

Creating community out of chaos and uncertainty begins with asking the right questions...

The power of community search conferences

Merrelyn Emery — Australian National University

Australia 1995 is a very different place from what it was in 1972. The reasons go far beyond its film and recording stars — the use of community search conferences has played a significant role in changing the face of Australia.

Since 1972, people have brought into being new organizations to deal with issues arising from the continuous process of change itself. They have directly created new national policies and directions. The search conference has touched and changed a huge diversity of geographical communities, industries and institutions across the country. And we are talking about thousands of searches.

Apart from these direct effects, there has been an indirect but perhaps even more important cumulative effect: the great mass of energy involved and created during these search conferences has also been directed toward creating environments which are supportive of community based on our highest human ideals. The basic set of ideals which the search conference elicits has provided direction and a powerful sense of democratic community.

Planning and work within participative democratic communities... Democratic communities take responsibility for their future. Within them individuals grow as the communities develop responsible democratic, cooperative ways. It is undeniable that cohesive community events based on ideals create a sense of community. The excitement and joy that people feel when they work together for their community and future means that they will attempt to recreate that experience. It becomes their preferred way.

It is easily arguable on the basis of these thousands of community search conferences that Australia's modern day success as a multi-cultural nation has its origins in the strong sense of community and tolerance that search conferences have both nurtured and created.

The life of the nation begins in the local community — Is Australia heaven on earth? No. Of course not. It's still basically a representative democracy. And it is impossible to track all lines of influence through time in any unit as big as a diverse nation. But there is a clear line of development within Australia, that of community revitalization. No democratic community or nation can survive without an infrastructure of strong cohesive communities. While the search conference in Australia has not created *New Utopia*, it has encouraged an understanding, a continuing potential for working together for the common good.

1972–1977: our communities come alive

Kids show planners the future — At the beginning of the Canberra winter of 1973, thirty four people aged between 16 and 25 went up the mountains to plan Gungahlin, a new town of Canberra, the decentralized (bush) national capital of Australia. In the process, they destroyed myths and created others.

“The excitement and joy that people feel when they work together for their community and future means that they will attempt to recreate that experience. It becomes their preferred way.”

So what is a community search conference?

A community search conference is a carefully planned and designed event in which a community plans its own future and takes responsibility for making it happen. The community may be geographical such as a town or a region. It may be a community of interest brought together by the need to plan for an industry or a policy area.

The basic concept or design principle is simple — It is that responsibility is located with the people who have to live with the consequences of their actions and the plan. Experts who fly in and out cannot do it by definition. As the *Gungahlin kids* realized, *community* means nothing if people have no control of their physical and social environment.

The design — Community searches usually follow the simple classical design of exploring the external social environment, the system which is the town, industry or issue and then integrating these into a set of strategies and detailed action plans to achieve their most desirable future.

Changes in the world around us
Probable and desirable futures of our town
Common history of our town
Our current town: what to
keep, throw-out, create
Desirable future of
our town
Action planning
Diffusion to the community
Implementing the plan

Differences between an organizational and a community search...
Community searches differ from organizational or corporate searches in three major ways.

1. Asking the right questions.

A community search conference usually involves more preparation and planning than do organizational search conferences. Communities usually:

- Are more diffuse with no definite internal structure...
- Have more diverse and complex sets of relationships, people and interests than do corporations...
- Often have a range of presenting symptoms: some people will focus on youth unemployment, others on environmental degradation and some will see economic development opportunities as conflicting with environmental and cultural sustainability.

Everybody knows that things must change but how? Pre-work will involve bringing all these views together and sometimes result in totally redefining the focus of the search conference. In small discrete areas for example, the most productive focus is usually simply *the future of our town*. But getting it right takes time. Be prepared.

2. Having all pieces of the puzzle in the room.

The selection of participants for a community search conference is absolutely critical to its success. For organizational search

conferences, there is little if any decision making about participants. The corporate strategic plan is the responsibility of top management or the board of directors and these attend the search. The community search on the other hand must necessarily involve a process of researching the nature of the community, drawing up a *social map* and using that *map* as the basis of the *community reference system*. The community reference system (Please see the Jan/Feb, 1995 issue of this Journal) ensures that the community itself determines who attends. It also ensures that the participants collectively know all the pieces of the puzzle involved in the future of that community.

