

PIBCI - Monthly Perspective

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Decade of Disgrace

This month's federal election provides voters with an opportunity to reflect on the course of Australian politics since the LNP coalition took the reins of power back in 2013. It is an opportune time to stretch our collective memory over the past decade to encompass the ALP's performance in its last year in power, and of course its performance as an opposition during the past nine years of LNP rule. Has our nation's vital indicators such as the country's social, cultural and economic health improved over the last decade? Clearly not. A casual glance across our island continent quickly highlights a rash of festering sores that have developed as a result of political infighting, questionable policy decisions, and a growing neglect towards political accountability. As the electorate ponders who to vote for on the 21st May, important questions need to be raised regarding our nation's social, cultural and economic indicators. Will voters permit the major parties to drag us through another disgraceful decade of deepening inequality, disregard for basic standards of accountability, and political management through PR spin and deception? If you are not confident that the LNP coalition or the ALP can improve our lot, then it is time to look beyond the major political parties for a better future based on truth, imagination and accountability.

What is accountability?

The true test of a robust democracy is the ability of even the most vulnerable member of society to confidently hold political and corporate leaders accountable for the actions they take in the public realm, whilst their human rights are protected. Underpinning such a strong democracy is accountability within government, in our key institutions, organisations and amongst powerful individuals. They need to demonstrate respect for constitutional norms and the independence of non-political institutions that serve citizens in a way that is transparent, responsive to public opinion, and where social and economic fairness and freedoms are not impacted by political coercion or domination. Accountability means that each citizen is able to freely demonstrate civic consciousness, exercise political participation, and expect fair and reasonable treatment by the authorities in a balanced and transparent way. Moreover, where there are transgressions, accountability involves decisive actions and strong sanctions that do not tolerate contraventions or hold out political concessions.

As we lurch closer to the federal election, it is important that we gain a better idea of accountability during the long years under the LNP government, and more broadly, what the major political parties have done to improve social, economic and cultural standards for the majority of Australians.

Setting a very low bar

The LNP coalition have been in government since 18 September 2013, when Tony Abbott became Prime Minister following Labor's internal chaos under Rudd and Gillard. On his first day in office, Abbott introduced legislation that swiftly removed the carbon tax (and later the mining tax). He set up a Royal Commission into trade unions and introduced unreasonable amendments to the Fair Work Act. Under Abbott, the LNP implemented Operation Sovereign Borders to 'stop the boats' which resulted in refugees being locked up for years, many of whom still remain in detention centres and Australia being accused of systematic breaches of the UN Convention Against Torture. Abbott's term in office was marked by spending cuts that severely impacted the poor whilst favouring the rich. His assault on trade unions negatively impacted the rights of workers, enabling the exploitative gig economy to spread, thus undermining secure employment. Furthermore, the offensive against refugees continued behind closed doors leaving the public to speculate on the government's moral standing and the financial cost to the taxpayer. Transparency and accountability were not Abbott's strong point as his term in office witnessed burgeoning inequality and the targeting of vulnerable groups.

Following a successful leadership challenge, Malcom Turnbull toppled Abbott as leader. Turnbull was the wealthiest member of parliament before mining magnate, Clive Palmer was elected in 2013. Under Turnbull, \$1 billion was pledged to fund the Great Barrier Reef. Of this total, \$443 million dollars was channelled into the little-known Great Barrier Reef foundation (GBRF) which had no track record of managing sums of this size and at the time, only six full-time staff and an annual revenue of approximately \$10 million. The Australian Conservation Foundation highlighted concerns about how the GBRF could effectively manage conflict of interest as many board members had strong links to the fossil fuel industry. Internal ructions within the Liberal party continued to eat at Turnbull's support.

After the damaging 2016 federal election, Turnbull later admitted to pouring \$1.75 million of his own wealth into the election campaign. During this time, Home Affairs awarded \$423 million in contracts for asylum-seeker security and site services on Manus Island to a company named Paladin. After a non-competitive tender process, a little-known arm of Paladin was registered to a beach shack on Kangaroo Island which had merely \$50,000 in capital. Turnbull's term continued a relatively

conservative approach to running the nation along the well beaten neoliberal path. Pressured by an influential conservative backbench, Turnbull struggled politically until he resigned from parliament.

