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Finding Our Way to the Future: Directions for a City of Opportunity

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Abstract

This Australian case study of futures methodologies in local government explores the development and implementation of the Logan 2026 City Directions project.

As an innovative approach to strategic planning, and forming the city visioning umbrella for the Strategic Planning and Performance Management Framework of Council, Logan 2026 City Directions has facilitated greater engagement with the community and represents an opportunity for Council to explore and build on the organisation's foresight capacity and to enhance internal communications within the organisation.

One significant by-product has been ongoing dialogue and actions of the workshop groups in Council seeking to address such issues as climate change.

Keywords: future studies, scenarios, local government, strategic planning, reform

Introduction

Resize, reshape, reform: the 3 'Rs' in Logan City's future

Logan 2026 City Directions was officially launched on 19 April 2007¹. Only two days prior the Queensland State Government announced a major reform of the local government system. A Local Government Reform Commission has been charged with the task of considering new boundaries for local government across Queensland and recommending amalgamations of neighbouring councils.

State-wide amalgamations are not new to local government. In the 1990s Tasmania, the Northern Territories, South Australia and New Zealand undertook extensive restructure. Victoria, for example, reduced the number of its local governments from 210 municipalities to 78 in a twelve month period. While not as intensive the New South Wales local government reform has had a similar impact on the scale and number of local governments in the state. Change of this magnitude has not been experienced in Queensland local government since its foundation and Logan City Council

would be one of 157 councils in Queensland (excluding Brisbane) to undergo the first sweeping reform in more than a century².

For some, these sweeping changes were a sooner-not-later inevitability, for many other local government commentators the announcement and timing of the reform came as something of a surprise. For those involved in constructing future scenarios as part of the Logan 2026 City Directions project, the issue of local government amalgamations was just one of many variables considered.

Strategic planning and futures methodology

Most legislatively required local government plans are in relatively short strategic and corporate planning terms, usually 5-10 year periods at most. Planners generally extrapolate from existing trends, but more and more local governments are realising the value of fostering a longer term sense of strategic planning and how it can be enhanced by futures methodologies and scenario planning which look beyond current trends, lend themselves to broader possibilities and focus on emerging issues, such as those undertaken by corporations, government defence departments and research institutions like the much-lauded Royal/Dutch Shell case study and group of scenario planners³.

While the growing credibility and prognosis for the incorporation of scenario planning into strategic thinking and management processes within the public sector (Delaney & Jones, 2001) is exemplified in the Queensland Transport and Main Roads (2000) *4 Seeable Futures* process; today we see community visioning filtering through to local government in Australia on an increasing basis. In the South East Queensland region alone, Redland Shire Council developed a *Community Plan* (2000), Brisbane City Council continue to develop their vision through *Brisbane 2010* and *Brisbane 2026 Vision Refresh*. Maroochy Shire Council developed their hands on *Maroochy 2025* document and Ipswich City Council developed *Ipswich 2020* and *Beyond*. Beaudesert Shire Council are currently working through their *Whole of Shire Planning Draft Community Vision* document and Gold Coast City Council, through their *Bold Futures* initiative, have also embarked on full-scale city visioning project.

Logan City Council's futures project orientation may have been predominantly informed and influenced by the Brisbane City Council's model which focused on community values and organisational development and the South East Queensland 2026 Regional Plan acted as a spur, in terms of a response to projected changes in the region, but all of the examples listed have impacted upon Logan City Council's consideration of the veracity and value of futures methodologies and scenario focused planning processes.

As a method of envisaging what the future might hold for a particular organisation (or City), Logan City Council's scenario planning attempted to identify the major drivers likely to shape the future and gauge the impact these will have on the organisation and its relationships with the community and stakeholders.

Rather than using straight-line projections from past trends, scenario planning attempts to tell stories about possible and plausible futures in which the organisation may have to operate. It is as much a 'process' of engaging the members of the organisation in a dialogue about those futures and their implications, as it is

an effort to achieve a final 'product' (4Seeable Futures, 2000).

Logan 2026 City Directions has provided the basis for an overarching planning framework, outlined in *Figure 1* for the city and the organisation's continuing growth and development.