Issue search conferences... In many issue search conferences, there is a great deal of work to be done in identifying all the pieces of the puzzle and the people who hold the relevant knowledge about those pieces. For *The Future of Australia's Marginal Lands (1980)*, key organizations and individuals in every state were visited. "Selecting three dozen participants from a list of over 200 was not easy" but many participants wore two or more relevant hats. The diversity was huge — lawyers, farmers and graziers, environmental scientists, parliamentarians, a welfare project officer, public servants, a wool manager etc. All states and sectors were there. And the puzzle was in the room.

3. Making it happen

In most community searches, there is no existing structure to implement the ensuing plan.* This has long been a major reason for the ultimate failure of many community search conferences. Our cultural brainwashing and tradition has led us to believe that we should set up committees to do everything and anything. But committees are for the most part only mini-bureaucracies and their dynamics and outcomes follow suit. Such committees create endless fight/flight, inertia and low quality outcomes, if any. The low energy and negative emotions associated with committees are the opposite of what people have experienced in the search conference itself. They quickly give up on the process and it dies. Democratic structures must, therefore, be created.

Democratic structures are necessary for success... Today, we build in a component at the end of the search to overcome this difficulty. We build in a modified participative design workshop to design an organizational structure to carry out the implementation in a democratic way. Once the concepts and practices of democracy through self-management are understood and participants have designed their own structure, the community has a much better chance of making its most desirable future happen. Not only has it come alive, it has consciously learned how to organize itself for an effective, long term and adaptive life. When the environment changes again as it will, the community has the tools, not only to adjust its plans but also to reorganize itself.

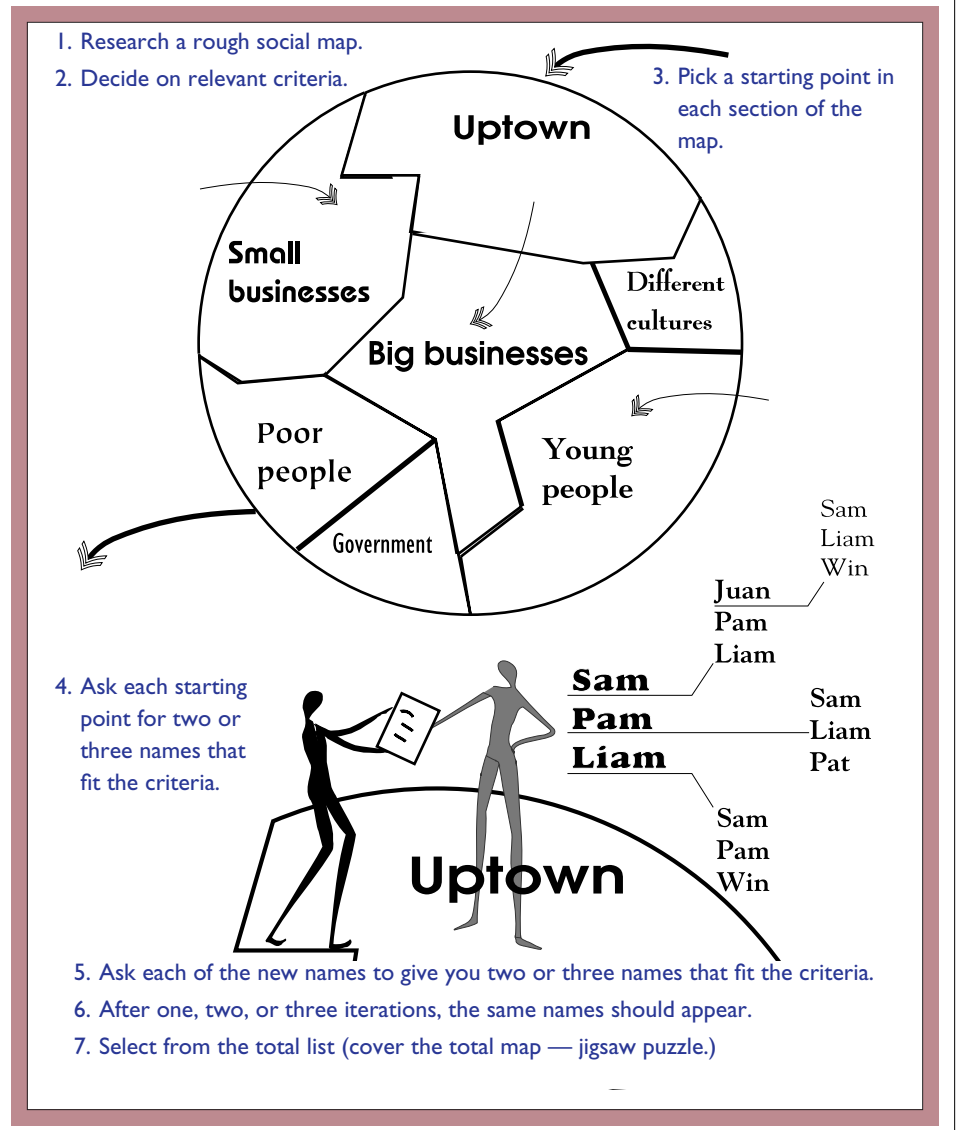
**(In organizational search conferences and some industry search conferences where is there a pre-existing industry association, implementation is naturally coordinated by that body in cooperation with the search conference membership.)*

