

Contextualising Conflict: The Futures Triangle

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Ivana Milojević¹

Abstract

This article offers an overview and theoretical analysis of the practical applications of the Futures Triangle framework, drawing insights from multiple case studies. It commences with the case study of “The Equal Crossing Initiative,” which resulted in the installation of a female pedestrian light symbol at the intersection of Flinders and Swanston Streets in Melbourne on March 9, 2017. The analysis of public opinions on this initiative reveals a diversity of views, with many expressing strong opinions. Major Australian newspapers, non-scientific surveys, and social media platforms reflected a spectrum of reactions, ranging from enthusiastic endorsement (“how cool is this?”) to critical perspectives that deemed it overly politically correct, questioned the allocation of funds, the necessity of gendered symbols, and even the attire of the female figure. Building upon this case study of community conflict, the article then explores the application of the Futures Triangle framework to better comprehend resistance to progressive social initiatives and to address the challenges inherent in social change efforts. It posits that the Futures Triangle offers a valuable tool for conflict resolution, fostering a deeper understanding of backlash dynamics, and enhancing the likelihood of successful implementation of innovative initiatives. Finally, it emphasizes the significant connections between change agents and change progression scenarios method, as elucidated in previously published texts.

Keywords

futures triangle, equal crossing initiative, female pedestrian light, futures focus group workshop, conflict, change agents, change progression scenarios



“A pedestrian signal lights up female for the first time in Australia. In honour of

International Women’s Day, the signals will pay tribute to an Australian woman.”¹

“Female traffic light signals to go up at pedestrian crossing as Committee for Melbourne tackles ‘unconscious bias’”²

¹Metafuture, Brisbane, QLD, Australia

Corresponding Author:

Ivana Milojević, Metafuture, Brisbane, QLD 4000, Australia.

Email: ivana@metafuture.org

*“We have been voted the world’s most liveable city six times in a row, and we should also aim to be the world’s most equal city.”*³

*“Walking lights are sexist! Melbourne, Australia pushes for female pedestrian crossing lights.”*⁴

*“Push for all Victorian pedestrian crossings to have equal number of male, female signals.”*⁵

*“Feminist Follies and Political Poppycock ... By now most of you will be aware of the latest madcap idea [to] have an equal number of female and male walking signals in a big push for gender equality in the state’s road crossings.”*⁶

The Equal Crossing Initiative, which resulted in the female pedestrian light symbol installed at the intersection of Flinders and Swanston Streets in Melbourne, on 9 March 2017, created quite a stir. Many people expressed an opinion on this initiative, and the majority of those opinions – at least as reported in some major Australian newspapers (non-scientific) surveys and as discussed on social media – were negative. While some on social media shared the news with the caption “how cool is this?”⁷, others argued that “the move was overly PC”, that the money could have been spent on more worthy initiatives instead, or inquired as to why the symbols need to be gendered in the first place (instead of “walk” and “don’t walk” signage) as well as why the female figure should be represented by wearing a dress.⁸



For instance, a conservative daily tabloid newspaper *Herald Sun* conducted a survey among its readers, inquiring whether “green men” crossing signs should be replaced with “green ladies.” The survey presented two options: “Yes, it’s about time we had gender equity” and “No, it’s political correctness gone mad.” Out of a total of 5,662 votes cast, the online survey garnered 241 votes (4.26 percent) in favour of the first option and 5,421 votes (95.74 percent) in favour of the second. Similarly, the same newspaper reported results from another online poll hosted on *Melbourne Leader’s* website, which yielded comparable outcomes, with only 3.6 percent of the respondents expressing support for the idea.⁹

So how did the noble goal of promoting ‘equality’ – in a land that prides itself on egalitarianism, giving everyone a ‘fair go’ and having “the first electorate (South Australia) in the world to give equal political rights to both men and [white] women”¹⁰ – manage to solicit so much opposition? Furthermore, can this initiative and the subsequent responses to it tell us something about the nature of social change? Finally, what can we learn from this example in regards to conflicts over preferred futures and how best to transform them?