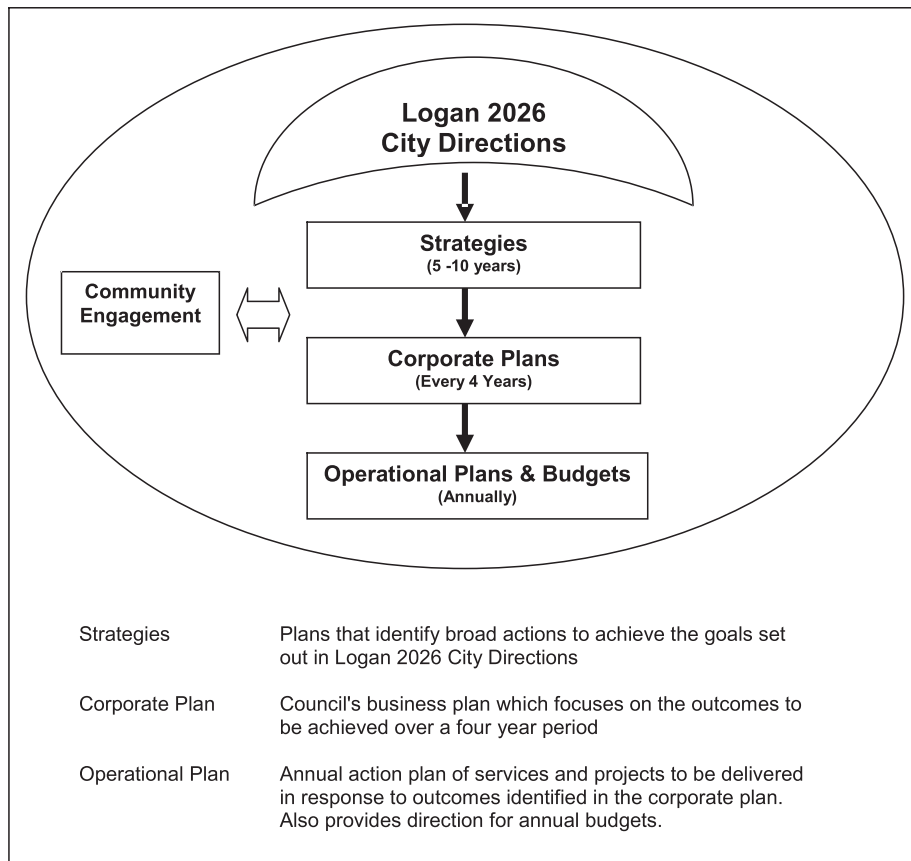


Figure 1. Logan 2026 City Directions framework

The findings, considerations and observations put forward in the project come from a variety of sources; the 2006 Community Values Survey (AC Nielsen, 2006), detailed Time Series demographic studies and projections (PIFU, 2006), extensive research and the development of potential future scenarios for Logan City (Logan City Council, 2006). The expected outcomes included a City Plan and Vision Statement and a framework for ongoing planning and delivery of Council services.

The project aims were to inform strategic planning developed within the Planning and Performance Framework and applied at organisational level and to constitute part of the local response to the South East Queensland Regional Plan.

The framework outlined in *Figure 1* demonstrates the key relationships between the Logan 2026 City Directions project and organisationally critical documents including the Strategy Register, Corporate Plans and Operational Plans and Budgets.

Council intends to review and update the City Vision in the preparation of subsequent 5 year Corporate Plans, annual Operational Plans, long-term financial planning and annual budgets and will report to the community on progress of the achievement of this Vision through its Annual Report of performance against its Corporate Plan objectives.

A pragmatic approach to learning

The Logan 2026 City Directions project broadened as a strategic planning exercise to prepare Council for the challenges and opportunities the organisation is likely to face in the future and to build planning capacity within Council to work towards long term outcomes. In essence, the project enabled Council to explore a completely new learning dimension and assimilate the newly learned behaviour into the corporate hegemony.

According to Peter Senge (1990) learning organisations are:

...organisations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together.

In situations of rapid change, Senge (1990) theorises that only flexible, adaptive and productive organisations can excel. While this is an aspiration for Logan City Council as an organisation, the project's initial challenge was to get a local government body, traditionally conservative and risk averse, to begin to think beyond conventional corporate norms and consider, let alone develop, relatively intangible and amorphous concepts as scenarios or even visioning.