The community reference system is used for selecting participants in a community search conference...

The community determines its own members whether it is a geopolitical, professional or issue related community. There are seven distinct steps to locating individuals to include in the search conference:

1. Research a rough social map.
2. Decide on relevant criteria:
 - Known to be actively concerned about X.
 - Other as relevant to X.
3. Pick a starting point in each section of the map.
4. Ask each starting point for two or three names that fit the criteria.
5. Ask each of the new names to give you two or three names that fit the criteria.
6. After one, two, or three iterations, the same names should appear.
7. Select from the total list (cover the total map — jigsaw puzzle.)

As can be seen in this hypothetical social map, many different groups, sectors and interests, each of which are considered a part of the system (as defined by the community), may be included in a particular community search.



I

The professional planners didn't think the "kids" could plan... The National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) (responsible for the planning of Canberra) made every possible contingency plan against how they assumed Murphy's law would work in our search conference. And despite our best efforts, Angela Sands and I could not overcome their skepticism about this age group's abilities to work or to self manage. The search was therefore scheduled for five days and a leader was assigned to three pre-determined subgroups (the NCDC also didn't believe they could plan). The NCDC brought masses of technical information and expert planners (neither one was called upon during the search). Worse than this, with the usual protective and paternalistic con-

cern, no night work had been scheduled. It had even been suggested that the kids might not work through a whole day. But then the staff couldn't stop them working and couldn't get them to bed!

Their community, Gungahlin, was years ahead of its time... Angela Sands, the co-search manager said in 1975, the memories are of "immense energy and enthusiasm." They were committed to finding idealistic and realistic solutions. They planned a SHE town, what James Robertson was later to describe as the "sane, humane and ecological" alternative. News of it spread rapidly. Professional planners took a deep breath.

Then they wanted to keep on meeting... Not only had they planned a community, they had become

* The city council was taken over by professionals and used for their own purposes. The new council's priorities directed millions of dollars into engineering projects rather than support for community action which would have cost only a fraction of this.

one! As Angela evaluated it a year later, the search conference had delivered on its promises and the ideals were evident. Many of the ideas were immediately incorporated into other parts of Canberra's development. The NCDC then took the plans forward into the structural planning phase. Gungahlin is now being built. Some of the original vision is included as the conventional wisdom it has now become. Two other search conferences were sponsored by the NCDC, for the future of Canberra and the future of Belconnen, another newly established town. They confirmed the ideals and values evident in the first. The *Gungahlin kids* had made history.

Alternatives to freeways

During 1974, traffic studies for Geelong predicted that by 1991 there would be a road and traffic crisis (Geelong is a small city in the south of Victoria which was then growing rapidly). A world renowned civil engineering consultancy firm was brought in to plan a solution for the throughway from Melbourne to the beaches on the South Coast. Their recommendation: a six lane freeway which would split the city into two and destroy many houses. Most residents opposed the plan and an environmental and social impact study was ordered. We were asked whether one of these *new fangled* search conferences could help. Again, we wrestled not only with the Geelong Regional Planning Authority, but also with the other social planners who had been contracted to look after aspects of the job.