Scott Morrison picked up the LNP baton in August 2018. Known for his harsh treatment of refugees back in 2013, when he led Operation Sovereign Borders whilst minister for immigration, Morrison led the LNP coalition government from crisis to crisis racking up a long list of disasters which he chose to manage by spin.

A very long list

Since 2018, Australians have had to stomach the Morrison-led coalition government's mishandling of the bushfire recovery, the botched vaccine rollout, the remorseful mess in aged care, the grants scandal, the slipshod Rapid Antigen Test rollout, the fiasco surrounding the submarine purchase, the millions of taxpayer dollars squandered by government through JobKeeper, and the list goes on.

Under Morrison, the woeful handling of the misconduct allegations levelled at ministers has set an all-time low in federal parliament as ministers ignored calls to step aside and ducked and weaved public scrutiny whilst the leader of the government, Scott Morrison kept at arms-length from the issues in an attempt to avoid making decisive decisions on the careers of his ministers. The then Attorney General, Christian Porter was allowed to continue in his position as the nation's chief law maker whilst a serious rape allegation was levelled against him. Porter finally resigned from the front bench in September 2021, after media reports revealed that he was a beneficiary of a blind trust relating to his legal action against the ABC.

The Brittany Higgins matter also highlighted the mismanagement of rape allegations in parliament when the then Defence Industry Minister Linda Reynolds demanded to meet Ms Higgins in the same room where she alleged the attack took place. Despite the shameful handling of the matter, Linda Reynold remained in cabinet and was moved across to take on the position of Minister for Government Services, Minister for the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

More recently, the allegations levelled at Alan Tudge that accuse him of bullying and intimidation again highlights the concerning number of such incidents within the LNP and the way in which such matters as managed. The lack of transparency has again dogged the LNP as a settlement to a former employee of Mr Tudge expected to be more than \$500,000 is to be paid out (via the public purse) under terms and conditions not clear to the public. Furthermore, following hearings into the matter, Tudge advised that he would resign formally as minister as he claimed that "in the interests of his

family and his own well-being and in order to focus on his re-election as the Member for Aston". Despite such assurances, Tudge remains in cabinet as Education and Youth minister though he is officially "on leave".

Following the lack of compliance and transparency around the GBRF grant under Turnbull's leadership, the Morrison-led government has further extended the lack of transparency and accountability across his term in government at an alarming rate.

Sport rorts witnessed approximately \$100 million of taxpayer funds sunk into ineligible projects in marginal seats. The LNP's commuter car park projects revealed huge problems in the \$660 million program in which sixty-four per cent of forty-seven car parks were promised to Melbourne, despite Sydney containing a majority of the nation's most congested roads. Eighty-three per cent of those Melbourne car parks were promised to Liberal-held seats. Furthermore, the Morrison-led coalition government splashed \$150 million into the Female Facilities and Water Safety Stream grants program before guidelines were put in place. Approximately eighty per cent of the funds were promised to build swimming pools in eleven Liberal and National Party-held seats, rather than female change rooms.

Government ministers wield significant power with responsibility which requires a high standard of integrity that form the basis for accountability throughout parliament. Yet, the LNP's lack of ministerial accountability has been clearly evident over their nearly ten years in power. In the face of the rolling disaster in aged care which has suffered 685 deaths in 2020, 282 in 2021 and already 691 in 2022, the federal Minister for Aged Care, Richard Colbeck continues to ignore his accountability as a minister regardless of the deep-seated problems in the system which he presides over. Despite the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety interim report citing 'neglect' in the sector, Colbeck still maintains oversight of aged care as Minister for Senior Australians and Aged Care Services.

Sussan Ley demonstrated an ability to bounce back into the Morrison cabinet after being forced to move on as minister for health following taking twenty-seven flights to and from the Gold Coast at the taxpayer's expense whilst purchasing an \$800,000 apartment on the Gold Coast. Once the negative press died down, Ms Ley's political career was rehabilitated, and she re-joined the LNP cabinet as Minister for the Environment.