Shared past presents the missing link to the future

The release of *Logan, Creating a City: A Celebration of 25 Years* (Howells, 2005), just prior to the start of the Logan 2026 City Directions project was provident in that the publication documents shared the historical experience of change and growth of the organisation and the City.

The key to successful engagement with the project and its futures processes was in relating to participants experience of change. Sharing the story of Logan City's history highlighted past achievements, honoured contributions toward growth and identified cornerstones of development. It also eased construction of the present picture in providing a snapshot of the city and the organisation's existing strengths and assets.

A series of informal introductory workshop and training briefings were conducted with prospective participants. They provided an opportunity to illustrate the rapid rate of change and to draw from the experience of participant's adjustment to organisational change. The most widely raised observations were of workplace transformation through technological advancement and whether we as individuals will be able to keep

up with the greater rate of change.

The project sought to engender a learning environment which supported and encouraged new alternative approaches and ways of thinking, particularly helpful for Council officers to incorporate futures thinking into current and forthcoming strategic planning and policy.

Another challenge was to sustain the momentum of learning and incorporate and adopt the new ideas and raised levels of energy into the practices and processes of everyday work.

Futures studies training and developing scenarios

Scenarios are stories rather than scientific analyses. The reliability of their content is less important than the types of conversations they spark. (de Geus, 1997)

In the consideration of plausible future scenarios and how the project would influence or affect the impact on the city as a whole, where the image of potential futures become the goal, it was imperative that the participants learn to build skills, knowledge and capacity in futures methodologies. Logan City Council engaged Sohail Inayatullah to facilitate the training and scenario development.

A group of twenty staff participated in the initial Futures Training with the intention that this group would propagate the resulting futures dialogue when the working group extended its numbers to sixty staff. Selected on the basis of their roles and abilities to influence and be effective within the organisation, members of the group also represented wide ranging diversity in age, gender, profession, ethnicity and even residence across the City.

Overall, I felt that a good cross section of participants were chosen which gave good balanced viewpoints across Council's diverse branches. (Workshop participant, 2006)

The training and workshops were based on Inayatullah's *Futures Studies* process of developing a shared view of the organisation's history, mapping the future, identifying emerging issues, deepening of issues, developing alternative futures, visioning and backcasting (Inayatullah, 2002). All participants found the futures methods and tools accessible and thought provoking.

The scenario process provides a context for thinking clearly about the impossibly complex array of factors that affect any decision. It gives managers a common language for talking about these factors starting with some 'what if' stories ...Then it encourages participants to think about futures as if it had already come to pass. (Schwartz, 1991)

From the first workshop, six scenario themes were distilled and sketched and participants elected to join a scenario group in order to develop, script and present back to the larger group and the Strategic Performance and Leadership Team at a second workshop scheduled a month later.

Over the four week period between workshops, each member of the group became intensely involved and committed to the process of cultivating alternative future sce-

narios. Much of what was learned through the training workshops, particularly the Causal Layered Analysis method (Inayatullah, 2004), Incasting Template (Brisbane City Council, 2006) and information consolidated in the project folders, was drawn upon in the development of these scenarios.

The futures training and methods held very practical and pragmatic applications for participants, enhanced professional staff development in group facilitation skills and policy development and provided the key elements and learnings which informed and influenced the project methodology and the production of a set of alternative futures which would be used for community consultation purposes.

When there is a shared vision, people excel and learn, not because they are told to, but because they want to. The practice of shared vision involves the skills of unearthing shared 'pictures of the future' that foster genuine commitment and enrolment rather than compliance. (Senge, 1990, p. 9)

It was during this intensive scenario building phase, where participants demonstrated extraordinarily high levels of energy, commitment, initiative and self motivation. Networking between groups also contributed to a positive spirit of competitiveness which continually nudged and raised the collective standard of creativity amongst groups. The learning was very much self-directed, with people consolidating from their own research, often meeting to build scripts and working after hours.

Given that we were all new to futures, there was a wonderful range of insights and group synergies. The highlights for me were the incredibly creative scenario presentations. The range of talent also featured some really clever and powerful parodies (Workshop participant, 2006).

The scenarios

The participants, doubling as the audience for their scenario presentation counterparts, were invited to consider a closely related though evocatively divergent array of scenarios.