The search for alternatives... The ensuing search conference was highly creative. Its participants evaluated all the available options and created some of their own. As the final report noted, they were strongly attached to the character of Geelong as a town rather than a city and worked to preserve this character. No outside body could possibly do that. A final plan was developed based upon a stretch of freeway outside the town plus designing and upgrading of traffic management conditions within it. It allowed for adaptive, step by step implementation as traffic volumes increased. To this day, there is no freeway running through the center of Geelong and no need for one either.

The beginning of the community reference system... It was for Geelong that we devised the *community reference system* to ensure that we had a non-biased selection of the population. **I**

It worked well as a subsequent community survey proved. But we made one mistake. We assumed that we could define Geelong by drawing a circle around the city. The participants disagreed. They drew their own boundary which was far from circular and worked on their definition. This enabled them to see options nobody had dreamt of. Again, the news travelled fast. Nobody had seen thirty ordinary citizens behaving like that before.

The emergence of a new planning paradigm... If the planning of Gungahlin had put many social planners and community development officers on red alert, Geelong confirmed that remote expert planners were gone. The new role for planners had to be a partnership with the community.

The search conference grows in scope and application

Some planning subjects and areas were so large and decentralized that more than one search conference was required. A series of searches became a common means to planning regional development or the development of specific aspects or facilities within regions and across the country.

Freemantle defends the America's Cup — In 1983, Australia won the *America's Cup* and the venue chosen for its next defense was the city of Freemantle in Western Australia. The city, a neighbor of Perth, was at the time a working class community not equipped to meet the needs of a world class sporting event with all its attendant spectators and media. The story of how Freemantle successfully hosted the event begins in 1977 when a series of 12 search conferences was held in key centers of a huge region of Western Australia. They focused on the development of community recreation facilities. As communities were energized, the conferences evolved over time. By 1983, the city had held six search conferences. These conferences provided the framework for the redevelopment of the city for the defense of the *Cup*.

"If the planning of Gungahlin had put many social planners and community development officers on red alert, Geelong confirmed that remote expert planners were gone. The new role for planners had to be a partnership with the community."

“The search conference was showing people that the future was truly theirs to make. It allowed communities to translate their new perspectives into effective action. The old expert driven and top down methods of making change were effectively dead.”

Instead of tearing out the heart of the cities as other cities around the world had done to host world class events, the city’s experience with building values into its planning through its previous searches enabled it to retain its character and be a worldclass host for the *America’s Cup*. These included access to the river by all, provision of low cost housing, preservation of historic areas, and redevelopments limited to three stories high. *Freeo*, as we call it, is now an open and exciting city, acclaimed by all.

In Tasmania they lose a few battles but win the war — At the same time on the other side of the continent, Bob Graham, the Hobart City Council Planner, attended a search conference on the future of Glebe, a small inner city area of the capital of Tasmania. He was impressed. He saw for the first time a community “develop and own a vision rather than moan the problems.” As a result, he developed a process which included 12 community precincts plus 4 umbrella group search conferences, with the Chamber of Commerce. Even though the overall Hobart plan they developed was not fully implemented and they had lost most of the first battles, they had learned their lessons. Bob Graham and Tony Ibbott who managed the searches told me recently that “on reflection, we both feel that the full value of the search program was subsequently not realized by the city council.”

But the communities involved, particularly those with less resources and less articulate spokespeople, had been visibly lifted in confidence and voice. Besides that, some of their ideas were so compelling that the new politicians had to implement them:

- Old areas were revitalized...
- The CBD was humanized...
- The Hobart Rivulet walking trail was developed.

The long term impact in Tasmania... While the Hobart plan failed in part, it was certainly not the last search on the island. Search conferences have since touched innumerable domains. It has developed some outstanding community leaders and it is now taken for granted that planning is a grass roots participative process. Tasmania is arguably the most politically active and maverick state in Australia. It had the first Green member of parliament, leading the way for what is now a national Green Party. People, their communities and the new breed of planners had won the war.