The Background

The Equal Crossing Initiative (ECI) was the result of a Futures Focus Group workshop run by the Committee for Melbourne – a non-profit group of businesses and community groups – and their ongoing work on Melbourne futures.¹¹ Participants in the 2016/2017 FFG program formed six project teams which looked at a diverse range of topics such as ‘the art of sports’, ‘equal crossings’, ‘future biotech skills Melbourne’, ‘getting onboard’, ‘art ways’ and ‘Melbourne backyard’.¹² According to the Committee for Melbourne, while the Equal Crossing Initiative became a hot talking point from the very beginning, it has also ‘received widespread support from the business sector’ as well as from the Committee’s Patron, Governor of Victoria.¹³ Perhaps crucially, the

resulting installation of female pictograms on traffic lights came “free of charge to the taxpayer”,¹⁴ with the Committee for Melbourne and Camlex Electrical paying for it.¹⁵

Some media erroneously ascribed the cost of \$8,400 to the change, which caused the conflict over ‘how tax payers money is best spent’. In general, “conflict over information” is relatively easily resolved by providing accurate rather than misleading data. That is, the actual plastic mask – male or female pictogram – costs around \$3 (three dollars)¹⁶ and is easily replaceable during routine yearly maintenance (at a scheduled cost of approximately 8,000\$)¹⁷ for an already installed full traffic signal (which costs between 250,000 and 500,000 to initially install).¹⁸

However, the ECI case study is not really about the cost, or about conflict over information, even though some conservative media certainly played their part in steering negative sentiments towards the initiative. Otherwise, why would a free or cheap and relatively effortless replacement of traffic signage cause so much or even any opposition as well as create a community conflict? So, to understand what is behind the surface level discussion about ‘the cost’, we need to dig deeper.

There are many ways to do this. One approach, used in this article, is to contextualise and map the conflict via the use of a futures method: futures triangle. This method is also useful for starting the process of conceptualising the future and understanding the nature of social change. Developed by Sohail Inayatullah in 1998, the method has been since utilised in hundreds of workshops and settings. In a nutshell, the futures triangle “maps today’s views of the future through three dimensions” (Inayatullah, 2013, 46).

- The first dimension is *the image of the future* which pulls an individual, organization or society forward.
- The second dimension is *the pushes of the present* – quantitative drivers and trends that are changing the future.

- And finally, there are *weights – the barriers to the change* and the imagined preferred future.

Each preferred image has different weights and is both supported as well as undermined by the pushes of the present. That is, some pushes of the present work to support the desired future, others work against it. Strategies for change are implemented with more ease when solutions are ‘riding the waves of change’, rather than ‘swimming against the tide’ – those ‘pushes of the present’. In addition to riding the waves of change, other key critical success factors are: (1) having a clear and overt vision of the desired future, and (2) succeeding in minimising the weights or barriers to the change. In a nutshell, the new initiative (ECI) could be understood through the futures triangle as a conflict between a new vision (equal number of male and female signals, symbolic gender equality in urban and public spaces), pushes of the present (supportive: systemic changes in the gender demographics of decision makers; opposing: anti-feminist backlash) and weights of the past (barriers: traditional signage, ‘gender neutrality’ of the male figure, patriarchy). Depending on the time and place, the respective strength of these factors will influence whether the initiative takes off at all, as well as how long it is maintained.

Futures Triangle Applications

At any given time, there are a multitude of competing visions on any given issue. These competing visions are often subconsciously held and, if incompatible, can lead to conflict. For example, in the area of education, the idea that educational systems can be transformed along emancipatory politics has always been in competition with more instrumental visions of education. Some of the diverse visions for the future of education are outlined below:

Educational futures visions	
Emancipatory	Enhancing human wellbeing and happiness; aiming for fulfilling and meaningful lives Eliminating various forms of oppression
Instrumental	Providing knowledge and skills in order to achieve and compete in the national and global economy Aiming for employment
Transactional	Education a product to be bought and sold Commercialization and corporatization of education
Academic	Acquisition of knowledge, search for truth Accessing and mastering information
Vocational	Learning by doing, high specialisation Partnership between educational institutions, government and industry
Communal	Focusing on public service and benefits to the community Delivery of knowledge focused on the pressing community's issues and concerns
National	Developing citizenship; preserving one's national culture State-based and financed education systems
Indigenous	Education for cultural, human and nature survival Continuation of indigenous cultures for future generations
Religious	Transferring specific religious teachings Focusing on the spiritual dimension to human existence and/or religious beliefs, doctrines, rituals, and customs

While these visions may be in more direct conflict, they may also overlap. For example, an educational institution can be supported by the state (national futures vision) or by consumers (transactional futures vision) or by a combination of both (e.g., instrumental and vocational futures visions). All these aspects (such as academic, vocational, communal and so on) are usually present in most educational institutions, however, they are prioritised differently. For

example, “alternative” historical approaches to education (such as Montessori and Steiner/Waldorf) whilst different to each other, challenged the traditional educational model. In a nutshell, in place of structured lessons and teacher-driven curricula came a vision of child-centered and self-directed learning. Another central vision by Maria Montessori – that the key role of education should be to develop and establish peace – received a significant boost from ‘the push of the present’ of the time, namely that of the post-WWII world of the late 1940 and 1950s. To this day, however, Montessori educational institutions still have to negotiate with competing visions for the future as well as the existing weights of history (such as the dominance of top-down approaches in education, social and cultural militarism, nationalism).

In any case, individuals unsatisfied with the mainstream educational model, and inspired by alternative futures visions, commonly venture outside of the existing system and create their own educational realities. Whatever a novel futures vision is, whether big or small, its proponents will similarly need to negotiate between the forces of the push of the present and the weights of history.

So let's say we want to create an alternative educational institution, predominantly focused on equitable gender relations. Such a vision would have to contend with the current pushes of the present. One such push is the increasing rise of artificial intelligence (AI). Given the gender of the majority of the world's AI practitioners (nearly 80 percent)¹⁹ and their subculture,²⁰ it is well known that some unconscious gendered bias is built into AI systems.²¹ This push of the present will then work against the vision, structurally and indirectly. On the other hand, a supportive push of the present is that we are 12 years away from attaining gender parity in education (globally) and that parity has already been achieved fully in 40 out of 153 countries ranked in the World Economic Forum's *Global Gender Gap Report 2020*.²² The weight of history in this particular case may be an outdated (pre-feminist) curriculum, educational qualifications not in line with labour market requirements, or changes in required literacy to include digital literacy. The weights of history also include patriarchy and the previously established gender gap in education.

What we can learn from futures visions which were successful in the past is that the effective implementation of a novel initiative was usually accompanied by the following:

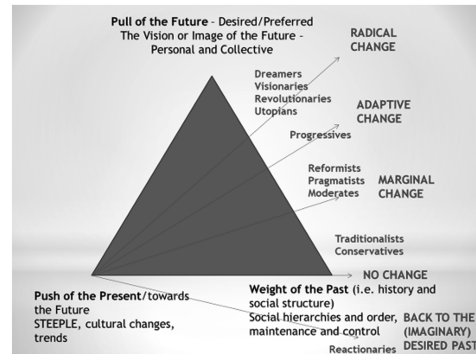
1. The vision was clear, overt and inspiring to individuals, groups, organisations or even whole societies,
2. The vision proponents took advantage of the pushes of the (then) present – i.e. they were riding ‘the waves of change’, and
3. The weight of history was minimised.

For example, in the case of the 20th century women’s movements for social change, wherever these initiatives were successful what they had in common was:

1. A novel and inspiring vision of the future: for example, imagined gender egalitarianism and equity.
2. The pushes of the present that supported this vision: for example, economic, demographic, ecological and cultural trends such as industrialisation, urbanisation, WWII, the material abundance of 1950s Western societies, the Baby Boom generation, secularisation, and the invention of the pill and other methods of safe contraception.
3. The successful minimisation of the weights of history and social structure such as the existing gender power order, patriarchy, the social conservatism of 1950s Western societies, and other traditional power structures and systems (e.g., the power of the church).