The Museum of Change with its variety of interactive and historical exhibits provided the context for the Active and Healthy Scenario, *Logan, Be In It* - a spoof of the popular *Life, Be In It* national advertising campaign of the 70s.

As the revitalised and healthy society that we have become in 2026 we are, all of us, much fitter, more active in terms of our exercise regimes and our engagement with the broader community. We now have a greater sense of wellbeing than at any time in the last century. And to see just how far we've come, The Museum of Change offers a glimpse of what we've managed to put behind us. We can reflect on the days of distressing obesity, ominous blood pressure readings and rampant diabetes. The Museum's first exhibit showcases the junk food munching smoker prevalent in society twenty years ago and provides the launch pad for an exciting and informative virtual historical tour which takes us from the relatively sedentary work and lifestyle practices of 2006 to the more active, healthy and nutritional living of 2026. We get a chance to glimpse a prescient and inspirational address from the CEO of 2006 and footage of the city's young Mayoress accepting the 2026

Healthy City Award on behalf of a city which has striven to change more than its image.

Based on a movie review format, the Green and Sustainable Scenario was constructed around the ABC's popular *At the Movies* television program. The studio hosts interview actors and the director and offer informed critiques on an acclaimed documentary called *Sustaining Logan*.

The award winning documentary's critical success is in how majestically it captures Logan City's rise to being one of the greenest and most environmentally sustainable cities in the country. It highlights the city's expansive community gardens and community governance projects; it investigates, but does not dwell on the tensions developing between low cost GI manufacturers and high end organic market gardeners. Through a remarkable montage of images, interviews and issues, it highlights the rationale for futures planning and the buffers it offered against the potentially crushing challenges met and overcome in a twenty year period, such as peak oil, drought and flooding. It considers the proactive steps the city took to encourage the slow food movement, provide cheap clean public transport and protect the native flora, fauna and waterways. The film centres on the strategic planner who initiated future methodologies and guided the City's breakthrough steps to dramatic changes back in 2006. While it glosses over a few of the cracks it poignantly points to the city's status as a beacon for local government authorities in terms of future sustainability and the driving forces and processes behind a 20 year planning project.

The Creative and Innovative City Scenario invited the audience to a private dinner party to spend the evening with the Da Vinci family as they complete their 2026 Census. Their revelatory discussion offers an informative insight on what their alternative future holds.

The Da Vincis, live in an exciting, culturally distinguished, technologically advanced city. At least two of them study at Logan University of the Arts - a research flagship and pioneer institution in cultural studies and philosophy and specialising in pragmatic vocational study opportunities. Like the Da Vincis, the city's other residents and specialised business precincts are still reaping the intellectual and commercial benefits of hosting the World Arts Expo in 2020. Logan City is a dynamic hub of innovation and cutting edge technology where design and invention meet necessity head on. Where the economy and our flexible education systems are key winners, particularly where innovative knowledge based industries - through working smarter, not harder - continue to create new growth and fair and equal employment opportunities beyond our thriving local markets which themselves reflect the city's resplendent festival-esque displays of cultural bonhomie and diversity.

The Business As Usual Scenario may seem familiar. This scenario group make the suggestions on the redundancy of maintaining a short term focus. If things don't change, the problems of the past and present are destined to be repeated. It's

Groundhog Day in 2026.

A controversial development application for a major sub-division is being discussed at a Public Meeting. We arrive just in time to hear representatives from the city's authorities predictably encounter the same arguments and respond with equally repetitive answers as they have since 2006. The same issues seem to arise and the same stakeholders make arguments for the same interests they've had for twenty years. In fact the only things that have changed are the people themselves. Our highways have continued to be extended in response to slow moving traffic, the environment is still being regarded with a seemingly endless ability for reproduction and the administrative process of local legislative bodies are as equally vulnerable to political processes.

It's not all bad Logan City Council is seen as progressive if reactive to external forces, the city and its custodians have kept up with prevailing trends, but would never be regarded as leaders or agents of change. Health issues such as obesity are still being tackled and the city's vision statement hasn't changed in twenty years. Nor has the desire to alter the way things are done. As a result the city is doomed to continue to make the same mistakes.