Search conferences across the country — During this same period right across the country the search conference blossomed in both scope and depth:

- Pre-school kids were designing their own playgrounds...
- University classes were introduced to and run by the principles of the search...
- The leisure clubs in New South Wales began to plan their future as community clubs through a long series of searches...
- A national group planned for telecommunications in 2000. A countless number of such searches have been held since then in different regions and aspects of Telecom’s operations...
- A new maximum security prison was designed on site in a prison — an inmate escaped during the event...
- Nurses planned their future through education. They are now a highly educated profession...
- Some focused on youth, some on the elderly. And the search conference began to be used by corporations.

It was truly a time of great excitement — The search conference was showing people that the future was truly theirs to make. It allowed communities to translate their new perspectives into effective action. The old expert driven and top down methods of making change were effectively dead.

Task oriented work by communities making their own plans and implementing them became the way to go. Responsibility for communities, their own affairs and lives in cooperation with others and the larger representative structures was being relocated with the communities themselves.

This was the formative period for the search conference in Australia... The testing had been extensive. We realized we had a powerful tool in our hands. Much of the learning was collected together for a search on the search: *Searching, 1982*. But there was more to come before this tool could reliably deliver sustainable communities. This accumulated new learning can be found in *Searching, 1996*.

The search conference and national policies

These examples also form an evolving series although they were not designed that way. Together they illustrate one of the powers of community search conferences, namely, that the forces they create to spread the message and the method, create an ever increasing momentum that eventually becomes irresistible. And then things happen!

Industrial Relations Summit: 1973 — The group that attended the first *Industrial Relations Summit* in 1973 was as far from being a *community* as it was possible to be. Industrial relations across the land were atrocious. The country was wracked by strikes and there was open warfare between unions and management. And similar struggles were taking place within the union movement itself and between employer bodies. There was an activist national labor government and rapid social change — a volatile mix.

Setting up the conference: a planning and organizing marathon... The search conference was initiated by the Centre for Continuing Education of the Australian National University with the purpose of bringing together key people able to influence the present and future shape of national industrial relations, on a personal rather than a representative basis. The 30 participants covered major areas of the industrial relations scene and were joined by key people from government and academia. Because of the conflicted context, its planning and organizing became a marathon, a trial of endurance.

But they soon found they agreed on more issues than not... Once the search was underway, however, it became clear that the agreements heavily outweighed the disagreements. They agreed:

- About the major factors influencing change in the broad social environment...
- That moving from bureaucratic to democratic workplaces was a core solution for the future...
- About the necessity for the education of management about this shift...
- That industrial relations in the future would place more emphasis on *future building* rather than narrow and short term negotiations.

In short, they proved to each other that their jointly held expectations that each of them held widely divergent views were wrong.

Results... They explored the future world of work in detail and reaffirmed the centrality of democratic structures for quality work for all. Their strategies were comprehensive and again agreed. They gave unanimous advice to government. They recommended more future searches with an enlarged membership, and planned the next. From its difficult pregnancy and labor, this child had become a prodigy within two days and two nights. It too had become a community.

National manufacturing policy: 1975 — In 1974 the Prime Minister appointed a very high powered committee, drawn from the private and public sectors and academia, to devise appropriate policies for the development of manufacturing industry. It was chaired by Gordon Jackson, CEO of CSR Ltd., one of Australia's biggest companies and of course, it became known as the *Jackson Committee*. It assembled a similarly high powered and broadly based supporting secretariat. It was agreed that they should produce a *green* or discussion paper and take a broad approach to manufacturing, including social and regional issues as well as economic.

The search rescues a committee that couldn't get off the start line... They began life as a committee and, as should be expected, found it difficult to pull together all the diverse views and facts they faced. Knowing of the search conference, the chairman approached Fred Emery and asked him to help. Fred and I ran a search conference during which they integrated their work into an agreed and consistent set of policies:

1. By understanding the environment in which industry would have to operate, and by understanding the forces which were inevitably bearing down upon Australia, they put their information in order.
2. They concerned themselves with values as they could see that these were driving change.
3. They focused on the question of "what does Australia expect of its manufacturing industry?"
4. By putting their work in a future context, common threads emerged from their diversity. In the process they changed from a committee to a community.

