

PIBCI - Monthly Perspective

August 2020

Imagination, Vision and Disconnection

As August rolls out, a backward glance over 2020 demonstrates that the major political parties lack imagination and the vision necessary to guide Australia through the pandemic and take us into a brighter future. The Morrison-led government's prognosis for the future is rather grim, as we will be saddled by debt and conflict. Meanwhile, the Labor opposition has been largely missing in action while it attempts to distract attention from the party's internal factional troubles fuelled by branch stacking. All this raises the question: How out of touch are the major political parties with average Australians?

The zig and zag of politics

Over the past few months we have witnessed the ruling Coalition zig-zag its way between what it wants to do, and what it has to do. Its earlier optimism in the form of an economic 'snapback' rapidly dissolved as Victoria, one of the country's economic powerhouses continues to register regular spikes in Covid-19 infections. As the Victorian economy powers down, the Coalition government had been forced to 'zig' instead of 'zag.' Neoliberals are loath to spend money on the public. This is why the Coalition announced that it would turn off the financial support provided to many Australians by ending the JobKeeper scheme in September. However, such plans were scuttled as it would be viewed as morally reprehensible to cut off financial support while thousands of workers are struggling with the dire state of business and employment in Victoria. As night follows day, the Morrison-led government has signalled that it will continue to gravitate towards the neoliberal ideology despite the social and political reality on the ground. Such political desperation was evidenced by the Treasurer, Josh Frydenberg openly channelled the neoliberal ghosts of Thatcher and Ragan at his speech at the National Press Club following the 'Covid Budget.' Such sentiments fly in the face of the trail of social and political wreckage inflicted by the dynamic duo that have left the UK and US deeply scarred.

Given the major upheaval caused by the global pandemic, and the fact that life will be different once the human race gets the upper hand over the virus, the opportunities to reevaluate and improve as a society are plentiful. Yet, the lack of imagination and innovation by the major political parties can only be described as depressing. They seem unwilling and incapable of thinking beyond the limited perimeters of their ideological sandpits. As a consequence, they will continue to drag our future back into the past, neoliberal-style.

The time is ripe to reclaim our future. Now is the time for big ideas, an innovative approach, alternative views underpinned by a positive outlook, that challenges the grim prospects offered up by the major political parties.

More for some, Less for others

Despite finding \$60 billion under the couch due to a 'JobKeeper miscalculation', the Coalition have unashamedly shaved back payments for both JobKeeper and JobSeeker. As a consequence, both young Australians and female workers will be hit hardest due to the precarious, part-time nature of their work in industries that have been hit hardest. Meanwhile the Coalition locked in \$270 billion towards defence spending over the next 10 years. It will also continue with spending \$580 million dollars towards the expansion of the Australian War Memorial by pulling down Anzac Hall and replacing it with a grandiose foyer and space to fill with old planes and helicopters. Clearly, the governing class is out of touch with what is happening on the streets and in the homes of Australia.

Same old tricks and same old targets

With the national economy in recession fuelled by rising unemployment numbers and rising Covid-19 infections, the Coalition government has scrambled to concoct a plan via the Budget to give the appearance of control and certainty. However, its actions to date demonstrate that its ideological proclivities will continue to dictate its course as our national and international troubles deepen.

The delivery of the Budget has been promptly followed by the usual neoliberal catch cries of: 'we need to cut red tape' and 'we need to cut back on regulation.' Although these phrases are intended to instill the belief that savings and efficiencies can be gained, the reality is that it will mean less oversight by

government agencies and less accountability required on behalf of business. This inevitably will translate into cut backs in government agencies, and make things easier and cheaper for corporations at the expense of the public.

Driven by neoliberal ideology, the Coalition has stepped up its assault on the Higher Education sector. Universities added \$32.4 billion to the Australian economy in international education alone. They also help to shape the future of Australia through intellectual contributions, cultural and social development. Due to the pandemic, international student numbers have evaporated leaving universities floundering. With 2020 a write-off, and both international and national enrolments unlikely to bounce back in 2021, universities have been forced to cut back their workforce. The Coalition's response has been to exclude thousands of higher education workers from accessing JobKeeper. The impact on regional Victoria will be devastating as universities will substantially scale back and closedown regional campuses, leaving thousands of young Australian's without a viable option to further their education, and higher education workers without work and financial support.

This has been further exacerbated by the proposed shake-up of University fees. As a consequence, an 113% increase is to be slapped on a Humanities degree. In effect, courses that teach our younger generations how to critically assess our society by learning about the democratic process, how power operates, and what makes society tick, will be out of the reach of most people.

The Morrison approach is not about educating our young people, but preparing them for work – the government euphemism being “job ready.” Yet, where are the jobs? In an age of growing technological advances, many jobs are likely to be automated. Despite this, the major parties cling onto the concept of full employment, an age old view that lost its currency decades ago.

As unemployment rises, the Morrison-led government has signalled funding cuts to the ABC which will directly lead to job cuts, and clearly a less critical government funded media.

As the nation's gaze is captured by the pandemic, the ruling Coalition has revised our defence spending. Following US President Donald Trump's demand of allies to spend at least 2 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP), the Coalition has opted to delink spending from GDP due to the declining economy. To ensure defence spending does not take a hit, Prime Minister, Scott Morrison announced that \$270 billion will be dedicated to defence for over the next 10 years. This constitutes almost 40 per cent more spending on weapons systems over the last defence review in 2016. Included in the shopping list is a large purchase of Long Range Anti-Ship Missiles from the United States.

