

PIBCI - Monthly Perspective

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Politics and Truth

This edition highlights the importance of living in truth and the implications it has on politics.

On this month, one hundred and sixty-seven years ago, a diverse range of people from all corners of the world fought on the goldfields of Ballarat for justice and a fair go. The 167th anniversary of the Eureka Rebellion is a timely reminder to us all that justice and the ability to have a fair go are not simply handed to us on a platter. Each win for justice and each victory for the right to have a fair go were fought through struggle. The right to strike, the right to protest, the right for an eight-hour working day, and the right to vote regardless of race or gender were all born of determined collective struggles. Unfortunately, many of the hard-won rights and the social supports that enable each person to have a fair go have either been watered down, ground down or simply removed. Provisions for a decent level of health and a good education regardless of your income, a minimum wage despite your age and citizenship and the right to housing irrespective of your social status are evaporating before our very eyes. Both politicians and political parties have deceived the public and misrepresented the truth in order to advance their narrow interests whilst undercutting our rights and selling off public assets. Unfortunately, this has fermented public distrust and disillusionment towards politicians and politics alike. Increasingly, the public have embraced cynicism, apathy and conformity which have given the political elite the go-ahead to embark on an all-out assault on public assets and protections through the relentless drive to privatise and deregulate.

This month is a time to reflect on the rising power of corporations who have profited from current political arrangements whilst wages in Australia have remained stagnant. This month is a time to take stock of the health of our democracy by asking how much power and influence each voter has, as opposed to a lobbyist, a corporate executive or a billionaire who owns a media outlet. We also need to question why the federal government consistently avoids setting up a federal corruption watchdog despite vowing to do so over 1000 days ago. Clearly, we as a nation need to question whether the Liberal and National coalition or the Labor party will improve our lot. Or are they simply part of the problem? We also need to ask ourselves whether each citizen can expect justice and a fair go under the current social, economic and political arrangements. Can't we do better as a society and

unshackle ourselves from the moribund practices and policies of the major political parties and create our own future direction? Can't we strengthen our democratic institutions that uphold justice, and entrench rights that give every Australian a fair go?

The world of appearances

The duopoly of power shared between the Liberal and National coalition and the Labor party have duped the Australian public into believing that there is 'no other way' but to vote for the major political parties who alone can ensure security and stability for the nation. During the past forty years, the major political parties have force-fed the public (via the corporate owned and government-controlled media) the narrative that there is 'no other alternative.' This mantra was sold to the western world by neoliberal heavy-weights, U.S. President Ronald Reagan and UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Their pitch was built on a market economy supported by privatisation and deregulation. During the past forty years governments advancing the neoliberal agenda promised higher wages, more disposable income, better living standards, job security and a better future for coming generations. Through the sale of public assets and deregulation, neoliberal advocates repeated chants of a 'trickle-down effect' and 'all boats would rise' which reverberated throughout mass media outlets. In summary, we were promised a bounty that would flow throughout all sections of society. However, surveying the past forty years demonstrates that we have been sold a very bitter lemon. The wonders of neoliberal economics did not materialise for the majority. Yet, it significantly benefitted the few. Public assets were flogged off during the neoliberal garage sale which included the sale of schools, ports and airports, the outsourcing of public services and the sale of the Commonwealth Serum Laboratories (CSL). Deregulation was marketed to us as an 'efficiency measure' that would cut 'red-tape' thereby helping business turn profits more efficiently. The reality of deregulation translated into the removal of worker's safety nets, the loosening of monitoring and accountability of corporations at the expense of small business and consumer rights. One could stand back and wonder whether the political and economic basis of neoliberalism was built on false promises and shaky foundations. The small lie based on a suite of false promises have turned into an avalanche of bigger lies and a cascade of disasters.

