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The Past and Future of Local Swimming Pools
Ian McShane

Abstract
This article examines both recent policy to rationalise the provision of local public swimming pools, and the controversy that some closure or redevelopment plans have generated. Focusing on Victoria, the article analyses the cultural and political history of municipal pools, challenging a current policy narrative of local authority failure by highlighting earlier civic and higher government initiatives for pool building. Physical infrastructure has been little studied by scholars in the humanities and social sciences. With much of Australia’s post-World War Two infrastructure reaching the end of its effective life in the first few decades of this century, the story of local pools illuminates a policy challenge with major social, political and environmental implications.

key words: swimming pools, local government, political protest, regeneration, public policy.

Introduction

Between 1950 and 1980 Victorian councils built around two hundred swimming pools. Responding to long-standing views on swimming as a natural Australian pastime, desires for community-building, and an urgent need for recreation facilities in new post-war suburbia, this was one of the most vigorous examples of social infrastructure provision in Australia. Four decades on, the perception of seasonal (‘outdoor’) pools held by governments has changed. Seasonal pools once symbolised local progress, a cultural pre-disposition for outdoor, particularly aquatic recreation, and the social welfare role of local authorities. In recent years they have been portrayed as financial burdens, providing limited service to the local community, symbolising uncoordinated development within the local government sector and, in some instances, guilty of unsustainably high water use.

This view is hotly contested within some local communities. In the past decade or so there have been at least seven well-organised campaigns against pool closures in Melbourne, several of which have frustrated local and state government plans. A campaign to re-open the seasonal pool in the western Melbourne suburb of Sunshine was fought for fifteen years. The City of Maribyrnong’s mayor reported a death threat following her council’s decision to close the central Footscray pool in favour of a new indoor facility in parkland next to the giant Highpoint shopping complex (the owners of which donated substantial funds to the building project). Campaign strategies have varied. The Sunshine protesters criticised the 1994 action that saved the Fitzroy pool as a victory for inner-city elites, entrenching privileged access to social infrastructure at the expense of ‘have-nots’ in outer suburbs. The closure or redevelopment of ‘war memorial’ pools has been criticised as rejecting the ‘freedom of association’ for which
service personnel fought. More consistent protest themes focus on the community-building aspect of the local public realm and criticism of perceived disinvestment and privatisation. In this light, the fight over local pools is one element in a wider set of issues relating to the role of social infrastructure in community life. Expert commentators describe seasonal pools as ‘white elephants’ or ‘doomed’, but these protests have a force that local and state governments struggle to comprehend.

This article contextualises debates around the closure or redevelopment of local pools in Victoria by examining aspects of the cultural and policy history of these iconic places. As councils consider the benefits and costs of retaining seasonal pools, higher governments and legislators have sketched a history of local infrastructure provision characterised by undisciplined expenditure and political aggrandisement. The anecdotal character of some analysis is suggested by a key (and otherwise sympathetic) 2003 Commonwealth parliamentary report into local government finances:

…there have been instances of unwise investment in infrastructure in order to meet community preferences which have put a council’s future at a financial disadvantage…a council must make a decision on whether to build and maintain up to six swimming pools within easy driving distance from its constituents, or to maintain other essential infrastructure such as roads.

The story of local authority recklessness can be qualified by pointing to the influence of wider civic action and state-level initiatives on local priorities. According to one report, over two-thirds of Australia’s infrastructure stock was acquired in the nation-building decades following World War Two, and much of this stock is reaching the end of its effective life. The regeneration of the local public realm involves a significant policy challenge in balancing local preferences with wider administrative and economic efficiencies. However, scholarly neglect of the local government sphere, and the framing of physical infrastructure in technological rather than cultural or political terms has limited the ways in which this challenge is understood.

The Culture and Politics of Swimming

Establishing the value given to swimming pools in the suite of municipal infrastructure, especially in light of criticism that rationales for their construction were seldom explicit, requires analysis of swimming’s wider cultural and political contexts.