In this process, people were inspired differently by each of these three forces. The conflict arises not only in terms of different visions for the future – for example a gender power order based on a strict hierarchy vs a gender power order based on equity – but also in terms of ‘how far’ and ‘how quickly’ individuals and groups are willing to go towards the new vision.

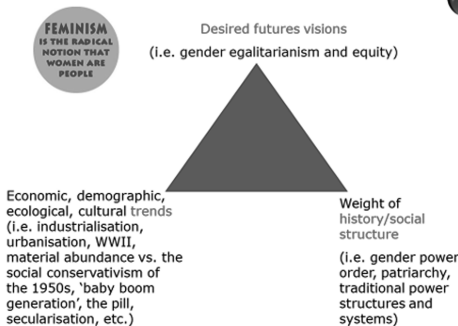
‘Visionaries’, ‘Dreamers’, ‘Utopians’ and ‘Revolutionaries’ have always been keen on more radical change, vis-à-vis the adaptive or marginal change favoured by ‘Reformists’, ‘Pragmatists’ and ‘Moderates’. However, both supported the progressivism of the vision. At the other end are ‘Traditionalists’ and ‘Conservatives’ who preferred no change but would be content with marginal change. Even further away from the novel, progressive vision are ‘Reactionaries’ who would be content with no change while preferring a reversal to a (usually imagined and idealised) past state. This tension is summarised in the diagram below:



As is apparent from the diagram, the futures triangle can be a way to identify different worldview positions in relation to the desired vision of the future as well as create different futures scenarios. Going back to the Equal Crossing Initiative case study, we can identify individuals and organisations inspired by a specific desired futures vision, those that want minor change, and then those that want no change:

1. Radical Change, Visionaries: Equal representation of all genders in the design of the city; an equitable city and an equitable society;

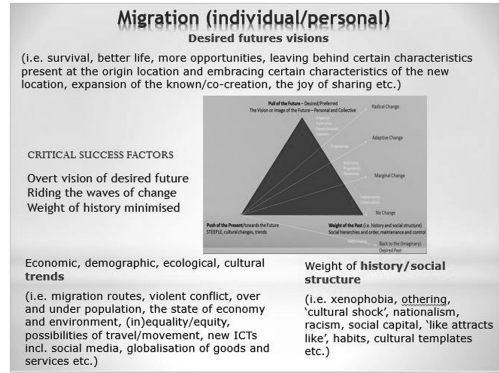
20th C Women’s Movements and Social Change



2. Adaptive and Marginal Change: Equality as relevant to the pushes of the present such as changing demographics (women as decision-makers) and/or minimal change such as the initiative not being extended beyond a pilot program due to backlash. Equal representation of genders on a number of traffic lights, but not much beyond that;
3. No Change and Back to the Past: Keeping the existing pictograms on traffic lights or reverting to the ones used in the past.

In the area of education, visionaries inspired by different future visions for education usually created alternative educational institutions or processes (Montessori and Steiner schools, home schooling, online learning platforms). Reformists worked within the existing systems, and focused on smaller scale initiatives (e.g., a specific educational project or lesson plans). Finally, traditionalists and conservatives worked at maintaining and enhancing the current system while reactionaries pushed for “bringing back” something (e.g., corporal punishment, “the basics”, unquestionable religious instructions). This was previously explored and discussed in Milojević (2002, 2005, p. 11).

Each and every change will be accompanied by such dynamics and the resulting conflict. Whether an initiative is relatively small and largely symbolic (an introduction of a \$3 female pictogram, 10 traffic lights, 1 city, a 12-month trial) or huge and largely substantial (addressing climate change globally) similar dynamics will take place. This dynamic, on a number of other issues, is summarised in the diagrams below:



As is also apparent from the examples above, there will be a pendulum swing at the collective level between a new vision, understanding of the reality of current and coming changes and the desire to keep the existing. For example, collectively, western societies (including the Australian society) of the 1980s were inspired by the counter-culture social movements of the 1960 and 1970s (e.g., women's, peace, ecological social movements). This was followed by a backlash in the 1990s (e.g., against multiculturalism and feminism, a desire to revert back to nationalism and patriarchy). And yet it was precisely the visions of the 1960 and 1970s that created systemic changes – e.g., higher representation of minorities and women in decision-making roles – which act against the possibility of such a reversal. Still, given the new environment wherein both egalitarianism and the backlash against it are competing for influence, the old vision – as conveyed in the 1960s and 1970s – may no longer work.

