

PIBCI - Monthly Perspective

February 2022

Courage and Common sense

As we draw nearer to the federal election, it is apparent that courage and common sense are in desperately low supply amongst the political elite. Courage to stand firmly for the wellbeing of the majority of Australians has bowed down to corporate greed. The inability to apply a common sense approach when tackling the pandemic and climate emergency highlights the colossal shortcomings of both the government and large corporations. With only months left before the federal election, it is important to reflect on the performance of the Morrison-led coalition government and remember who exactly has benefitted during the Liberal and National Party's lengthy term in office. It is also vital to consider the performance of the ALP in opposition. Has it demonstrated sufficient backbone from across the aisle, and will it have political courage should it face challenging times ahead?

World of appearances

The relentless dilution of reality by the proponents of neoliberalism have turned all that was solid into a soft and pliable slurry that is moulded in the hands of the corporate-owned media and served up to the public. This corporate-sponsored reality teaches us three things: to glorify consumption, applaud the superrich and to be seduced by spectacle and sensationalisation.

The glorification of consumption was placed into hyper-drive as Covid-19 restrictions were recently cast aside and the public encouraged to go forth and shop until they dropped (literally in the case of the thousands who subsequently contracted the virus) leading up to Christmas. The newly minted NSW Premier, Dominic Perrottet was keen to win public approval following the voluntary resignation of Gladys Berejiklian by presenting himself as an all-round nice guy who wanted more 'freedom' for the people of NSW. Perrottet cast aside health concerns in the face of Delta and the new Omicron variant spreading across NSW. The public were encouraged to get vaccinated and promptly get out to stimulate the economy in time for Christmas. Encouraged by the Morrison-led federal government, other states followed NSW's lead. Most states reduced restrictions citing the rise in vaccination rates and duly opened up. The nation consumed its way through to the New Year almost oblivious of the new variants active in the community. As night follows day, Covid-19 infections began to rise rapidly in NSW, only to be followed by Victoria, South Australia and Queensland. The island state of Tasmania was no longer immune from the spread of Covid as the nation was encouraged to 'let it rip'. The benefits of consumerism and consumption were extolled by politicians

and business leaders who ripped into retail stores, shopping centres, restaurants, cafes and so on. Meanwhile, Covid ripped through the states as numbers increased as never before.

Secondly, applauding the exploits of the superrich continues to be a softening agent in fabric of society. Via the billionaire-owned media, we are conditioned to view the opulent waste and fantastic projects headed by the world's richest oligarchs as mere joyful adventures or flights of fancy by a fun-loving bunch of rich guys. The billions of dollars poured into the race between Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos and Richard Branson to launch space tourism for the rich was presented as some kind of healthy pioneering rivalry. No questions were raised about better spending the billions on fighting Covid and serving humanity. Mark Zuckerberg's relaunch of Facebook as "Meta" and the new virtual platform his company is poised to launch has been presented as a fun virtual world where we could meet work colleagues as 'colourful' avatars. But was any thought given to the ramifications of this blurring of the virtual and real world? The implications of doing our work and our social activities in a virtual world that is ultimately controlled by Zuckerberg are both deeply concerning and disturbing. But hey, the corporate-owned media make it all look like a pile of fun, so it can't be that bad can it? Meanwhile, the glorification of the superrich in Australia was further exalted as the nation's richest person Gina Rinehart was awarded an Australia Day gong for her 'distinguished service to the mining sector...".

As for the third point, spectacle and sensationalisation is constantly employed as a tactic to divert the public's focus from real issues that impact the majority of Australians. As hospitals buckled under the strain of surging Covid-19 numbers in January, mortality rates climbed, and basic food items disappeared from supermarket shelves as logistics workers were furloughed, the corporate-owned media fixated the public's gaze on the Immigration Minister's decision on the Novak Djokovic visa fiasco. Every additional detail and development provided the mainstream media with ample fuel to keep the media circus thronging for day after day and keep the focus off the major issues on the ground impacting the majority of Australians.

