

2021 Royal Society of NSW and the Learned Academies Forum: “Power and Peril of the Digital Age”

Her Excellency the Honourable Margaret Beazley AC QC

Opening Address

To all of you watching, in New South Wales and far beyond, I am delighted to join you in this opening session of the Royal Society of New South Wales and Learned Academies Virtual Conference. This morning I am speaking to you from my office here at Government House which stands on Gadigal land, and by the beautiful Gadigal waters of Sydney Harbour.

As we consider the unrelenting pace of the Digital Age over these next days, I pause to acknowledge the wisdom, culture and continuing connection to lands, waters and communities of First Nations people who have lived in the Sydney region for at least 60,000 years.¹

Downstairs in the Main Hall here at the House, there is a large portrait of the first President of the Royal Society of New South Wales, founded 200 years ago and initially known as the Philosophical Society of Australasia. The subject of that portrait was an avid astronomer, my predecessor, Sir Thomas Brisbane, the 6th Governor of New South Wales.

It is an honour to continue this long line of Vice Regal patronage of the Royal Society, whose mission to enrich our lives through knowledge and inquiry is vigorously pursued with intellectual rigour.

The theme of this year’s conference is exciting and, in many ways, confronting. People

do not necessarily handle change well. Indeed, according to the eponymous Mr Google, change sits on top of the list of the top ten fears people have. Uncertainty ranks fifth. And that is in everyday life. Yet, as John F. Kennedy put it so well: *Change is the law of life. And those who look only to the past or [live only in the] present are certain to miss the future.*²

I commend the Society and Learned Academies Forum for this year’s forward looking theme — *Power & Peril of the Digital Age* — and for the dynamic way they have sought to focus our deliberations.

We have entered a new age that has already changed and will continue to change the world and, I would add, most likely, civilisation as we know it.

The Bureau of Statistics estimates there is one birth in Australia every 1 minute and 45 seconds. So, a beautiful little bundle of joy and potential has been born whilst I have been speaking to you — born into a world of increasing digital complexity. A world, as you are going to explore, which brings both power and peril.

With a few clicks on your phone, you can access nearly all of human knowledge that exists in our time. The baby’s name may have been a family favourite — or the parents might have googled ‘baby names’, along with some 6.9 billion searches made on the same day, using the services of a company

1 <https://sydneylivingmuseums.com.au/exhibitions/gadigal-place>

2 Address in the Assembly Hall at the Paulskirche in Frankfurt, June 25, 1963

that is reputed to hold a 92.7 per cent share of the global search market.³

As the baby grows, their immunisation status will be recorded on an app, their toddlers' clothing will be ordered online and delivered by drone, perhaps. In 2030, aged 8, the child will travel to school on an autonomous school bus, perhaps. Twenty years on, in 2050 aged 28, this tech-savvy young person will have every aspect of health care delivered remotely, will sit through international conferences in a room full of holograms, almost undoubtedly.

However, this little person, born today, also has to live in an actual world.

In 2019, the CSIRO published its Australian National Outlook⁴, exploring multiple potential futures for our Nation for the next 40 years. The aim was holistic. It was to: *help Australians continue to enjoy the best quality of life available to any nation, and for future generations to have access to even better opportunities.*⁵

The report recognised the challenges:

- the Rise of Asia
- Technological Change
- Climate Change and Environment
- Demographics
- Trust, and
- Social Cohesion.

The report modelled two scenarios: a *Slow Decline* — should we fail to adequately address these issues; and an “*Outlook Vision*” that called for decisive action and a long-

term view to achieve positive outcomes. The modelling demonstrated that *the difference between these two scenarios is large and worth fighting for.*⁶

Whilst the immediate future of our little birthday baby is in our hands, the longer-term future is not so certain. This uncertainty underlines that what we are discussing here over these two days is intensely pragmatic and significant.

I congratulate the Forum organisers on this collaboration between the Society and the Australian academies of Health and Medical Sciences; the Humanities; Science; Technology and Engineering; and the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, which creates a deep well of expertise to discuss this future which is so “worth fighting for” to get it right.

My thanks to Dr Susan Pond, President of the Royal Society of New South Wales and Chair of the Planning Committee for the Forum; the representatives of the five Learned Academies who formed the Program Committee; our two lead speakers: Australia's Chief Scientist, Cathy Foley, and NSW Chief Scientist and Engineer, Hugh Durrant-Whyte; and our Moderator, Dr Ian Oppermann, NSW Chief Data Scientist and Industry Professor, University of Technology Sydney.

It is my pleasure to officially open the Royal Society of New South Wales and Learned Academies Forum for 2021.

³ <https://www.salesforce.com/au/blog/2021/09/sco-best-practices.html#:~:text=Google%20is%20projected%20to%20hit,for%20a%20lot%20of%20information>

⁴ <https://www.csiro.au/en/work-with-us/services/consultancy-strategic-advice-services/csiro-futures/australian-national-outlook>

⁵ https://www.csiro.au/-/media/Showcases/ANO/ANO2_MainReport_WEB_190614.pdf

⁶ https://www.csiro.au/-/media/Showcases/ANO/ANO2_ExecutiveSummary_190613.pdf