Cascading disasters

Neoliberalism is the current variant of capitalism which took root forty years ago. Today, it has established a tight grip across most of the world with scores of governments adhering to the continual implementation of policies based on the privatisation of public assets and

deregulation. Despite neoliberalism's lofty promises backed by slick marketing, privately funded think tanks and wealthy backers, its glowing vision of a prosperous world has flopped. A backwards glance over the past forty years highlights a world strewn with the debris of the neoliberal train wreck. Individuals, communities and nations have felt the devastating impact in the shadow of neoliberalism's self-proclaimed triumphs. During its short history we have experienced the global financial crisis of 2008. It has rapidly generated the offshoring of wealth by the world's richest and most powerful - the Panama Papers and Pandora Papers give us a mere glimpse into systemic tax avoidance. Neoliberalism has corroded the foundations of public health systems and weakened education systems. During its reign, child poverty and homelessness have continued unabated. We have witnessed the rise of the gig economy in which jobs are short-term and precarious, triggering an escalation in work-related anxiety and stress disorders. The impact of loneliness has gripped the population. The age of neoliberalism has spawned a refugee crisis as a consequence of ill-considered conflicts waged around the world. Both self-styled strong men and dangerous clowns have been elevated to the pinnacle of political power during the global pandemic. Meanwhile, it has been business as usual for the fossil fuel industry despite the existential crisis posed by the climate emergency. As inequality continues to grow, we have observed the rise of powerful oligarchs whose wealth rivals that of nations.

Lies, cynicism and apathy

It is no surprise that lies and deceit are considered the key ingredients to political success. Voters have come to expect politicians will make false promises during election campaigns. We know that politicians will exaggerate claims against the opposition and embellish their triumphs and personal qualities simply in order to endear themselves to voters. Lies are also used to conceal mistakes, disguise agendas and cover up corruption. Unfortunately, they take on a much more insidious role when used to create a dense fog that makes it difficult for citizens to orientate themselves as to what is true and what is not true; what constitutes a political fact and a political falsehood. If allowed to go on unchecked, lies can take on a life of their own and inhabit each and every corner of society.

Currently, the billionaire-owned media and the government-controlled media feed the public a constant diet of spectacle and sensationalisation. The rapid-fire form of news we endure on a daily basis is a conduit that circulates disinformation, skewed facts and deception, all of which are aimed at a public who have little time to thoroughly digest the torrent of content. The endless flow of news combines truth, half-truth, speculation,

opinion, bias and falsehoods. As a consequence of the tsunami of news, views, and 'infotainment' topped by political scandals, corruption, and investigations the public becomes all consumed and eventually worn down by the tide of content. It is little wonder that people become cynical towards politics and politicians. Others become apathetic and politically paralysed in the belief that 'nothing can be done' and 'all politicians are corrupt' or 'I can't change anything.' This kind of public despondency and political cynicism should ring alarm bells as it signals a political climate transgressing into a shallow, apathetic and conformist melange. Such a politically inactive public gives a green signal to the political elite that they may further entrench their power by weakening our system of justice, hollowing-out our democratic institutions, repealing civil rights and disenfranchising power from the majority.

Manufacturing consent

The neoliberal ideology lives and breathes via the media. This has allowed it to entrench itself in our schools and universities, spread into our workplaces and take hold of our culture. So thoroughly has it embedded itself over the past few decades that the public generally believe it is the 'only way' and that there is no alternative to economics without a market mechanism.

The pervasive neoliberal lie has compelled us to blindly live in this system without questioning its basis, seeking alternatives and imagining a better future. For decades, we have been groomed to believe that neoliberalism presents the best plan for a prosperous future. Governments have promised us that the market system is the superior approach to fixing every social and political ill. Even the climate disaster can be fixed by the very system that has largely contributed to the current existential crisis. Despite Prime Minister Scott Morrison's environmental plan being viewed as the 'rich worlds weakest link at COP26,' he happily stated publicly that 'we believe climate change will ultimately be solved by 'can do' capitalism.' Such comments highlight the baseless ground upon which the Liberal and National coalition is building Australia's future. What has come about from 'can do' capitalism is a new class of workers - known as the 'precariat' - whose jobs are short term and precarious to say the least. Can do capitalism has delivered stagnant wages for over a decade while Australia's billionaires have continued to cash in and leverage their wealth during the pandemic.

Continuing down the neoliberal path will deepen inequality, exploitation, social decay and unbridled environmental exploitation. The corporate elite who sponsor the political class

are adamant to maintain the status quo, which keeps power centralised in their hands, behind an endless fog of spin and propaganda.

