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TREE OF LIFE: past-future alternatives

George had arrived at that point in time where he could claim contentment with life. With those early and sometimes confusing years in the rearview mirror, he is able to take on board the new life that Australia had to offer. He has - more through good luck than sound management – navigated his way to 'the lucky country'. But what might life have been, if those crucial decisions along the way had determined an alternative forward pathway?

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In a more general sense, how do the decisions we make affect our future being? Along life's relatively short and meandering path to supposed heaven or hell, we each stumble on a myriad of forks in the road, where choice dictates the path we take; as if beginning our journey from the base of a gigantic oak and ending up a twig on its outer limits. Which endpoint twig we finally arrive at, is self or otherwise determined, by the myriad of branching options we choose along the way.

A few of us - a fraction of the almost eight billion – are born to lead and to rule; to prosper come what may. This legacy is bestowed through birthright (along with its allied upbringing and education). For this relatively small group there is unshrinking belief that destiny is established at birth. Essentially the futures of this miniscule portion of people on Earth are pre-ordained, but even for them, there will be significant choices – including inbuilt tussles to maintain their gilded legacy – that need to be made as they graduate, as we all do, to that ultimate twig. This is true for all parts of the planet,

whether it be the USA, Europe, Asia or Africa: a certain few have distinct advantages over the multitudinous remainder.

In stark contrast, the futures for the remaining 99% plus of the planet's populace are not pre-determined, but related much more to the choices they (and those around them) make as they navigate their branches. For those who exist at the lower limits of our world's economic pyramid - in Africa, Asia, or Latin America - it becomes a distinctly uphill battle, and only a minute number are able to make the right choices that enable them to progress to a bright and relatively prosperous future.

To illustrate this aspect of *Born-to-Rule* legacy in familiar British surrounds, we can refer to the life stories of two prominent politicians. For Boris Johnson, life's pathway to the top was to a large extent inevitable: born wealthy, educated at Eton and Oxford, then on to Lord Mayor of London and British Prime Minister; one could say he was anointed in the cradle. But for Margaret Thatcher, born a grocer's daughter, the choices to reach the summit were much more challenging, even including elocution lessons to enable her to speak and emulate those people who had in truth, attended Eton and Oxford.

Thus, some of us are given a head start, because we are provided with a better tree to start with. But regardless of that, for all of us – Prime Ministers included – the major branch choices – those that stand out as whales amongst a sea of minnows - tend to be the ones that most clearly determine our progress and direction. Education, employment, habitat, our respect for personal well-being, and our partner in life, etc.: these are some of the main aspects where our choice essentially dictates our future.

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So let's now backtrack through some of the discrete 'main-branch options', faced by George as he traversed from formative days in England to enlightenment in Australia. Did he, given the circumstance, make the right decisions, or could he have done better? Could his branch choices have been more carefully thought through - less impulsive perhaps – in order to guide him along a preferable path.

In the early days of course, the major decisions were made for him, rather than by him; as for most of us, his family chose the branch he took. But from his early teens, George took over the reins, and from then on, his fate lay effectively in his own hands.

Major choice No.1 (at 0 years): to be, or not to be!

For George, the early branch choices were there, even before he was born. Dorothy his mother – in the known circumstance of post-war England, closely guided by her parents – had to choose between illegal abortion or allowing her foetus to grow and emerge into a Yorkshire Winter world. She made the pro-life choice, which George can now be very thankful for. This necessitated the baby being born in secrecy, or the birth would be labelled illegitimate and the child a *bastard*! Thus George came to Earth within the confines of a trusted doctor's surgery - and away from the neighbourhood's prying eyes - before transfer to the family home and subsequent veiled announcement to the world that 'a *new wee bairn is born' …* to his maternal grandmother. Of course, if his mother and her family had in reality chosen abortion, then this story too would have been terminated, before it had begun.

Major choice No.2 (at 5 years) Scotland or Cornwall.

After the birth there was one major decision (along with many minor choices) made on George's behalf, by his immediate family. This foremost decision, effected at an early stage in his life, involved a monumental move for himself and family, away from the grime and graft of post-war Yorkshire, to the green valleys and unsullied air of Cornwall, way towards the South West tip of England.

It was an interesting choice, because his father (in reality, his grandfather) had on several occasions checked out a farm-island off the West coast of Scotland, which was thought to be the most likely destination. The family had close Scottish connections. George in fact could claim by birth, to have three-quarters Scottish blood coursing through his veins. But In the end Cornwall was judged a warmer climate, and likely to provide a healthier environment for the revered matriarch of the family (George's grandmother), who was seriously ill with what turned out to be terminal cancer.

It was a marginal decision, but one wonders what might have happened if the throw of the dice had pointed to Scotland. George would have grown up with a heavy Scottish accent, rather than a slow Cornish drawl, and because the island was so remote, he may have by necessity, had to attend boarding school thence on to university in Aberdeen, or Edinburgh. Because of this, he most likely would not have chosen to move to Australia in his mid-teens, perhaps opting for a job after university in a field where he had shown aptitude, such as agriculture or architecture. It could have been a very different George who emerged in his mid-twenties to court and marry a young Scottish lass. They would become a professional couple, perhaps following their wanderlust and travelling to Europe and Asia, and eventually Australia.