Assessments of swimming as a recreation in colonial Australia point to its initial popularity and subsequent reluctance of colonists to enter the water. Booth argues against functionalist assumptions that aquatic recreation is a natural Australian activity, locating its promotion within middle-class debates over morality, health, and education. Developing views on the benefits of disciplined physical activity, the provision of segregated facilities, and the national and imperial overtones of sport saw competitive swimming strongly established by the last decades of the nineteenth century, institutionalised through state-level swimming associations. Swimming’s popularity
was strengthened by Australia’s early Olympic success, the relaxation of bans on daylight and mixed bathing, and the promotion of public health and eugenist views on the benefits of sun exposure, surfbathing and swimming. 19

The prevalence of drowning in nineteenth-century Australia also re-oriented concepts of swimming and bathing towards skill and civic duty. 20 Rescues were sometimes acknowledged by public recognition and reward. The form and significance of such events had particular resonance for some heroes. The outlaw Edward ‘Ned’ Kelly, when a youth, was given a green sash for rescuing a drowning child. He wore the sash under his armour at his final confrontation with colonial police at Glenrowan in 1880. Olympic swimmer Frank Beaurepaire used the £2,500 he received for rescuing a swimmer from shark attack at Coogee Beach in 1922 to establish his highly successful tyre business. 21

Representations of Australian swimming, especially competitive swimming, conform to Sprawson’s depiction of the swimmer as hero, although the influence of eugenics and nationalism in Australia overshadows the classicism that inspired swimming’s revival in nineteenth century England. 22 Classicism and vitalism fused in the modern Olympic movement. Of its hometown hero Beaurepaire, the Melbourne Herald wrote in 1910 ‘[a] few years ago, [he] was physically weak, the sea has made him a bronze Hercules…[i]f all young Australians were like Beaurepaire, we should be like the Greeks of Plato’s time’. 23

Swimming had a significant place in early twentieth century popular and spectator culture. Match races, sometimes between swimmers of different nationalities and conducted on almost any expanse of water, often drew large crowds. Diving and acrobatic displays were popular, particularly when they featured international figures such as Annette Kellerman. 24 Public swimming pools hosted more civically-oriented events such as pageants and festivals, the park setting of some municipal pools proving especially suitable. 25

The proliferation of local public pools from the 1950s was accompanied by a new focus on physical and moral risk as large numbers of young people passed through the turnstiles. Connell et al’s 1957 study of Sydney adolescents contains early quantitative evidence of the popularity of swimming, with surrounding comment on its suitability as a relaxed way of encouraging socialisation and personal development. 26 Swimming coaches, though, reinforced a message that success in the sport depended on discipline and competitiveness, traits that could curb teenage delinquency or assist the triumph over adverse home environments. 27 Councils responded to the surging numbers with careful drafting of regulations, and council-employed pool attendants developed a reputation for their stern enforcement. 28 ‘The power to make these bylaws is an extensive one…and [their] proper enforcement can make the difference between an attractive swimming pool and one that attracts undesireables’ commented the authors of the Victorian Local Government Handbook. 29 The popularity of pools with young people offered commercial opportunities that councils were happy to facilitate. In the 1970s Melbourne youth radio station 3XY toured pop star Issi Dye and his band around Melbourne pools,
negotiating deals with councils for the distribution of Coca Cola products in the process.

Van Leeuwen argues that swimming pools make an indispensable contribution to the reading of twentieth-century architectural modernism. A European trend for picturesque design, characterised by curvilinear structures placed in garden settings, was followed in several Melbourne suburban pools built in the 1920s and 1930s. By mid-century this had given way to over-riding concerns for the hygienic and streamlined handling of patrons, and the expansion of facilities for lap swimming. In the second half of the twentieth century, stylistic innovation, new construction techniques and new standards (covered and heated pools made their appearance in the 1950s) signalled rising investment levels in these facilities.

The famous campaigns for access by Indigenous Australians to pools in the New South Wales towns of Moree and Kempsey highlight the political symbolism of these facilities, and the contingent notion of a swimming public. However, the first major Australian-based study of the recreational policy aspects of swimming did not appear until 1989. The limited literature in this field defies the importance of aquatic recreation at local authority level and the intense policy activity surrounding the provision of aquatic facilities. Recent Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) figures show that swimming has the highest participation rate of children (14 years and under) of any ABS-measured sport or physical activity in Australia, and the third highest for adults. The significance of these figures is underscored by recognising that the most popular adult sport – walking – requires no specific infrastructure provision. Swimming is especially dependent on facility investment, and thus vulnerable to questions about infrastructure spending. How these debates have been framed in Victoria is examined below.