The manufacture of public consent through sophisticated media presents us with a warm feeling that we have a democratic process, we vote for political parties, and everyone has a fair go if you try hard enough. What has been normalised is the ritual of voting, and believing that billionaires have worked hard to get to the top and deserve the extraordinary wealth they hoard. Upon reflection, why do so many Australians vote for political parties they do not believe in? Why is there a continual rise in the informal vote? Why do we accept the false view that the top 1% deserve their incredible wealth at the expense of the rest of society? Why do corporations have access to the major political parties, and receive 'incentives' and 'tax breaks' at the public's expense? Why isn't there a chorus of voices calling for a federal anti-corruption body to oversee politicians?

Challenge one-dimensional thinking

Four decades of neoliberalism have altered the public's perception; something which the media has played a key role in moulding. The result is that the broader public no longer critically question the decisions of political and business leaders. Public cynicism and political apathy have set in, breeding conformity and one-dimensional thinking. This has influenced our politics which shapes our culture. In turn, our culture is swayed by technology which has revolutionised the way in which information is communicated. During the decades of the mass media model, information was controlled via a top-down approach with a small number of billionaires controlling media outlets. Strategically, they have controlled the flow of information to the public by tactfully gathering information and deciding what is 'newsworthy' and what shall be omitted from tomorrow's headlines. Through a number of media outlets, the public's focus is carefully directed. Broad public opinion is manipulated as specific issues are legitimised and others delegitimised, thereby manufacturing public consent that are counter to our best interests.

Over the past decade it has become evident that in exchange for safety from hyped-up security threats, we have given up our privacy and freedoms, all with the tacit support of the billionaire-owned media. However, the media landscape which was so tightly controlled by corporations and the government is rapidly changing. Alternative views are now reaching a wider public. The flow of thought, discussion and new ideas are pressing through to the

wider public via social media and the internet. It is little wonder why governments are moving to tighten the flow of media via social media and the internet.

Reality check

The colossal social, economic and political failures racked up by the major political parties following the neoliberal line have placed us where we are today: a climate emergency, a global pandemic, insecure employment and a dim future with the prospects of war being drummed up by governments and echoed in the headlines. Governments, powerful billionaires, corporations and privately sponsored institutions channel their opinions through a sympathetic billionaire-owned media, who package their views with the aim of maintaining the status quo. The media may not specifically shape our individual views, but it certainly sets the conceptual environment and the public's focus. In effect, the media helps to limit our economic and political choices. By crafting the daily headlines, they have become adept in setting the social and political agenda which ultimately serve corporations increasing their profits and maintaining the current political duopoly.

Unfortunately, those setting the social and political agenda form a very small section of society. Their views do not reflect those of the broader public. Moreover, they are rarely conscious of the responsibility they wield as members of the rich and powerful club. From their lofty heights, they do not fully understand the concerns and the struggles of ordinary people. The depersonalisation of power by the 1% enables them to make decisions that are detrimental to entire communities (eg. mining and deforestation), and societies (eg. through conflict and displacement of nationalities). This depersonalisation of power employs manipulation and obfuscation of truth that feeds the needs of ideology. It legitimates the status quo, it transforms people into consumers, social inequality into statistics, the natural world into a mere resource, and the climate emergency into rubbery targets dressed in greenwash.

In order for us to understand the problem, we need to be aware that the time for contemplation is over. The social and political problem lies in the appearance of a working democracy which has been hollowed out by corporations and sympathetic governments. The façade of democracy has helped to bury the current social and political crisis deep under the layers of belief that we still live in the lucky country. Such a perception has helped to disguise the growing social inequality that has been matched by the rise in wealth of Australia's richest individuals. The fact remains that behind the thin veneer of justice and a

fair go is the fact that hefty corporate profits, obscene executive bonuses and the rising wealth of billionaires is based upon continuing inequality.

To see clearly, we need to cut through the corporate sponsored fog, and break the world of appearances that has been constructed by the billionaire-owned press. We need to appreciate that the social, political and cultural arrangements that we have become accustomed to are not normal. They have been manufactured and passed off as 'the only way' which limits our imagination to demand a better future.