Thus George would have chosen - or have had chosen for him - a totally different branch of his life-tree; a branch that would deliver dissimilar connections to people and place, though the possibility is still there, that due to his maternal relations, he might have ended up in similar circumstances of life and work in the antipodes.

Major choice No.3 (at 16 years): England or Australia

After George assumed life in Cornwall, the next decade seemed to be split in two: the first half on the up; the second on the down. By mid-teens he faced the prospect of likely expulsion from secondary school, and thus the most momentous decision of those turbulent years was taken – this time by George, but guided by family - to travel to Australia, where he would join the family of his older sister (in reality his mother). A combination of inbuilt wanderlust and need to exit a tight situation in England, prompted George, with hardly a second thought, to accept the offer and ship out to Australia. It was essentially a decision taken on impulse.

But what if he had declined and opted instead to stay with his errant adolescence? Then, with school in the past and no qualifications in sight, George might well have become a delinquent youth, connected to a poor mix of friends who would lead him down ill-chosen routes towards an unsociable, on-the-fringe lifestyle. But perhaps, being

the swinging 60s, when Britain was emerging from the lethargy of post-war 50s to lead the world in fashion and flower power, it may not have been all doom and gloom. He was an inherently bright lad, who had the potential to discard the surrounding influences and re-surface through fields such as music or art. Once the challenges of those teenage years had worn thin, he may well have picked himself up and begun exploring the delights of *Carnaby Street,* rather than the doldrums of Cornwall. A personal choice of higher education in his twenties could have set him on course for a new and vibrant career, while that ever-present wanderlust might still have prompted him to pick up, and act on, one of those recurring invitations to visit Australia.

Major choice No.4 (at 17 years): college or university

George had elected to travel alone at the tender age of 16, to Australia. After arrival there his character changed out of all recognition, including excellent results at school, which contrasted vividly with abysmal grades in the UK. Then at the end of that first year *down under*, another incredibly important choice loomed from the depths. His newly adopted Australian family wanted him to persevere at school and progress to university, but George would have none of that; in the UK he had developed an inbuilt hatred of everything to do with school, and he wanted out.

Living his formative years on a Cornish dairy farm, meant George had a close affinity with, and basic knowledge of agriculture: he missed that part of his English life more than most other things. Thus, this became his focus in Australia: to become educated and build a career in the world of agriculture. As a result, he was set on course as an agronomist, company representative and farm advisor, through to his mid-thirties.

However, we need to explore what could have happened if our young immigrant had followed the desires of his newfound family and completed schooling, probably with high grades, then graduated to a city-based (most likely Melbourne) university. He could have chosen agriculture, but he also had other talents such as art and architecture. In reality his later life had moved towards journalism and education, but this might well have happened earlier if he had chosen university in the first instance. Instead of

employment in rural areas, the most likely scenario would have been for George to emerge from university and take up a higher-level position in agricultural research, journalism, education, or architecture. Ultimately, he may well have followed his calling to work with disadvantaged communities in developing countries - as happened in his real world – but it would have entailed a different entry point and probably an alternative level of involvement. The *sons-of-landed-gentry* clique that he met (in reality) at agricultural college, would have been replaced by more highly educated students, who in turn could have connected him to a range of diverse, city-based individuals: an alternative lifestyle inhabited by very different personnel.

In his twenties George admired and in some ways envied the freewheeling music-driven life of his half-brother, almost five years his junior, who attended university in Melbourne, later to become a teacher. Pubs and clubs, dope and the artworld where hallmarks of the hedonistic life his younger brother led in the 1970s. But in his own transition from England to Australia, and choice of a more rural existence, George had somehow managed to miss much of that. And in many ways – looking back to those days - he regretted it.

Major choice No.5 (at 20 years): Victoria or South Australia

After agricultural college, George was directed (and accepted) to move for work from the state of Victoria to South Australia. Before that, he was engaged to be married to a young teacher in Victoria, but after the move he met a new love and was married in Adelaide. His new wife was a teacher, but importantly like George, an immigrant from Britain with a bit of a wanderlust. After a few years of life together which saw them working and travelling to various parts of Australia, they ventured back to Europe to re-unite with relatives, and then on return to Australia, became a family of three in the mid-seventies. This tends to prove the theory that one’s destiny is governed by circumstance: where you are, and whom you meet, at any given time. If George had elected to stay in Victoria, marrying his original fiancée (whose parents did not hail from the UK and who was not particularly outgoing), this could have underpinned a different-

looking future, that may *not* have included travel to Europe, and could have impacted significantly on his life and work in other parts of the world.

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Of course, other decisions were made – many and varied - during his first two decades or so, that offered pathways to quite different futures, but George rated the choices listed as the top five. For each of them, the alternative on offer would have brought about a seismic shift in his life: different places and a new breed of people, heralding major directional changes to the reality that occurred.

As we will discover in Book 2, these major recurring branch choices – each one identifying an alternative future to embrace – keep on presenting themselves to George (as of course they do to all of us in the human fraternity). But one major choice in particular stands out, which will change his life's direction irrevocably. This saw a more worldly, clear thinking young man, opting for a return to university studies. In essence, this decision – taken in his early thirties - initiated a diametric change to both personal life and vocational arena. In reality, it meant a new partner in life and work in the voluntary, rather than mainstream sector. It would become perhaps the number one decision of his entire life; a decision that foreshadowed work in Asia and Africa and underscored a life in retirement on the tropical coast of Kenya. But more of all that to come … in Book 2.

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