

PIBCI - Monthly Perspective

January 2022

Change can happen now

As 2022 emerges, somehow it seems that our bright future is vanishing before us. It is apparent that the new technological age supported by automation aimed at bringing about a more wealth, more leisure time and more personal freedom are rapidly fading. Secure and full-time employment have made way to the gig economy where employment has become precarious, and wages have stagnated. Promises of a more equal and more affluent society have disappeared before our eyes. Billionaires have continued to increase their vast wealth only to be matched by the growing inequality between the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. The collective aspirations of a fairer society have given way selfish individualism and a self-serving oligarchy focussed on further enriching themselves despite the unchecked global pandemic, homelessness and poverty. Hopes of a secure and peaceful world are diminishing as the prospects of conflict become real between the major global powers, whilst attention on the climate emergency takes a backseat in the halls of political power and corporate boardrooms. The neoliberal dream based on freedom of speech, freedom of press, civil rights, democratic institutions and international cooperation have yielded to a world where social relations are bound by an obsolete economic system that promotes competition, consumption and corporatisation. We continue to work long hours, increasingly perform meaningless tasks, no longer have job security nor the prospect of increasing wages whilst accumulating personal debt. People shuffle from job to job trying to pay off a mortgage and meet energy bills whilst billionaires literally make millions whilst they sleep. Governments continue to pursue the privatisation of remaining public assets and deregulation. They finance corporations in the dispensation of public programs despite a leaving a trail of gross inefficiency and incompetence at the expense of the public purse. Regardless, little is said about the fact that such corporations contracted to work for the public will always place the interests of faceless shareholders first. Clearly, change needs to happen now. We simply cannot wait for institutions to transform themselves, nor can we wait for the major political parties to turn the ship around and redress the manifold problems they have helped to create.

Theory and practice

So pervasive is neoliberalism's embrace of nations across the globe that we have lost sight of the disparity between its original goals and what is happening in reality. Neoliberalism based itself on a platform to improve capitalism by increasing economic freedoms through privatisation and deregulation. It was believed that this would better stimulate business to produce and sell products that consumers wanted at attractive prices. It also aimed to encourage competition between corporations, incentivise innovation and increase employment thereby bringing about higher living standards. Politically, the by-product of higher living standards was more political freedoms. However, neoliberalism works through a myopic looking glass in which it views human relations through competition, consumerism and endless consumption. It has redefined citizens as consumers; it has promoted individual interests ahead of collective interests, and it rewards those who profit and punishes those who do not.

Neoliberalism has promoted itself as an avid supporter of democratic rights and freedoms. Yet, this ideology has become so pervasive that it has recalibrated reality for us. Through a national and global network of media outlets owned by corporations, it has successfully advanced the view that 'there are no alternatives'. This has signified that any opposition to the status quo is either utopian, foolish and slighted to fail. With over forty years of neoliberal propaganda permeating each and every nook in society, we have been sleepwalking. Democratic institutions have been hollowed out. Critical thinking and calls for accountability have been sullied. Civic freedoms now exist in the shadow of a growing surveillance apparatus whilst the environmental crisis continues in the echoes of promise of action and distant targets.

As a consequence, we have become oblivious to the way in which the neoliberal ideology has colonised our minds for over forty years and how it has redefined the way in which society operates.

Recalibrating reality

Despite its very short existence, neoliberalism has been incredibly active in redefining our world view. Upon its implementation, it set out to undermine the concepts of cooperation and collaboration which human society has built itself upon over the centuries. Since the 1970's, it has promoted individual gain and personal glory. It has occupied our thoughts through all means of media and advertising guiding us on what and how to consume – rewarding ourselves through aimless binge buying usually on products that what we do not

need in the artificial environment of shopping centres. For decades we have been trained to compete; first, while we are young in sporting events and the like, then in school for higher grades, and later for jobs against all other candidates. The rights and freedoms that we hold dear to our hearts have also been transformed before our very eyes.

The right to become rich and famous has been fetishized, whilst the right to a minimum income, basic housing and personal privacy have diminished in waves of assaults on minimum standards backed by legislative changes. The right to choose between a public or private school or health care provider has been elevated above the need for well-funded and government supported public services which have been paired back and prepared for inevitable privatisation. Freedom to compete and consume have been exalted whilst the freedom to strike and protest have been castigated and severely limited via legislation. The freedom to choose between political alternatives have morphed into the choice between differing versions of market capitalism. Rights and freedoms apply differently to those who have the economic and political means, and those who do not. The notion of rights and freedoms have significantly changed particularly in the past twenty years. Nevertheless, their watering down and changed meaning continue to promote the illusion that we have a choice regardless of our economic and political status.

