

PIBCI - Monthly Perspective

March 2021

While you were looking the other way

Democracies across the globe are being openly challenged by forces that are determined and powerful. If we were to believe the mainstream media, the most dangerous threats to our democratic way of life come from foreign powers, terrorist groups and international crime syndicates. In reality, the threat is much closer to home. On the one hand, large corporations have successfully taken root in our democratic institutions and rendered them ineffective. On the other hand, governments seem ill-equipped, incompetent or in league with large corporations. The net result is that corporate and political leaders are failing the people, and failing the planet. In the face of this predicament, only the collective actions of the public can make a difference and help to turn the tide. By joining PIBCI, you can make a difference that will help us get one step closer to placing public interests first.

The battle of two different worlds

As the planet remains in the grip of the global pandemic, the world's two richest individuals have been battling it out for prize position. While nations race towards vaccinating their populations, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos has reclaimed poll position as the world's richest person. While the world's population eagerly awaits a 'silver bullet' for COVID-19, Mr Bezos has been building his net worth to hit the US \$190.3 billion mark, ahead of Tesla CEO and SpaceX founder Elon Musk resting at US \$173.4 billion.

While the public focus has been looking the other way (namely focussing on real world issues such as surviving a pandemic and trying to raise an income), large corporations have been very busy bolstering their wealth whilst expanding their political influence.

The US and UK experience

The recent political upheaval in the USA and the unfolding disaster in the UK highlight that democracies experience corruption when they lack transparency in

political and campaign financing, have outdated laws on freedom of information, provide insufficient protection to whistle-blowers or have unreliable media.

In the face of the highest COVID-19 death rates in the world fuelled by gross incompetence, the governing elite in both the USA and UK have maintained their hold on power. Governments in both nations have bumbled their way through one of the most serious public disasters since WW2. And yet, the majority of the population in the USA and the UK have continued to support the same old political class. In the USA, Americans have swapped one set of privileged politicians with another. Both the Democrat and the Republican parties have continued their project stripping away social services, adding to the already huge inequality gap. Americans have elected to put in power the same bunch of politicians who took the 'too-big-to-fail' view of banks who asset-stripped the middle class in 2008. What is certain is that the major US political parties will continue to fail their supporters, and prop up large corporations.

In the UK, the Boris Johnson-led government continues to preside over one of the world's highest COVID-19 mortality rates. As it fumbles its way through the pandemic, concocting policy on the run, it somehow remains ahead in the polls despite its high levels of incompetence in handling COVID-19. Furthermore, the economic fortunes of the UK continue to decline as the full impact of Brexit is yet to materialise.

Behind the public support for bumbling and self-serving mainstream politicians is the billionaire media. Broadcasting 24/7, the corporate media paints distortions of reality through their many and varied corporate media platforms.

The impact of the billionaire media's diet of skewed and biased news is a public trained to be politically ignorant and apathetic. The upshot in both the USA and UK is that the public are fast forgetting how to take up the reins of being active citizens. The corporate media has taught them to focus on spectacle and sensationalisation, rather than nurturing a healthy democracy that brings politicians to account. Are we any different in Australia?

Meanwhile in Oz

The situation in Australia is no less concerning as the Morrison-led coalition government lurches from one scandal to another. As the coalition government ducks and weaves its way through the unfolding scandal at the very steps of Parliament House, the corporate media has been diligent by inducing the Australian public with collective amnesia. Long forgotten from the main stream media headlines is the succession of scandals that continue to pile up. RoboDebt, the sport rorts affair, the bushfires fiasco, and the disaster in Aged Care are only a few scandals that resonated in the mainstream media. Regardless of the mounting evidence pointing to the lack of accountability, no minister has resigned or stepped down.

During its time in power, the Morrison-led government has accumulated a mountain of scandals that have either gone unreported in the corporate media or have been quickly brushed aside to make way for sensational headlines. With an uncritical mainstream media by its side, this government has been able to thumb its nose at suggestions of responsibility, accountability and transparency. The recent events unfolding in Parliament House will further place pressure on the government. However, what is likely to occur? With the full support of the corporate media giving the coalition government cover and an opposition that is scared of its own shadow, the consequences for this government seem far and few between.