In their final report, they stressed the importance of people learning to adapt to the forces of change by learning to change and manage their systems to better share common aims and ideals of diverse background: “We found after a while, we were able to share a common purpose. We had field-tested among ourselves the consultative procedures which are an essential feature of the green paper.”

Participation the key to progress and adaptability... The aims of the new policy were a better working economy through improving the quality of work-life, encouraging social cohesion through involving Australians in decision making and building into institutions and processes of policy formation, “a capability to adapt to future change, whatever it may be.” There should be a framework of strategy with restructuring and reduction of tariffs at the rate that revitalization and restructuring can support. In particular, they confirmed the results of the first industrial relations search by emphasizing employees being genuinely involved in making decisions which affect them with resultant dignity and satisfaction for all.

They rejected the belief that major change should be left to market forces alone: “Government should facilitate, encourage and back with resources major structural change devised for an industry sector by participative processes within that sector.”

No new bureaucracy. Instead, a new form of national participative decision making... They recommended new participative machinery for decision making on industry policy, industry specific councils which would form an overlapping network to generate practical and forward looking policy. In a break with long standing tradition, they did not recommend a super department or council, in other words, a bureaucracy.

A big step backward and steady underlying progress... Even though the *Jackson Report* generated huge debate and workshops were convened to put detail on the design of the industry councils, the subsequent *white paper* represented a massive step backward from the *green paper* and opened the way for the extreme economic rationalism of the 1980s. But the backward step didn't matter in the end. The prowess of the search conference had demonstrated itself to participants of the *green paper* search conference and since 1975 many industries have held their own search conferences to get their act together.

AUSTRALIA now regularly uses search conferences and other participative forms in its work to improve Australia's overseas competitiveness.

Industrial Relations Summit II: 1976 — This second search was focused on *worker participation and industrial relations* and was conducted under the same conditions as the first. The *Jackson Report* was taken as a major input and again democratic self-managing organizations were accorded primacy.

Overcoming constraints for participation... The managerial problems in this shift were addressed as was the need for guarantees that new participative forms could not be reversed at managerial whim. Managerial promotions should be part of a consistent approach, related to demonstrated ability to develop self management in subordinates. Legislation was seen as possibly self defeating but collective or enterprise bargaining was endorsed with legal binding agreements for participative forms.

Work was done on their many constraints and concerns, foreshadowing some of the subsequent changes we have seen. Examples are:

- A massive reduction in the number of unions from 300+ craft based to about 30 industry based unions...
- More successful forms of public summit or national meetings, from bureaucratic meetings procedures to participative as in a search conference.

There was a fear about a hierarchical super manufacturing council following the *white paper* and a more general concern about the influence of the public service, and particularly Treasury, in economic and social planning, or the lack of it. To overcome this potential constraint, employers participatively planned and created the Business Council of Australia to provide an appropriate environment and advice for business.

At the time of this search conference, we had a Liberal (conservative) government with a Department of Productivity which understood these matters and we expected an agreement between the government and the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) by the end of 1977. We had to wait until 1983.

Future Directions for Australia: 1980 — The *Future Directions* conference was incidentally, the first multi-search. It had nearly 120 participants

“They recommended new participative machinery for decision making on industry policy, industry specific councils which would form an overlapping network to generate practical and forward looking policy. In a break with long standing tradition, they did not recommend a super department or council, in other words, a bureaucracy.”

organized into 4 parallel search conferences of 30 each. The participants were chosen from Australia's youngest and brightest *opinion leaders*. Some had had contact with the events described above, some were already politicians and others were destined to hold positions of national power and influence.

The opposite ends of many poles had been united... It was a dramatic and intense experience for all. "A single image etched in the mind will recall the feeling in that room. A man and a woman. A Labor Senator and a Liberal MHR, stood side by side and read in unison the third principle of their group's vision of a *convivial, equitable* future." *Convivial equity* emerged as the major scenario. It was based on four principles:

- A conserver society, democratically based, open and informed, and permeated by feminist principles, is needed to enable Australia to flourish...
- Such a society will be convivial, sharing, egalitarian, participatory, innovative, self-adjusting, consensus achieving, pluralist and decentralized...
- A non-exploitive and internationally responsible Australia will have an Asia/Pacific orientation...
- In this convivial equity society Australians will be more self-realizing, creative and tolerant.