**Municipal Swimming Pools in Victoria**

The Municipal Institutions Act 1854 empowered Victorian local authorities to operate public baths as part of broader provision for public health and culture. Concern over unsupervised swimming in natural waterways was a strong motivation for councils and shires to construct pools. The Adelaide City Council, concerned about drownings in the Torrens River, provided free entry to the Adelaide Baths and prohibited swimming in dangerous waters. The supply of swimming costumes to patrons of public baths, though, suggests underlying concern with the prevalence and persistence of nude swimming.

The construction of swimming pools also symbolised municipal progress. The north-west Melbourne borough of Essendon constructed baths and a new town hall soon after the conferral of city status in 1909. McCalman notes that the inner-Melbourne Richmond city council prioritised renovations to the town hall and municipal baths over repairs to slum dwellings, streets and playgrounds in its 1933 unemployment relief scheme. However, several hundred children used the baths weekly, many with no such facilities at home, and the upgrade included a daily change of the often fetid water.
The focus of municipal engineering at this time offers an additional perspective on the significance of pools as social infrastructure. Hydraulic engineering is central to municipal concerns, and swimming pools were an extension of this field. City of Willoughby (Sydney) engineer C J Chesterfield included swimming pool construction in his 1931 higher degree thesis on municipal engineering, a profession that undertook ‘public service of the widest and finest kind’. Chesterfield contrasted the relatively high number of public pools in Melbourne with their lack of provision in Sydney, with its popular surf beaches.

In 1847 a Sydney commentator criticised truants for ‘learning to swim instead of learning to write’. Progressive educators advocated modest-sized school pools in addition to their provision by councils. In the 1930s the secretary of the South Australian Amateur Swimming Association argued that school pools ‘should be considered as important as playgrounds’, a view echoed in T I Thompson’s 1956 Popular Handbook of Swimming. Thompson, a Queensland physical education teacher, exemplified attitudes about the benefits of swimming at the beginning of the pool construction boom. Swimming was popular because of ‘the out-of-doors temperament’ of the ‘average Australian’, more than half of whom lived less than one hour’s travel from the sea. ‘Every single person owes it to himself to learn how to swim and recognise hazardous situations which are beyond his capacity’ he argued. In this light, the construction of municipal pools and the appearance of swimming in education curricula were complementary, relieving education departments of a burden of provision, and supplying core patronage to council pools.

Specific statutory reference to Victorian municipal swimming pools (as distinct from baths) first appeared in the Local Government Act 1958, reinforced by the Victorian Local Government Handbook’s advice that councils foster swimming clubs. Council decisions to construct pools, though, were not universally welcomed. The appropriation of parkland, perceived negative impacts on adjacent properties, ward-based favouritism, and council priorities and debt levels were consistent themes. Community fund-raising for pool construction provided tangible evidence of support and a sense of real equity in the project. City of Malvern (south-east Melbourne) officials cited a local progress league and the state department of education as constituents of the ‘well informed public opinion’ favouring a pool in that city. It can, though, be speculated that by the 1950s the wish to provide supervised recreational opportunities for young people was sufficiently strong to render elaborate justification redundant. The Mayor of Essendon described the benefits of the Essendon Baths (1915) in extended and lyrical terms at its opening ceremony. His successor opened the bath’s 1959 replacement by advising residents that ‘I would like you to remember that it is your pool. Look after it. It cost a lot of money and is worth looking after’. The description of state-level views as well informed public opinion, though, is significant. In Victoria, the development and configuration of municipal pools was influenced by external forces and state policy as well as local preference. The account offered below analyses three episodes to support this argument.
‘A swimming conscience has been aroused… – Frank Beaurepaire and Community Effort

Frank (later Sir Frank) Beaurepaire was a key figure in swimming promotion and pool construction in Victoria. An Australian title-holder at the age of sixteen, Beaurepaire won medals at the London 1908 Olympic games, adding to his tally in the 1920 and 1924 games. In 1911 Beaurepaire took paid employment with the Victorian Department of Education as a swimming instructor, a move that resulted in revocation of his amateur status (and exclusion from Olympic competition) until 1920. One of Beaurepaire’s activities in this role was to instruct the Australian Infantry Forces, underscoring the strong connections between militarism and swimming.