Morrison's announcement signals an aggressive defence posture aimed at countering the rise of China. His speech further indicated that we will be entering a world that will be 'poorer, more dangerous and that is more disorderly.' The Coalition's thinking clearly indicates that diplomacy and working towards a stable global community during a world-wide pandemic is not foremost in the minds of our policy makers.

On the back of telling Australians that we will need to get used to working from home, the Prime Minister, Scott Morrison has moved to shut down Parliament citing health concerns due to Covid-19. This raises a broad range of questions: How will the democratic process function? Why won't Parliamentarians meet over digital platforms like so many Australians are currently engaging in whilst working from home? Is parliament an essential service or not? Will the Coalition simply make decisions while debate is shut down?

The neoliberal slogans that the ruling Coalition will drum into the public's mind until the next election and pass off as 'common sense' will invariably include: 'there is not enough money', 'government regulation is inefficient', 'everyone must have a job' and 'for years we will have to pay back what has been spent'. All this will translate into tough times for the majority of Australians as a program of austerity is unleashed, government regulation is loosened up, the drive to privatise is stepped up, and wealth is transferred from public hands into the laps of corporations and that small section of society we know as the 1%.

A contemporary solution to the impact of the current and future pandemics, economic downturns, rising unemployment, and conflict is offered by a Universal Basic Income (UBI). This viable alternative provides for a single, standardised safety net for all citizens of age regardless of their economic circumstances.

Our policy on UBI sets aside the complication manufactured by the Coalition's differentiation between one social support scheme from another, which are constantly subject to change and confusion.

International relations & the 'Big Other'

The strains in geopolitics have reached an all-time low as the major global powers battle amongst each other to carve out new spheres of interest and edge out rivals in the face of the global economic downturn. Leading the charge is the United States whose relationship with friends and foes alike have been strained under the Trump administration. Of particular interest is the deepening stand-off with China. The tensions between the two economic giants are fast reaching a crisis point that has the potential to trigger a military conflict should hot-heads prevail. In effect, a new Cold War between the US and China has commenced, and our government has enthusiastically thrown Australia into the arena of the 'big players' by poking and prodding our largest economic 'partner'. Regardless of the reasons behind our government's enthusiasm, the circumstances have facilitated in the manufacture of a menacing 'Big Other' akin to the 'Yellow Peril' from the past. In effect, the Morrison-led government has rebooted the 'Yellow Peril' scare which the mainstream media have dutifully promoted as a new 'China problem.' Despite the appalling human rights violations committed by the Chinese government, the ruling Coalition has willingly followed the lead of the United States. As tensions are set to rise, the new 'China problem' will act as a useful distraction for public consumption as our future domestic situation gets tougher and more precarious for the majority of Australians. Of concern is how this will play out? Anti-China rhetoric is merely a step away from rising nationalism, racism and invariably conflict. Is this the future the majority of Australians want? Is this the future we deserve?

The disconnect

In reality, neither the Liberal Party and their National Party partners have a credible plan for the majority of Australians. Nor does the Labor Party in opposition. What the major parties do have is a worn-out ideological hymn sheet which they will re-hash and deliver as a vision for the future. Unfortunately, this demonstrates that the major parties are in short supply of imagination and big ideas for the future. They are fast losing touch with the public as the reality of what is happening on the streets and in the homes of Australians is light-years away from the governing class' world view; and it will not get better.

The role of political parties is to give voice to the people. Key to this is unifying voters, creating a common vision, and working towards the realisation of the hopes and aspirations of their supporters once they win government. In opposition, political parties work to further the interests of their supporters, and hold the government of the day to account. Regardless of whether they are in government or opposition, the purpose of the political party is to act as an effective intermediary between their voters and political institutions such as the state. Their aim is to effectively implement policy that gives voice to their political constituents thereby assuring democratic outcomes are met.

However, political representation by our major political parties has long been lost. In the last two decades, they have withdrawn from their roles as democratic parties. Today, their single objective is to compete amongst each other regardless of how hollow and meaningless their attempts are. The Liberal and National Party Coalition differ little from their Labor Party counterparts in opposition. Both major parties merely attempt to win government; a priority that comes at the expense of representation of their constituents. This has resulted in a widening gap between the aims and aspirations of major parties and their voters.

The Governing Class

What we have today can be described as 'government by cartel', in which there is no real opposition. Both major parties effectively stand for the same thing; the one ideology with some minor tweaks to give the appearance of differentiation. This 'governing class' presents no effective opposition, no alternative vision, nor sufficient imagination for a better future beyond the narrow parameters of neoliberalism. Hollow political slogans reinforced by 10 second soundbites do not

pass for good government and solid opposition. It is little wonder that the public have become disengaged with politics and view it with deep cynicism. However, political disengagement will not solve the problem.

Clearly, a more meaningful opposition is required, and the public needs to move beyond choosing between the two major parties and look at the alternatives. PIBCI offers a real alternative to the majors by placing public interests before corporate interests.

Reclaim our future

We recognise that we have entered a transitional period impacting social, political and economic spheres of life. Much of the upheaval has been brought about by the global pandemic, which has acted like an X-Ray on society by highlighting our weak points. It continues to expose the vulnerabilities in our society; it has underlined the precarious nature of employment; it has underlined the plight of people in social housing. It has shined a light on the convoluted and underfunded social security system. The pandemic has demonstrated that government spending lacks a social focus, and targets both questionable and incomprehensible priorities. What is abundantly clear is that the major parties are out of touch with the needs and aspirations of the majority of Australians. Ultimately, change will come; but this will depend on broad community support, and this support starts with you.

You may opt to accept more of the same, or elect to take control of your future and seek real and meaningful change.

Join PIBCI and help us start that change. If you are a member, help us increase our membership so we can make change real.

Anthony B – Website Editor
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