



RE-imagining relevance forum: from surviving to thriving

REIMAGINING PURPOSE: Ian Hyslop – November 2025

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An old Socialist once said ..

“Imagination is more important than knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there will ever be to know and understand”

~ *Albert Einstein*

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You are the experts ...

01

BOLD NOT-FOR-
PROFIT LEADERS

02

FACING
UNPRECEDENTED
CHALLENGES

03

EXPLORING NEW
MODELS OF
PRACTICE

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Forum as quiet(er) time

- ◆ I imagine most of you are ridiculously busy – This hui provides some respite - An opportunity to pause and think / engage in some dialogue / free the mind a little – to stop ‘running’ for a bit.
- ◆ It is a chance to take off the blinkers – it is always useful to imagine better worlds and ways / means of creating the future.

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Challenging context

- ◆ Not minimising the challenges for social service / social justice endeavours in the current hostile political climate. It would not be unusual to feel 'disempowered' at this time.
- ◆ When we look around we see the fruits of 40 years of neoliberal 'revolution from above' – a society characterised by radical structural inequality – shaped by capitalism, coloniality, racism, patriarchy and heteronormativity.
- ◆ Powerful interests have redefined inequality as 'natural' common sense: the taming of autonomy and silencing dissenting voices is part and parcel of the rise of neoliberal politics.
- ◆ We can push back – individually and collectively!

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PURPOSE: What brings you here?

- ◆ You are all passionate people.
- ◆ You are people who have exercised courage and who have a vision (and a voice).
- ◆ I am unlikely to tell you anything you don't know today but I hope to remind you of some things you already know – AND I am definitely not about to try and tell you how to do your jobs, or how to work with your communities - BUT I can encourage you to examine new questions and begin to develop some fresh answers at this challenging and critical time.

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Ways back (*and forward)

- ◆ IT is critically important not to be held back / hamstrung by your own knowledge and your own analysis.
- ◆ It is a premise of this forum that you are not without authority / that some things can be done!
- ◆ What is your purpose and are there other / better / alternative ways of advancing this aim?

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Is there joy in your work?

- ◆ How can you make more room for creative / generative practice? What battles are afoot? Who (and where) are your allies? (*Isolation is one of your enemies but we do not always practice the community solidarity that we suggest to others).
- ◆ In what ways can you target structural inequalities?
- ◆ What is the place of service users in your organisation – how is power distributed and exercised?
- ◆ If you make some ‘resolutions’ today, how can you maintain your resolve when you leave here and are swept back into the storm?

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From deconstruction to reconstruction

- ◆ Criticism of the power and politics and of an unjust system (however clever and convincing it may be) is not enough.
- ◆ Critique needs to be aligned with 'hope' and hope needs some kind of road-map.
- ◆ Critical visions of Utopia are practically useful but strategies to 'get there' are equally, if not more, important.

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Socially just practice

- ◆ How can you look to practice justly in a system that is unjust?
- ◆ You will all have 'inklings' of answers to this question (*and part of this process is to take a breath and RE-imagine what is possible).

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Insights

- ◆ Under the 'skin' of our society:
- ◆ Social service / community workers have a unique insight into the contradictions - flaws of the current system – and these insights can be adapted to the cause of social change / transformation.
- ◆ Change can be incremental – you / we are not without power.

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Reflection ...

- ◆ WHAT are you doing? (your mahi / how is it defined and measured – by whom?)
- ◆ WHY are you doing it? (what are your motivations, intentions, objectives?)
- ◆ HOW are you doing it?
- ◆ DO ALL OF THESE THINGS LINE UP?

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Activism and Change

- ◆ You are all 'activists' in some shape or form – all actors in the social world.
- ◆ This sort of Forum is a opportunity to lift your eyes from the day-to-day. in order to consider practical strategies for resistance to oppressive structures AND how you might contribute to changing systems for the betterment of all.
- ◆ It is about plotting (and creating strategy) to take back some power and agency!

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Active development

- ◆ As suggested, you know all of this and part of the way forward might be supporting each other to find ways to practice what you preach.
- ◆ The ideas of freedom that go with community development are about a generative process - about the power of activism and engagement – alliances, advocacy for change – power through 'doing'.
- ◆ There is no social change without struggle. You know this also.

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Bread and Roses

- ◆ In the struggle for a fairer, kinder, more progressive social order we need to both struggle 'in the now' AND hold to dreams of better things / better ways of living together in the current time of global 'poly-crisis' and the rise (and rise) of right-wing populism.
- ◆ There is nothing natural or inevitable about the current political order – what has been done can be undone!

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Problem Definition

- ◆ The definition of social problems and solutions is contested – it is a site of struggle.
- ◆ AND, in your fields of practice experience, you DO know much more than the politicians of the day.
- ◆ A belief that there are other ways of responding is always the starting point.

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Tensions & the power of definition

- ◆ Who holds the power – the power of definition – and how can you take some of this back?
- ◆ The state is not about to give you the mandate for radical / revolutionary social change: **the role of state-funded agencies is often about managing the problem poor.**
- ◆ Who defines what is impractical / unthinkable – the limits of the possible?

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Master's House Demolition?

- ◆ Rules of the game – funding, measuring, evidencing? (Is there an 'outside' of the liberal capitalist business model of social service provision?)
- ◆ **More tensions: Will new solutions be possible while we are bound by this rubric – by the Master's tools?**
- ◆ What would a better way look like and how do we get there? (* non-reformist reforms)

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Capitalist 'realism'

- ◆ Beware of the 'Yes, but ...' argument.
- ◆ Whose realism are we talking about ? (*who's definition of what is possible in a world of repressive political ideology and economic austerity)
- ◆ Historically many things are 'impossible' until they actually happen.

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Use what you have in abundance

- ◆ Your courage, your voices and your collective imaginations. Your knowledge must empower you rather than freeze you.
- ◆ What could be different – how would your work look if done differently (*idea of 'prefiguration' and enactment).
- ◆ Accept that process can be more important than outcomes / anticipate resistance and struggle – things worth doing are seldom easy.

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Be resilient – Look after one another

Advancing and outflanking

Retreating and retrenching

Restocking and replenishing

Reimagining and reinventing

For the guises of oppression are many

And the road to Damascus has many donkeys”

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My friend George



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