Beaurepaire’s role as a swimming educator is well-known, but his advocacy of voluntary effort and local-level partnership signals the civic dimensions of swimming. In 1929 Beaurepaire, by then an influential business figure and Melbourne city councillor, joined with the Melbourne Herald newspaper to promote swimming education. He travelled throughout Victoria to seek the agreement of local authorities and citizen committees to build swimming pools. In a forward to his 1933 swimming instruction booklet Beaurepaire noted the scale of the program – in four summers around 45,000 people had been taught by 4,000 instructors, many of whom were volunteers. The businessman then provided some social accounting:

> It would be difficult to assess the time thus given so freely. Certainly, it would amount to thousands of pounds. In addition, some hundreds of pounds worth of valuable work has been given in providing better facilities for swimming. What a pleasing example of the spirit of self-sacrifice to help others. The result of this cheerful effort is that a swimming conscience has been aroused.

Beaurepaire’s biographer records his influence behind pool construction in four Melbourne suburbs, as well as fifteen unspecified pools in country Victoria in 1929 alone. The limited archival record constrains full testing of this claim. However, there is little doubt his influence was substantial, and continued to be felt after the war, through his association with the Victorian Olympic Committee and Melbourne’s bid for the 1956 games, and the long-running Herald Learn to Swim campaign.

The Olympic Era

The major phase of swimming pool construction in Victoria occurred in the 1950s and 1960s, when around 120 were built. Australia’s success at the Melbourne 1956 Olympic Games contributed substantially to this project, but should not be singled out as a causal factor. Other influences on pool construction included increasing municipal prosperity, population growth, pent-up demand for facility provision following economic depression and war, and the instrumental use of facilities to forge a sense of community. Civic and commemorative activities converged around municipal facilities in the early post-World War Two years through bodies such as C E W Bean’s Parks and Playgrounds Movement. The Commonwealth Department of Post-War Reconstruction unsuccessfully lobbied
the Federal Cabinet to fund community facilities following the Commonwealth’s 1942
takeover of income tax collection. However, councils took advantage of a funding
program for memorial buildings and encouraged tax-deductible donations to finance
capital works.

Melbourne’s successful staging of the Olympic games was supported by state-level
investment in infrastructure, especially the Melbourne Cricket Ground and the Batman
Avenue pool. Major events conferred prestige on host cities, but set in motion
competing forces that both raised facility standards and expectations for local authorities
and diverted potential sources of capital funding to state-level facilities. The influence of
the Melbourne games cannot be assessed with precision. However, the numbers of local
pools constructed in the following decade suggests that, at the least, the games confirmed
the swimming pool as a desirable local recreation facility, especially in new suburbs with
relatively high numbers of young people.

Expanding service demands on Victorian councils in the post-war years strained
municipal budgets, but expectations of revenue growth and relatively low interest levels
on public debt (which generally pertained until financial deregulation in the 1980s),
encouraged optimistic financial outlooks. If municipal budgets were tight, construction
economics and regulatory regimes were favourable. The availability of cheap land, the
willingness of local authorities to convert existing public open space, and the use of
municipal engineers as project managers (or facility designers in the case of smaller
councils) were important factors. Modest material and construction costs, a relative
freedom from compliance burdens, and local fund-raising and voluntary effort also
contributed. The structures were often utilitarian, though, and there was little provision
beyond annual works planning for long-term maintenance. Construction was also
assisted by state-level subsidies, initially provided by the Victorian Department of Local
Government to poorer councils or those on the urban fringe experiencing rapid
population growth. Allocation of this funding to individual councils worked against
coordinated planning or shared facilities. State-level support for seasonal pools,
however, was short-lived, overtaken by new portfolio arrangements and policy outlooks.

