Americans call technology assessment, and that these assessments will become more and more politically important.

The time for open discussion has come. With regard to telecommunications, I would like to discuss the dangers of centralisation of control, and also the dangers of too much trivial communication. Many of my colleagues in the urban studies profession have in fact defined metropolises

as being measurable in terms of the average number of contact choices per unit time. They have defined urban societies as being transaction maximising systems. I think that we might have in the future a problem of "communication - pollution". We have a constant danger of trivialisation - a constant danger of communication overload.

Having said that, I should quickly conclude by urging more experimentation with new forms of social and political processes and institutions that would enable us to conduct social planning and conflict management as on-going, participative processes, that would work better than we have ever before been able to make such processes work.