Rather, it – the essence of the vision – needs to be repackaged, reinvigorated, or made completely novel. New ‘memes’ help in this process and so does the ownership of a vision. The more inclusive the ownership and the more inspirational the vision, the more likely it is to succeed.

Based on the analysis above, some recommendations to assist leaders and change agents to implement progressive change and minimise conflict include:

- When suggesting or implementing a change, no matter how small, supported or justified, some backlash should be expected,
- An attitude of ‘we are in it for the long haul’ can be helpful,
- Timing is important – change is more easily introduced when there is not only a convincing argument for it but also an up-to-date perception that it is needed,
- Change agents need to watch for burnout and ‘change fatigue’ and take time to rejuvenate,
- Backlash will be smaller if the resistance is somehow minimised and/or contained (e.g., via different spheres of influence),
- The change initiatives will be more easily implemented if ‘the waves of change’ are utilised,
- It is important to focus on the vision and periodically revisit it (because visions get tired as well), and finally,
- There should be an investigation of multiple strategies to achieve the vision and an inquiry into which ones are more likely to succeed given social change dynamics.

Discussion

The futures triangle is useful to further understand the processes of social change and conflicts arising from them. As well, this

process can be utilised as an introduction to scenario work (radical, adaptive, marginal, no change and “back to the past” scenarios) or causal layered analysis (the existence of multiple perspectives and worldviews, dependent on the roles played).

The futures triangle can also be useful to understand where one stands in relation to the conflict and/or desired future and how this positioning relates to where others stand. In any given organisation and community, or on any given issue, different people will ‘play’ the role of visionaries vis-à-vis moderates and conservatives in real life. It is, of course, entirely possible to be a visionary on one issue and conservative on another. Sometimes, with new information and experience, people shift from one role to another. If done right, the process of applying futures triangle on an issue will highlight the utility of various perspectives and enable ‘distancing’ from all of them. This helps with conflict minimisation, resolution and transformation. Conflict is usually a result of adverse and deeply entrenched positions based on worldviews that are commonly held subconsciously as well as firmly.

Furthermore, intense conflict is often found where an issue is merged with one’s own identity. For example, a simple traffic light signal may challenge everything that one feels is ‘true’ about their own gender or gender relationships in general. So ‘an attack’ on a ‘little green man’ becomes an attack on all men and each man. Structurally, and beyond this specific issue, polarisation is to be expected if a single alternative to the existing system/order is proposed. To minimise the weight of history and barriers to change it is thus useful to focus on alternative futures.

The futures triangle is one method which enables the acknowledgement and understanding of multiple perspectives around a conflict. It opens up the future by allowing a multiplicity of solutions rather than insistence on one right way. While a person may indeed choose one right way for themselves,

hopefully there will be more room available for the appreciation of where others are coming from. This then prevents or minimises polarisation, entrenchment of positions, backlash and defensiveness. As always, by outlining a multiplicity of solutions a conflict becomes less determinant.

Moreover, a multiplicity of perspectives may allow for better incorporation of evidence-based policy. Here, the role of education is invaluable. Education has always played a twofold role in accompanying successful policy initiatives. First, informing about the need for changes and second, as a vehicle enabling adjustment to those changes. In hindsight, the opposition to the ECI would have been less pronounced if it was contextualised as inclusive rather than polarising. Instead of the (decades-old) vision of ‘equality for women’, in the context of rising social conservatism (increasing social backlash to gender equality) the inclusive vision could have been about ‘better safety for all’. For example, in an experiment conducted in Lisbon, Portugal, the introduction of an alternative traffic light, ‘the dancing light manikin’ resulted in 81 percent more people waiting for the light to turn green instead of crossing whilst it was red.