Policy Tumble-turns: Community Recreation and Public Choice

At the high point of seasonal pool construction, the Victorian state government, through
the new and dynamic portfolio of Youth, Sport and Recreation (YSR) took an interest in
the concept of multi-purpose indoor leisure centres. YSR’s policy remit was pioneering in
Australian terms. Funding and promotional programs acted on new concerns about
physical fitness and increased leisure. YSR targeted local authorities to promote active
recreation, subsidising the salary of newly-created municipal recreation officer positions.
The funding scheme for multi-purpose leisure centres was a second major initiative. YSR
provided grants matching council allocations for these structures, and also channelled
funds from the new Commonwealth Department of Tourism and Recreation to local
authorities for the same purpose. A standard policy vehicle for higher governments, the
attractiveness of these grants was (and remains) a major factor in municipal capital works
decision-making.
YSR broadened the emphasis of aquatic recreation from fitness and discipline to community recreation, consistent with wider changes to youth policy and the remit of local government. YSR’s strong interest in municipal pools sprang from a range of sources, including staff expertise, survey work on pool provision, and awareness of northern hemisphere developments in pool design and use. Studies of aquatic facilities by other Australian state governments in the 1970s and 1980s provided benchmarks to assess the viability of seasonal pools in a period of declining attendances and competition with other recreation forms. A sharpening focus on the physical and financial performance of aquatic facilities indicated a gradual shift in policy rhetoric from concern about the productive uses of leisure in post-industrial society which underpinned the establishment of sport and recreation portfolios in the 1970s, to the language of efficiency and public choice in the 1980s.

The local sector was the last level of Australian government to be exposed to new public management - the coalition of ideas favouring reduced public outlays, de-regulation and service contestability. The direction of public sector reform had a particular impact on councils. Local authorities, which have the highest proportion of buildings in their asset portfolio of any tier of government, began to question the effectiveness of capital investment (made transparent through new accounting rules and asset management policies) in bricks and mortar. Might limited public funds be more strategically used by contracting out services or facility management, especially where the pro-community outlook of providers such as the YMCA was aligned with councils? The underlying issue here is not service provision per se, but the efficiency logic that underpinned public sector reform. The ‘financialisation’ of local government brought a scrutiny of public outlays that recast some public goods – in this case, facilities that are fully or partly funded from taxation revenue for social welfare purposes - as loss-making enterprises and avoidable costs. For example, despite evidence that the City of Essendon’s 1959 seasonal pool had the lowest operating subsidy of six comparable Melbourne pools, by 1988 it was described by council officials as ‘unprofitable’. The council sought unsuccessfully to close the facility in 1994. The seasonal pool did compare poorly in financial terms with the municipality’s newer profit-making indoor leisure centre (which included a 25 metre pool), although the expansion of the latter facility to be the largest of its type in Victoria hardly made fair comparison.

The future of seasonal pools, especially in inner Melbourne, was further challenged by local authority amalgamations implemented by the Victorian Kennett Liberal government in 1994. The dissolution of existing municipal boundaries exposed tensions between pools as local community facilities and as local authority facilities – that is, between their spatial and jurisdictional orientations. This is consistent with a state-level policy view that community facilities had been over-supplied in the past, and local residents must learn to live with reduced service levels. The most strident Australian statement of this view, articulated in a 1987 South Australian parliamentary report on infrastructure renewal, urged government agencies to ‘improve their understanding and application of the marketing and public involvement strategies that need to be used in the downgrading or removal of assets’.
The developing entrepreneurship of local government property managers raised new concerns about decision-making authority and ownership of community facilities that surfaced in pool protests. Concerns over deal-making with third parties emerged in the Essendon and Footscray protests, while the Sunshine protesters disputed the council’s authority to close a structure that had been partly financed by community donations. Reference to the down-grading or removal of assets ignored earlier policy encouraging club and community contributions to facilities, especially in a post-war economy in which housing construction advanced well in front of social infrastructure. The suspension of local democracy by the Kennett government in 1994, controversies over the uses or disposal of public land, and perceptions of infrastructure disinvestment created a difficult environment for consultation and trust-building around facility regeneration. Regrettably, the major analysis of trust in Australian government does not encompass the local sphere. We are not well-prepared to debate the regeneration of local public places, despite growing awareness of their strategic position at the intersection of social, economic and environmental policy.