The implementation of these principles, all agreed would require a more pluralist economic system, a more participatory politico-legal system and more autonomous individuals. The desired result: a harmonious society, at peace.

The Industrial Relations accord: 1983 — By 1983, a national agenda had definitely emerged. It revolved around a participative reconstruction and revitalization of Australian industry and democratic workplaces. It resulted in a national accord, signed between the government and the ACTU. The *Summit* which brought this particular agreement into being was not a search conference but that is what the Prime Minister had in mind. He had been a member of the Jackson committee and the president of the ACTU during the subsequent formative years. And despite its less than ideal format, nothing could stop the momentum. For this idea, the time had come.

The accord created a supportive environment for micro-economic reform and workplace redesign with award restructuring... It supported payment for skills held within enterprise bargaining and more generally encouraged many of the reforms and new initiatives that

had been dreamed up years before in the events described above. Its effects have not been entirely desirable nor successful in the eyes of some:

- Real wages have dropped...
- There are still pockets of resistance. Business schools are still turning out dinosaurs and the industrial courts are not well educated to deal with the new challenges they face.

But the accord has been renegotiated almost every two years since to remain adaptive to environmental change. And as change continues, productivity increases.

The search as diffusion of workplace

democratization: 1991... February 1991 saw *Workplace Australia*, the largest multi-search ever with over 750 participants. Its design was inspired by the *Future Directions* conference.

1. Its first two days were 20 search conferences in each of which participants planned the desirable workplace and worked on strategies to bring it into being.
2. With their frameworks clear, participants then moved into *marketplace* sessions where they heard case studies and swapped lessons about democratizing organizations.
 - Those who had not previously started learned from those that had.
 - Those who had experienced problems passed on their *don'ts*.
 - Successes were analyzed.
3. Despite its problems there was a rash of change projects following the conference.

The conference created networks, many of them international. In Australia, new networks continued meeting back home both for diffusion and consolidation. *Workplace Australia 2* was held in May, 1995.

Workplace Australia also highlighted the need for a new training course in the theory and practice of workplace democratization, through the search conference and participative design workshop. I became the bunny. The first of my new courses was held in November 1991 and four years later, it has proven itself as a diffusion process. Several more consultants now work exclusively with these methods and the rate of effective change has increased.



Merelyn Emery has been at the forefront of the development of the search conference and participative design methodology for over thirty years. Her most recent efforts have focused on the development and refinement of effective training programs for both methods. Her upcoming (co-authored) book, *Search Conferences in Action: Learning and Planning Our Way to Desirable Futures*, will be published in the Spring of 1996 by Jossey-Bass.

Communities continue to come alive

The search conference continues to be a major tool in the revitalization of the Australian community. Its power has united many disparate and desperate communities, and created others. It has contributed to the development of a new Australian ethos. Nowhere has it been more at home than with Australia's indigenous peoples.

Australia returns to its indigenous roots: the Torres Straits Searches — The original peoples of Australia, the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders have used the search conference since time immemorial. They didn't call it that, of course, but in their traditional oral culture their way is to talk around and around until a direction appears. The search conference is based on the same assumptions as their cultures. In this sense it marks a return to ancient ways which respect inter-dependence and oneness — in other words, it fits. In the two hundred years since Europeans invaded Australia, there has been destruction of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage and culture but they have retained their oneness, their spark and their inter-dependence ethic.

They get off to an understandably slow start... During the period of 1992–3, most communities on the inhabited islands of the Torres Strait (a narrow and shallow strip of water between Australia and Papua New Guinea) planned their own futures. (I was involved in five of them.) There were, as might be expected, some slow starts. We were white mainlanders and the islanders are used to people like us coming in to *tell them* what they should do or what they should want to do. They listen politely! In addition, a representative council structure has been imposed over their cultures with the same results of apathy and dissociation seen in many white Western cultures. In some cases, it took a while for the communities to believe that they were genuinely being asked to plan their own future.