What may also be of interest to policy makers – when dealing with community conflict – is that it is possible to ‘reframe’ the same initiative in many different ways so as to garner more support. For example, in the context of an anti-feminist backlash, a similar initiative framed as the acknowledgment of a local historical figure tapped into ‘local patriotism’ and thus muffled opposing voices. Interestingly enough, no ‘outraged commentary’ was posted in conservative press against the ‘push for gender equity’ when it was framed in the following way:²³

‘Green lady’ pedestrian signal switched on in Richmond to pay tribute to Mary Rogers

AUSTRALIA’S first “green lady” has been lit up in Richmond. The pedestrian signal has been installed at the intersection of Bosisto St and Bridge Rd as part of a \$250,000 upgrade to the intersection. The silhouette pays tribute to Mary Rogers, who was Victoria’s first female councillor, in place of the usual illuminated man. The signal, which is an initiative between Yarra Council and VicRoads, will be in place for at least 12 months. Mary Rogers was elected to the City of Richmond Council in 1920 and was a councillor for five years, initiating the very first community maternal and child health services in Victoria. The council passed a motion in March that at new signalised pedestrian crossings, the ‘green and red lady’ be installed in place of the illuminated man, subject to VicRoads approval. Greens Cr Misha Coleman said at the time the initiative was a “unique and rare” way to display gender equity.

It is helpful for specific education and communication strategies to accompany the implementation of the vision, wherein case studies supporting non-polarising framing and argument are shared.

For example, numerous other similar initiatives were framed as either a tourist attraction (German’s Ampelmännchen with Ampelfrauen, LGBT lights in Vienna)²⁴ or an opportunity to use the city’s other signs creatively²⁵ or, as mentioned before, being about light safety, since female versions wearing larger garments produce ‘more light and are much more visible’²⁶ and ‘fewer people cross the road [when the] red [light is on]’²⁷ when the lights feature alternative symbols. This does not mean the abandonment of the vision of ‘gender equality’ or the desire to address unconscious bias in urban settlements. Thus, understanding the role and power of all three forces greatly enhances the probability the vision will survive beyond the pilot program. It could even grow to its full potential.

Equal Crossing Initiative in Australia and Other Similar Initiatives



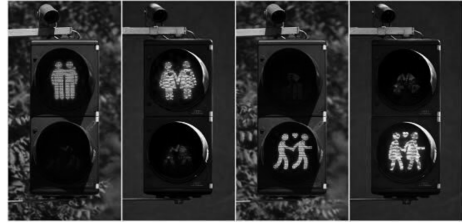
Mary Rogers silhouette, Richmond, Australia



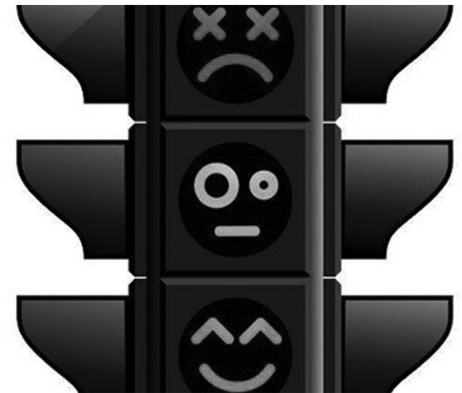
Kate Sheppard silhouette, Wellington, New Zealand



Ampelmännchen and Ampelfrauen, Germany²⁸



Couples pedestrian lights, Vienna, Austria.
Beyond traditional traffic lights, multiple initiatives and designs ...



.... including flexible hologram crosswalks, the way of the future?



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Notes

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Author Biography

Dr. Ivana Milojević is a researcher, writer, and educator with a transdisciplinary professional background spanning sociology, education, gender studies, peace and conflict studies, and futures studies. She earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in sociology from the University of Belgrade in 1992 and completed her doctoral studies in education at the University of Queensland in 2003. Currently, she serves as the Director of Metafuture, a global think-tank, and Metafuture School, an online platform offering futures-oriented courses.