The balance between independent freedom and collective responsibility has been tipped towards a self-centred view of society in which individual wants are placed above community needs. Neoliberalism defines liberty in terms of freedom to shop, to consume, and to watch others dance, sing, cook and play sport on TV whilst we sit at home feeling safe and secure in the glow of a big screen. Neoliberalism does not want an informed and politically active public critically thinking about real issues. It does not want you from leaving your screen and taking action to resolve issues such as inequality, homelessness, the climate emergency, freedom of the press and so on.

Let's not repeat 2021

The waves of scandals, incompetence, and deception that marked the 2021 Australian political landscape highlighted how low political standards have dropped. Notably, the inefficient 'stroll out' of the vaccination program employing the private sector highlighted significant shortcomings in federal Liberal and National party coalition's ability to tackle a national emergency. The flow of public funds to profitable large corporations via the JobKeeper scheme minus accountability and a claw back measure to reclaim money not

utilised to employ staff during lock-downs. The year was peppered with waves of political scandals ranging from dubious allocation of sporting grants, sexual assault allegations in federal parliament, and the eventual dismissal of a minister from cabinet. The great hope of addressing the climate emergency at COP-26 in Glasgow was undermined by the lack of a enthusiasm, and lack of a progressive position leading up to Scott Morrison's departure to the climate summit. This was equally matched with a promise and a prolonged target to meet net zero emissions by 2050.

Internationally, Australia's reputation took several blows as trials of SAS troops took place highlighting deeply disturbing actions in Afghanistan. This was followed by the sudden withdrawal of western troops from Afghanistan. This was marked by confused and chaotic scenes of withdrawing troops following a long conflict that sapped trillions of dollars from a coalition of nations including our own. The messy \$90 billion French submarine affair further damaged our international standing as Australia opted to bolster the AUKUS alliance. Throughout 2021, our relationship with China sunk to record lows which will continue into the new year.

2022 promises to throw up significant challenges. Already, the US President Joe Biden has locked-in a US\$768 billion defence package with approximately US \$300 being earmarked for 'security initiatives' related to Russia and China. This signals further rising tensions amongst the world's largest military powers. The pandemic will continue to challenge the way we live, and the work and the way governments control their populations. Meanwhile, the social media will remain a contested space as social and political tensions will continue to work their way into the public realm, the privacy of public data will continue to be tested and governments will keep watching. Clearly, 2022 is a year that will bring to the fore ongoing issues and pose new concerns. This year demands vigilance on behalf of the public, and change for the better.

Change is inevitable

How long an economic and political system is permitted to continue depends on the public understanding the negative impact of a system, and how long the public permits that system to continue. For change to occur, we need to go beyond merely criticising the current state of affairs and talking of a better future. We need to practically apply our hopes, wishes and ideas by living our lives beyond the limited confines and structures of domination erected by neoliberal thought. We need to short circuit the existing order by creating, developing, and

participating in alternative social, political and cultural activities that promote social justice, solidarity and equality.

We need to rise above the malaise of political cynicism and apathy and enliven political activity amongst our friends, family and our work colleagues. We need to increase political activity through discourse and free expression. This will build valuable experience in participatory democracy and decision-making at the local level. By supporting and participating in social and political activities such as political clubs, independent media, public meetings and local campaigns to name a few, we can focus on regenerating political culture in our communities. It is important to bring vital social issues to the forefront of people's minds and counter the corporate media's ability to hijack the public's attention through celebrity news, sports and sensationalisation.

The corporate owned media does not want public housing on the public agenda. Nor do they want to raise the disparity and the division between public and private school systems discussed at your next BBQ.

The dominant view in society ensures that alternative views such as the benefits of supporting and nurturing cooperatives and communes into our economy are not discussed.

Guaranteeing change

The major political parties and the billionaire-owned media do not want to raise the issue of the expansion of corporate and state power. Little is published in the mainstream media about the colossal amounts of political donations funnelled into the major political parties' coffers. Regardless, they are vital issues that impact each and every one of us. Hence, it is important that we engage with as many people as possible at the grassroots level and talk about our concerns and ways in which we can counter the status quo. We need to raise our worries about the limitations of the political duopoly that masquerades as democracy. We need to raise awareness of the growing gulf between our nation's billionaires and the rest of us. Most importantly, we need to take action now.

Your efforts multiplied by the efforts of others will help to commence the rollback of corporate power. By raising awareness of key social and political issues, we can demand the relaxation of surveillance laws and call for greater restrictions on environmental devastation.

Your political activity in your local community, your voice in the workplace, and your participation via the vast array of media are some concrete steps in nurturing a social and political culture that supports the need for change.

Anthony B – Website Editor

January 2022