When they were convinced we were for real, they came to life... They homed in immediately on the big issues for a desirable future: self sufficiency and self management — “the way we used to be”. Together with these they identified:

- Good fresh food to overcome chronic health problems...
- Environmental preservation and management...

- Improved housing...
- Transport...
- Skills for participation in education...
- Industries to reduce dependence on welfare...
- Peaceful, harmonious unified communities based on justice, with an integration of customary and European law...
- Above all, they wanted to revitalize their cultures...
- That their own people be trained in participative processes to continue their community and inter-community development.

We conducted two intercommunity events which were a mixture of joint planning and the required training. Contrary to conventional wisdom that communities would not work together, these two weeks again showed immense energy and enthusiasm as they worked as *one group*. They all developed concrete action plans to achieve their goals.

In particular, they made joint action plans for educating their people, and particularly the children, in *Ailan Kastom* and its laws. They practiced with the participative design workshop in which they redesigned their workforces. In the second, they then also used its principles to redesign their community meetings to overcome the apathy generated by their top down bureaucratic structures. They decided to rename their community workforces to help get rid of the dole mentality. They had a ball!

But many expressed concern about the level of support they would receive as they implemented their goals. They saw their success as being dependent on regional self government. The Torres Strait became self governing in 1994.

They now have to plan their collective future to “empower our people to determine their own affairs based on our unique *Ailan Kastom* along Torres Strait from which we draw our unity and strength.” Planning for the development of the region began in September. Its central process is the search conference. This part of the *timeless land* is coming together again.

My abiding memory from Moa Island is of an elder and a youngster walking off together with a camera, to take the *before* photographs for their revived gardens to be.*

* *Ailan Kastom*: Island custom.

**The islanders used to have gardens but had let them die, when canned and dried goods became available from shops.

What have we learned?

Is it really possible for any country or community to keep up or actively adapt to the change which daily assaults us? I think yes. Communities which have learned how to monitor changes in their external environment and have a democratic function and structure appropriate to the task are making it, and will continue to do so. In such communities, plans work. Their people have dignity, purpose and meaning in life.

Can we create or recreate community? The search conference got off to its flying start in Australia in communities and it soon became clear that only communities can create community. And it also became increasingly clear that the search conference definitely created communities.

Will the search conference help us to determine which future we will live in? There is acknowledgement that sitting down and searching for new solutions is the only answer. These agreements have emerged through the making of the change itself. In this most basic sense, the future has arrived. Given that this is the most probable future we are walking into, those communities and organizations that don't or can't become democratic and creative will live only to inhabit the *Jurassic Parks* of the future. ♦

References and resources:

Much of this data is taken from unpublished search conference reports. I am also indebted to Glen Watkins for up to date information on the regional development which led to Freemantle's defense of the America's Cup, and to Tony Ibbott for the long term perspectives on the development of Hobart.

Emery, Merrelyn. *Searching*. 1995. John Benjamin Publishing, Amsterdam & Philadelphia.

Emery, Merrelyn and Ron Purser. *Search Conferences in Action*. Jossey-Bass. 1996.

Henry, Michael & Thompson, N.Y. (Eds.) (1980) *Future Directions: 1980 Conference Report*. Australian Frontier Inc., Fitzroy, Melbourne.

Jackson Committee. *Policies for Development of Manufacturing Industry. A Green Paper*. Vol I October 1975. Australian Government Publishing Service. Canberra.

Robertson, James (1978) *The Sane Alternative*. River Basin Publishing Company, Minnesota, USA.

Sands, Angela. "The Search Conference — a Year Later." In Emery, Merrelyn (ed) *Planning Our Town*. 1974. Centre for Continuing Education. Australian National University.

White, Sally. 1980. "Now to Wrap it Up... An Insider's View of the Conference." First published in *The Age of Future Directions Supplement*, Monday 18 August 1980. pp 71-2 of Henry & Thompson.

Author's post note:

When I look back now over the documents of the 1970s, I am overwhelmed by the change that has taken place. But it has happened (*and usually without the bureaucratic apparatus of grants and money in general*).