In the tradition of the Great Debate, the Worst Case Scenario lets the audience decide which of the two representative teams argument is most cogent. The topic for discussion, and incidentally the scenario's title, is: *This Is As Good As It Gets*.

The affirmative side believe that Logan City requires no change in 2026; in fact no action is required. 'She'll be right' is the catch cry of those who enjoy living in this 'hot city'. They see no wrong in quickly cooling down with an abundance of air conditioners. The green-thumb approach to rooftop gardening is deemed a reasonable replacement for the parks and open space they used to have. They seem happy to water down pollutant and waste treatment issues, citing the proliferation of DIY recycling systems as an accepted norm.

The negative team reveal the reality of life in Logan City in 2026. Poorly managed and stigmatised with a substantially earned reputation built on slow reactivity in response to issues and alarming rises in a range of physical and mental health conditions. The appropriately if unofficially renamed 'rust belt' alludes to the critical lack of and links to much needed resources for the economy and the community. As the debate adjudicator skilfully and succinctly puts both cases forward we the audience are left in no doubt that this fearful worst case future alternative is one to be avoided.

In complete contrast, the Best Case Scenario, *The New Frontier*, heralds an enterprising and capacity building Council that, by 2026, has boldly gone where no local government authority has gone before, hence the Star Trek spoof it was spun around. *The City of Opportunity Awards* highlight Logan City as an all-round winner.

A consistent forerunner and leader, Logan City has beaten off stern competition to scoop top honours in every category of the 2026 Awards:
Dr. 'Bones' McCoy accepted the Community award where social equity, participa-

tion, inclusion, health and safety are key factors. Logan City Council has initiated extensive collaborative service provision and preventative health and liveability programs.

Chekov accepted the Economic award where investment, education and accessibility are key factors in matching education to business in programs which provide fully integrated work based qualifications for example.

Cmdr. Uhuru accepted the Environmental award where planning and development controls and the preservation of natural environments are key factors in introducing integrated public transport network alternatives and smart housing incentives and standards.

Mr. Spock accepted the Governance award where accountability, transparency and sound management practices are key factors in community engagement programs such as the simplified and well informed e-government systems.

The implementation and achievement of some bold strategies instigated in 2006 have paid off. The initiative and (USS) enterprise of the City Council foresighted enough to commit to meaningful continual improvement in service delivery has been duly rewarded.

High levels of satisfaction were fed back from the training. In response to the question, 'Overall, do you see the City Directions project as a valuable strategic planning process for the City's and Council's future?' All responses registered a rating of four or five where five was 'most valuable'. A shift in participant's openness to futures studies was discernable and in turn reflected in workshop participant comments, like those below:

The training had been very good, but it was over too quickly and there was so much to absorb (Workshop participant, 2006).

Wow, I am still processing all of the overwhelming impressions...The two days were both challenging and rewarding! I look forward to lots more learning (Workshop participant, 2006).

Intentions to be a highly consultative and interactive process were exceeded beyond any reasonable expectation. The project sparked a palpably synergistic reaction within the organisation. Where it had initially sought to engage, it meaningfully connected people, the ethereal nature of this futures methodology was augmented into a tangible and encompassing field of positive energy.

Continual updates allowed participant knowledge levels to increase in proportion to the project's burgeoning development. Email group lists expanded to incorporate the sharing and exchange of understanding, insight and ideas. Much of the information and communication produced during the project development phases was proffered by the participants themselves, extending their own sets of networks in the process.

Looking forward, looking back

Scenario presentations complete, further visioning and consolidation sessions were used to revisit and make comprehensive use of backcasting method as an effective means to demonstrate the change continuum and to close the loop begun in the

initial shared history timeline. This exercise drew together knowledge developed in the scenarios and made the important step towards strategy setting and action planning.

Really enjoyed the afternoon session as the various scenarios were able to be consolidated. It had a good outcome (Workshop participant, 2006).

These six, often overlapping, scenarios formed the basis for the formulation of five main themes: active and healthy, creative and innovative, green and sustainable, inclusive and vibrant and globally and regionally connected. The worse case scenario served as the much needed cautionary tale.

Along with material from the scenarios, additional leading ideas and impressions were gathered, evaluated, synthesised and presented back to the groups for an additional round of feedback and comment. The balance of the materials produced by and in support of, including a DVD of the presentations, were then carefully considered and incorporated into a succinct working draft of the user-friendly, colourful and engaging Logan 2026 City Directions community consultation document.