The alternate reality that is presented to us on a daily basis is a very different world from the one we live in. This disconnect has manifested itself into an anaemic political culture riddled with cynicism and apathy. The symptoms have expressed themselves through very low levels of trust in our politicians. Faith in the electoral process is in steady decline as Australians lose their appetite to cast a formal vote. As interest in politics takes a backseat, the void is being filled by specific views and the opinions of media personalities who are on the payroll of the corporate-owned media.

Unfortunately, such opinions paper-over the widening gaps in society. Such views omit the impact of

policy decisions on marginalised populations and they fudge the widening cracks in the welfare state. Despite the distraction and diversions, the path for the future remains uncertain. Hence, the recurrent question for all Australians remains fixed on whether the government has a plan for the future.

Is there a plan to make a plan?

Have Australians ever witnessed a time when courage and common sense by our political leaders has been in such short supply? Have we ever been forced to watch a federal government lurch from one disaster to the next without learning lessons along the way? With a federal election only months away, it is timely to review the recent performance of the Morrison-led coalition government.

What immediately becomes apparent is the cascade of promises and the lack in their delivery. Throughout this time, accountability, transparency and common sense have been missing. The Morrison-led coalition's repeated lack of planning has been central to its response to crisis. Prior to the outbreak of Covid-19 in Australia, the federal government had the benefit to observe from our distant island continent the impact of Covid-19 on other nations. Yet, the response was sluggish at best and downright neglectful given the hesitancy to make facial masks mandatory early on. When Covid-19 hit our shores, Australia simply did not have ample stock of PPE. Following waves of Covid-19 highlighted the government's lethargic response to securing vaccines. As a consequence, vulnerable Australians in aged care felt the brunt of the pandemic as elderly Australians and aged care workers were not immunised. Again, the Morrison-led coalition government was well behind the starting line when they agreed to 'let it rip.' With variants of Covid-19 out in the community, the federal government encouraged Australia to 'open up' so that business could get a shot in the arm as Australians went shopping. The short-term sugar fix to open up unprepared has highlighted the weaknesses in the system and exacerbated existing cracks particularly in aged care and our hospitals. Once again, the federal government was caught out without a plan to manage the impact of the pandemic as it surged across the nation.

As numbers of Covid-19 infections hit record levels, it became apparent that the federal government had not considered how to manage high numbers of hospitalisations, the rise in numbers of people sent to ICUs, the massive strain on paramedics resulting in neglect of urgent matters and the toll on hospital staff. Despite business and unions calling for Rapid Antigen Tests (RA tests) to be made available back in 2021, the government again seemed oblivious to the need to test essential workers before attending work. Letting it rip resulted in large numbers of workers contracting Covid, which in turn impacted logistics chains, supplies of food and ultimately produce that did not make it to

supermarket shelves. The obvious questions remain: Was there a plan? Who has been advising the government? Is there a plan to get us through the forecast spike in Covid numbers?

Upon reflection, the Liberal and National party coalition government seem to have buried their heads in the soft and damp sandpit of neoliberalism. The reliance on the private sector to provide public services has repeatedly backfired. The inefficiency and waste displayed during the vaccine roll out is a case in point. As the nation dives into the latest depths of the pandemic, it is well worth looking at who has benefitted since the pandemic began.

Who benefits

Under the stewardship of the Morrison-led coalition government, Australia's forty-seven billionaires doubled their wealth in the past two years. The federal government has opened the gate to fiat currency which now totals \$310 billion in freshly printed notes courtesy of the Reserve Bank of Australia. The Liberal Party itself has accumulated \$16 billion in their election war chest, all primed to be dispensed as sweeteners to the top end of town and undiscerning Australians ahead of the looming federal election. The Morrison-led government has splashed billions of dollars in every direction with the exception of where it's really needed. At least \$40 billion was wasted on large corporations who profited during the pandemic through JobKeeper. More recently, it has signed off on a \$3.5 billion tank deal with the US whilst refusing to provide Australians with free RA tests. Despite other wealthy western nations freely distributing RA tests, the Prime Minister Scott Morrison stated that he will not freely distribute RA tests to the public and "undercut retailers" despite the clear advantages. Meanwhile, the lack of planning has resulted in this government again leaving things to the last minute and desperately sourcing RA tests despite recommendations and warnings of the need for such tests back in 2021. Again, the Morrison-led government has been caught-out sitting idle at the starting block when the smoke from the starting gun has long gone.