Re-appraising Seasonal Pools

A 2005 study by developers of the Australian aquatic industry’s most widely used set of performance measures predicted that stand-alone seasonal pools will attract significantly fewer ‘customers’ than multi-purpose centres with indoor pools. Leisure centres, which typically combine aquatic, gymnasium and court facilities, and sometimes include ancillary services such as a creche, have significant advantages over seasonal pools in terms of program flexibility and extended operating times. They indicate a shift towards more personalised forms of recreation consumption, and provide councils with new revenue opportunities, although the increasing reliance of local authorities on user charges is, on one account, indicative of a declining commitment to public goods. It is a commonplace observation that seasonal pools built for the recreation of post-war youth may be ill-suited to an ageing population. Similarly, while conceding that the utilitarian quality of many seasonal pools is situated in a particular context of infrastructure provision and recreation choice, criticism that these facilities were ‘built on the premise that Australia enjoyed a permanent heatwave and people would always wish to cool off’ holds some force. More recent concerns over sun exposure and requirements for new capital investment to mitigate risk in this area may further strengthen the case for indoor facilities.

However, a hybrid trend in aquatic facilities – there is now an established record of refurbishments that have added indoor pools and ‘dry’ facilities to an existing seasonal pool – raises questions about the usefulness of a strict outdoor/indoor binary. While accepting the limited adaptability of seasonal pools with heritage or site constraints, a more productive policy approach views seasonal pools in investment rather than subsidy terms, and investigates ways that their recreational, social and amenity components can be optimised. Existing management tools provide limited support for such an endeavour. The performance instrument cited above incorporates the social dimension of pools within a customer service measure, a conflation of citizenship and consumption
emblematic of recent public sector reform. Rate-payer support for subsidised leisure facilities is evident, but not inexhaustible. As this article has shown, the aetiology of current concerns over infrastructure renewal, and the settling of these concerns around seasonal pools, is complex. Strategic physical and financial asset management is a new story for local authorities – councils didn’t think in such terms when acquiring much of their physical asset stock. But pinning responsibility solely on councils overlooks the wider background to this issue, problematising it instead in narrow financial and service terms.

The disciplinary approach of higher governments is also strained by their own competing policy logics. For example, in 2006 the Victorian government announced additional funding to keep rural pools open in drought affected areas, arguing for their social and recreational significance in small towns. This role has not been as forcefully articulated for metropolitan pools. A pre-conception of rural pools as social benefits and metropolitan pools as economic burdens aligns too neatly with relative land values. A second example of policy inconsistency is provided by a decision to donate four portable pools acquired by the Victorian government for the 2007 world swimming championships, held in Melbourne, to local authorities (one of them the owner of the Sunshine pool). The identification of community benefits is a condition set by the Federation Internationale de Natation for hosting this event. Here State government policy on local authority asset management and financial prudence gave ground to the prestige and short-term economic benefits garnered by an international sporting event.

While local protests over pool closures can be rightly viewed as a reaction to the rationalising project of economic liberalism, and the particular forms it takes at local authority level, continued Victorian government financial support for municipal pools suggests the persistence of earlier rationales concerned with skills acquisition, well-being and community building. These rationales are now framed by new urban development and environmental contexts that require re-appraisal of seasonal pools. The stealthy reduction of amenity and service levels through urban consolidation raises questions about the long-term wisdom of facility closures, especially facilities that contribute to a municipality’s stock of public open space. Similarly, recent metropolitan population growth has outstripped projections informing Victoria’s local infrastructure policy. Criticism of so-called single use structures, and their closure in favour of multi-purpose facilities such as leisure centres, has a functionalist logic that may underestimate the intangible and informal contribution of such places to social cohesion and a shared local public realm. The aggregation of community facilities into larger units, patterning the re-organisation of local authorities, raises important questions about car dependency. The growth of backyard swimming pools, through increasing capitalisation of private residences now confronts water scarcity and household debt concerns, raising questions over the sustainability of private facilities and new demand on public counterparts. On the positive side, improved solar and temporary roof technologies hold new possibilities for extending the useability and lowering the effective cost of seasonal pools.

Capping this discussion is the linear character of infrastructure decisions. Only a handful of Melbourne cases can be cited where decisions to close major community facilities such
as schools or pools have been reversed. Fluctuating seasonal attendances and failure to annualise expenditure on infrastructure asset maintenance (which is typically ‘lumpy’ or cyclical in nature) can lead to snap judgements by decision-makers focused on short-term budget or electoral cycles rather than long term social value. Defence of seasonal pools as a seemingly natural part of the Australian recreation landscape should be informed by an awareness of their instrumentality and qualified policy support. However, singling out municipal pools as either poor financial performers or local electoral trophies masks their significance as local community facilities, and limits imagination of their long term futures.

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