Living in Truth

Both the corporate-owned and the government-controlled media have helped to sculpt a specific view of reality in the minds of the public. Such opinions have become all-encompassing and have transformed our view of the world. The endless tide of spectacle and sensationalisation encourages the public to switch off from the daily scandal and triviality of what passes for Australian politics. However, public apathy does not change nor improve politics but fuels the status quo. Disinterest in changing laws, new legislation, and the curbing of freedoms simply fuels the confidence of the political elite to organise our political world and control the social agenda. This is facilitated by the corporate owned media which protects the 1% behind a veil of distorted facts and strategically omitted issues that from the daily news. In order to turn the tide, we do not need less politics, but more. A renewed interest in politics and engagement in political action is vital given that the better informed people are, and the more politically active people become, the better society we will create.

As individuals, it is vital that we do not support the lie that there is 'no other way.' As we have seen, the current way has brought about the unstable nature of employment creating a new class of the 'precariat.' The current way has created the stagnation of wages. Living costs are on the rise whilst corporate profits continue to rise making the rich all the more richer. In the face of the pandemic, state governments have imposed laws restricting the movement of people. Meanwhile, the federal Liberal and National party coalition has stumbled from scandal into scandal. As we move closer to a federal election, we are reminded again that the major political parties offer us very little. The Morrison-led coalition has stood aside Education Minister Alan Tudge? from the cabinet after a former staffer claimed their extra-marital affair 'was abusive at times.' Despite upholding a form of parliamentary standard, Scott Morrison has extended an invitation for former NSW Premier

Gladys Berejiklian to join the federal Liberal Party whilst being under investigation by the NSW anti-corruption commission (ICAC). The torrent of scandal and sensationalisation continued in the past weeks with the Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce being forced to caution National MP George Christensen after his inflammatory comments during an interview with a far-right US conspiracy theorist. The exchange in Parliament in which ALP leader, Anthony Albanese called Minister Dutton a 'boofhead' overshadowed the Sex Discrimination Commissioner Kate Jenkin's report highlighting a clear lack of standards of conduct with over half of those surveyed experiencing at least one incident of 'bullying, sexual harassment or actual attempted sexual assault in Commonwealth parliamentary workplaces.' It is little wonder that the headlines breed public mistrust in government and taints political discourse, which promotes cynicism, apathy and has the potential to gift fringe groups calling for so-called 'freedom.' We need to be reminded that numerous freedoms have been legislated out of existence without a murmur from those groups recently getting out on the streets. Where were the protests when the Federal government enacted a range of exceptional measures aimed at preventing terrorism, which also curbed our civil liberties? Where were the protests when the right to strike, which is an internationally recognised human right, were severely limited to the point that in practice there is no right to strike in Australia except for 'exceptional circumstances.' Where was the public outcry when the federal government instituted laws that allow hacking into your personal PC, your online accounts and just about any piece of technology and networks you come into contact with?

The current social and political focus hones in on specific issues, many of which do not make the headlines. Spectacle, consumerism and celebrities make the news. Real issues that impact real people run counter to the agenda set by corporate interests and the political class.

While each major political party flings mud across the House of Representatives and the Senate, the fact remains that the current economic and political system has failed to meet its promises of a better future. It has been built on the twin disasters of privatisation and deregulation fuelled by competition and individual gain. The global pandemic has reminded us that individual freedom is important. However, this needs to be balanced by collective responsibility. It has demonstrated that the sale of selling public assets has left a crucial gap in the effective management of social health issues. Furthermore, deregulation has left a

void in which corporate and political accountability have easily disappeared into the shadows.

Our responsibility as individuals is to live in truth. We need to demand accountability from the political class and fellow citizens. We need to build strong communities and strengthen society through cooperation. We need to call out unbridled individualism that comes at the expense of the broader community. We need to appreciate that competition and consumption do not form sustainable building blocks for a future society by merely support the continuing growth and profits of the 1%. As active citizens, we need to reengage in social and political participation at the local, state and federal levels in order to reverse the culture of cynicism, apathy and conformity. Individually and collectively, we need to reinstate our civic freedoms and demand political accountability, rather than slide into a world of consumer comfort. The corporate media simply offers a sandbox view of the world designed to shape public opinion by pumping out propaganda on behalf of its billionaire owners. Political activity means sharing ideas, reaching out to independent media sources and engaging in political dialogue that goes beyond the corporate-owned and government-controlled media. It is time to seek alternatives that actively work to put public interests ahead of corporate interests.

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