I can now see how it is possible to plan long term and set strategies in place to achieve this (Workshop participant, 2006).

Conclusion

Organisations desire tools and methods to better understand the future. However, more than education, organisations desire to enhance their organisational strategic thinking, at the level of the entire system as well as of all employees. It is not just having a clever CEO but a broader and deeper process to create a learning organisation. Doing so requires capacity building throughout the organisation - at all levels (Inayatullah, 2005).

Futures training and the resultant workshops introduced new ways of thinking about the future within Logan City Council as an organisation. It helped people begin to understand and inquire of their own perspectives regarding the future. The collaborative dialogue extended participant's capacity to suspend assumptions and enter into a free-flowing exchange of thoughts and ideas which allowed for richer insights.

Developing the scenarios had a regenerative and reinforcing affect on the people in each and between groups. As people engaged, each scenario solidified and friendly pressure to make perfected presentations increased with levels of clarity, enthusiasm and commitment. This heightened interaction was initially limited to the extended project working group, but has since, in developing futures mental models, enhanced strategic and policy planning and dialogue across the organisation. This bodes well for a greater possibility of bringing our futures to fruition.

Through group participation it was interesting to note that an agreed outcome - the future was mapped by the participants (Workshop participant, 2006).

The success of scenario development as a planning exercise also set the stage for

greater interdepartmental dialogue. Many participants had their first opportunity to work in a multi- and interdisciplinary team were appreciative of the opportunity and struck by the meaningfulness of the experience. Individuals identified with their particular scenario group and learned the essentials in creating a shared vision.

The scenarios were the result of many hours of preparation by staff to present creative and practical ideas for Logan's future. Participants unleashed their enthusiasm for future planning providing Council with well balanced options for the next generation (Workshop participant, 2006).

The corporate values of the workplace were tested with a focus on sharing leadership and enhancing the capacity of people to work towards common goals. The involvement of people from all levels of Council was a vital means of developing the ability to mobilise peoples' commitment towards results. Not only did the project go some way to tapping into people's commitment and capacity to learn at all levels, there continues to be a strong and sustained desire to be engaged in discussions on emerging issues and futures topics.

Initially I was excited about thinking about what the future could be, anxious that as a group we may not get it right, worried that my contributions would be limited and sceptical as to whether it would succeed. I am pleasantly surprised, looking back over the experience of how I was not the only person that felt this way and as a group of people from all different backgrounds, beliefs, professions, we were able to work together and develop scenarios that addressed issues and challenges and develop a way forward to an improved future. The whole process has renewed my faith in the true sense of 'holistic planning' (Workshop participant, 2006).

The training and workshops introduced people to futures learning and constructing a shared vision, but more importantly, people were able to act together. For instance, when a dialogue on Al Gore's climate change documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*, began in Council, it snowballed from an exchange of impressions of the documentary, to a self-perpetuating interest group. Significantly membership of the group extended beyond the parameters of workshop attendees which means participants of the project are now leading proactive movements and exercising agency in their capacity to act and influence Council policy and planning.

Logan City Council's community consultation on the *Draft Logan 2026 City Directions* document was incorporated into the final *Logan 2026 City Directions* document and is now a vision that does justice to the efforts and energies of those who contributed. It represents a collaborative and proactive effort to shape the growth and development of Logan City and is derived from a number of perspectives from the people who live and work in the community and is indicative of the learning dynamics of an organisation ready for major change.

Beyond the organisations commitment to delivering the strategic directions in the preparation of long-term City strategies, the dialogue in council on futures related issues and actions has already started to reap some benefits in the form of more collaborative working relationships across Council and robust futures planning.

Another world is not only possible, she's on her way... On a quiet day, if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing. (Roy, 2002)

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Notes

1. While the Logan 2026 City Directions project was endorsed by Council in November 2005, its inception began years earlier in 2000 with extensive background research and project planning
2. By September 2007, the new names and boundaries for Queensland local government will be announced by the Minister.
3. Pierre Wack, Arie de Geus, Peter Schwartz and Napier Collyns (Global Business Network), Charles Hampden-Turner, and Kees van der Heijden

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