The term disaster capitalism has been applied during times when governments and corporations move into a country under the guise of helping through providing aid during a natural disaster, but have in fact actively profited. Looking back on the pandemic so far, it is difficult not to draw similar comparisons where government has exclusively sought the help from the private sector who have managed to bolstered their profits. As Covid-19 infections increase, private hospitals have been called in to assist, which will impact the public purse as they will charge top dollar. Meanwhile, the federal government approved Brookfield's \$4.4 billion takeover of Healthscope, Australia's largest private hospital operator despite the Canadian investment giant using the controversial Cayman

Islands as a tax haven. In effect, this blurs the government's ability to understand how much profit will be made by several hospitals and pathology labs in Australia.

As a consequence of the pandemic and neoliberal policies, the world's largest pharmaceutical companies have raked in massive profits whilst keeping their vaccines shrouded in secret locking off their vaccine technology from nations who cannot afford supplies. Privately owned pathology labs are also rolling in cash as the public is forced to rely on the private sector. It is emerging that neoliberalism has found its place in the cosy heart of this pandemic, and many governments have demonstrated that they are more than comfortable to place profits ahead of public health. In the meantime, Prime Minister Scott Morrison tells us blandly that "this summer will be frustrating for Australians" and "Covid needs to get out of the lives of Australians." Such comments do not go far in giving the nation confidence that the government will shake off its lethargy and come up with a plan that puts the public's health front and centre in its thinking.

The plan for change

Given the opportunity, the major political parties will continue to serve up the neoliberal swill that exclusively relies on private sector support. Hence, it is vital that our collective actions focus upon bringing about the end to the status quo where the major political parties get into government and consistently favour corporate interests ahead of public interests. We need to commence an electoral migration that pivots away from voting in the major political parties who take the public for granted. We need to remind the political elite that governments are elected to serve the public. They are put in power to ensure the public is safe and secure. Governments are the stewards of the public purse. With this in mind, the base expectation is that government will have the courage and common sense to follow professional advice, efficiently and effectively dispense taxpayer funds that place public interests ahead of corporate interests. Continuing to vote in the major political parties will simply prolong the ineffective cycle of market-based solutions to real public concerns.

We need to tackle inequality in power and wealth. As discussed above, Covid-19 has not stopped the nation's richest individuals from doubling their wealth. Under the Morrison-led coalition government, public wealth has transferred to the wealthiest 1% at an incredible rate. Key to addressing inequality is reintroducing a strong public sector focused on addressing public issues such as health, education and housing.

A strong public sector complimented by cooperatives and collectives will put a halt on the economy's domination by the private sector. As things stand, the private sector's unchallenged

supremacy in our economy has minimised competition leading to the growth and control of large corporations. By introducing alternatives such as cooperatives and collectives coupled with a strong public sector, private corporations will need to work harder to provide services to the public. Ultimately, public control of essential services will ensure profits are not placed ahead of public needs.

The nationalisation of essential services, the reintroduction of a strong public service and support through seed funding for alternatives like cooperatives and collectives will ensure we have a truly mixed economy that is better prepared to meet public needs and capable of facing difficult challenges. Moreover, it will ensure that the focus is not on fat profit margins that obstruct real social needs.

In order to provide a solid framework for the public as we head off into an uncertain future, a Universal Basic Income (UBI) will provide a solid pillar for all Australians. A UBI provides a contemporary approach to tackle a pandemic, economic downturn, high unemployment, a conflict or other natural disaster. The UBI provides a basic wage to citizens and will go a long way to remove the stress and stigma that is associated with the everchanging schemes that the current government foists upon people in need.

It is time to tackle the real challenges that face the nation and it is time to dismantle the huge imbalance in power and influence that billionaires and their large corporations exert on the political elite through lobbyists, political donations and the skewed views promoted by the corporate-owned media. We need to put a halt to the 1% tapping our nation's wealth, and ensure it is distributed more fairly amongst the nation and directed towards those areas that need it the most. It is time to politically engage and play your role in strengthening our democracy by placing the public's voice ahead of the corporations.

Anthony B – Website Editor
February 2022