As the coalition government continues to channel financial stimulus to business, it subjects government agencies to austerity measures that weaken their ability to scrutinise government and bring ministers and their departments them to account.

The shift from Commonwealth government agencies to private agencies doing public work has more than doubled over the past five years, totalling more than \$5 billion per year. With public work being transferred into private hands, transparency has been disappearing behind contractual arrangements deemed 'commercial in confidence'. Meanwhile, focus and funding on critical issues such as public health, the environment and social welfare evaporates.

Undermining of our democratic system is further evidenced by the murky world of political donations. The weak laws governing donations leaves our governing class open to a lack of transparency and independence. This is further exacerbated by opaque public accountability and questionable political decision-making along with conflicts of interest. According to Anthony Whealy QC, and the Chair of the Centre for Public Integrity “the source of almost \$50 million in party income was hidden last year alone. This secrecy needs to stop.” He further stated that “the last election set records for money raised and money hidden. Reform is needed now so that the funding of the coming election is transparent.”

Mr Whealy further stated that “most states have a disclosure threshold of \$1000. The Commonwealth’s disclosure threshold of \$14,300 is out of line. There is little analysis or enforcement occurring to make sure donations returns are complete. The AEC needs greater resources and expertise to make our disclosure system work properly”.

Clearly, the lack of transparency in political financing, weak laws regulating donations and outdated laws on freedom of information leave gaping holes in the democratic process. This opens the gateway for powerful and well financed individuals and corporations to exercise undue influence on our governing class. The unfortunate fact that Prime Minister Morrison and Treasurer Josh Frydenberg spent almost \$5000 of taxpayer money to fly the prime minister’s private jet from Canberra to Sydney for Lachlan Murdoch’s 2018 Christmas party highlights two issues. The first is that the misuse of public money by the Prime Minister and Treasurer did not raise an eyebrow, embarrassment nor was it paid back to the public. Secondly, the mainstream media did not report this misuse of funds nor was the issue followed up.

The critical issue here is the health of our democracy. If our mainstream media lacks an investigative arm and the appetite to bring ministers to account, what does this mean to for democracy? What is the wider impact on a public that is trained to be more interested in celebrities and spectacle than being shocked and disgusted by scandals in the government? How does a healthy democracy flourish if our government agencies are underfunded and weakened to the point that they

are unable to effectively expose anti-democratic activities within our major political parties?

The fix

The public's active involvement in social and political issues is vital in developing a culture aimed at bringing politicians to account, and raising the declining ethical standards of our major parties.

By joining PIBCI, you will help us get one step closer to becoming a registered political party with the sole aim of placing the public's interests first. We will work towards bringing political parties to account by promoting anti-corruption and integrity mechanisms which bring into place appropriately funded agencies that oversee checks and balances in our political system.

Our approach is to promote citizen participation that fortifies anti-corruption efforts. Vital to this is the active design and implementation of systems that promote transparency of our political system and institutions. Furthermore, it is key that the undue influence of large corporations and wealthy individuals is rooted out by reducing political party reliance on private donors. Where donations are permitted, we will advocate for the regulation and disclosure of political donations, spending limits and impartial enforcement.

Basic mechanisms to eliminate undue influence on political parties and individual politicians also may include, clear guidelines on the use of public resources, reasonable spending limits for campaigns, fair and transparent criteria that balances the allocation of public financial support to all parties, and the implementation of independent regulatory mechanisms that have sufficient support to apply sanctions where parties and/or politicians are found to violate obligations.

It is your choice

It may appear that the major political parties have an unshakable grip on government. The corporate media will have us believe that 'there is no other way' except for their way. However, it is time to stop looking the other way while large

corporations and the major political parties set the social and political agenda that works contrary to the public's interests.

PIBCI offers a genuine alternative to mainstream politics. Join PIBCI today. With your support, you can help place PIBCI one step closer to promoting our simple objective: to put the public's interests first.

Anthony B – Website Editor

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