The Minister for Employment, Workforce, Skills, Small and Family Business, Stuart Robert has demonstrated an incredible level of immunity from controversy, transparency and accountability. Robert was sacked from Turnbull's front bench in 2016 after it was revealed he owned shares in a trust linked to the mining company of a generous Liberal donor. His political fortunes turned around under Morrison's leadership, during which time he charged taxpayers \$2000 per month for his home internet. This matter did not raise the ire of Scott Morrison. An IT service company, GMT Group which Robert co-founded and owned shares in until 2010 secured government contracts to its offshoot companies approximating \$16.5 million between 2007 and 2010 while Robert was in parliament. Robert claimed to have "ceased involvement" in GMT before the 2010 election. However, investigations into the matter highlighted that Robert had transferred key aspects of another private company, Robert International, to the home address of his parents, Alan and Dorothy Robert, who were aged 74 and 71. According to ASIC documents, the Roberts' home address became the company's "principal place of business" on September 10, 2010, and Dorothy and Alan became directors of the company on the same date. Their home became the registered office for Robert International on October 8, 2010. Stuart Robert apparently neglected to tell his parents of their new role and responsibilities, while the government contracts continued.

Transparency and accountability during the LNP's prolonged term in office has been embarrassingly thin if not non-existent. Much of this is reflected by the LNP's lack of motivation to meet its election promise of implementing a federal anti-corruption watchdog. As prime minister, Scott Morrison abandoned his election promise thereby shelving a vital body that would be designed to secure a strong accountability measure to oversee the political class. One can only speculate what is stopping a sitting government enacting an effective anti-corruption body that is designed to hold federal politicians to the highest standard.

Asleep at the wheel

Following the federal ALP's electoral loss in 2019, it opted to take a small target approach, shrinking from the idea of releasing bold policies and unwilling to take a strong stance on social and economic issues. The ALP has done little to differentiate itself from the LNP in the hope that the current government fails of its own accord. Despite media bias towards the LNP, the Albanese-led ALP has lacked the grit and gravity to bring the LNP coalition government to account. The long list of failures, scandals and sheer incompetence demonstrated by the government has not been matched by the opposition's determination to call each and every indiscretion to account.

In terms of policy direction, the ALP has presented the electorate with a dim shadow of the LNP. It has acquiesced to LNP policy, seeking only minor changes, remained mute on numerous issues and has worked in the shadow of an inept government seemingly in the hope that it will gain office by default.

The duopoly

The decades rule by the major political parties has witnessed a convergence of views that are based on the wholesale inculcation of the neoliberal doctrine. During this time, the collective experience has been stagnant wages, rising homelessness, growing household debt, insecure work and the decline in the quality and availability of services such as education, health and transport. This has been matched by a growing deficit in the accountability of our politicians. Over the past decade, both major political parties have been the wilful recipients of potentially compromising political donations. The lion's share of such donations come from the nation's largest corporations – from mining, infrastructure and defence companies. A further look at such companies reveals that they all rely on government policy decisions. The opacity surrounding policy decisions and the allocation of taxpayer funds is further obscured from public scrutiny by the rise in number of commercial-in-confidence contracts.

A wider look at Australian business reveals that the bulk of banking, health insurance, internet service providers, supermarkets, domestic airlines, newspapers and department stores are owned by a handful of enormous corporations that control more than 80 per cent of the market. Their domination cannot be underestimated, nor can their influence on government.

Sadly, the majority of the mass media form part of the corporate behemoth which are reticent to hold major political parties to account. The corporate owned media and the government-controlled media have actively conditioned the public's reactions to the endless spate of scandals by muting calls for accountability and transparency on behalf of our political elite.

No electoral seat should be a safe seat

During this month's election campaign, the major political parties will present the electorate with a limited field of political options: the LNP coalition or the ALP. Their campaign machines will craft a narrative that promotes the view that only the majors can effectively run the country. Yet, the past decades have demonstrated that the LNP coalition and ALP are wedded to the failing neoliberal doctrine that is unable to deliver meaningful change for the majority of Australians.

The solution to the stale and stagnant status quo is to look beyond the major political parties this election. Voters need to critically think about their decision before entering the election booth with the view that change needs to begin by ousting the major political parties. No electoral seat should be a safe seat. Local members need to work for their communities, and not their careers. Politicians need to put public interests first, and not corporate donors. All politicians need to be accountable to voters. Such accountability comes in the form of dedicating our nation's vast reserves of wealth towards high quality of education and a health system that is second to none. Our nation does not need more tax cuts. It needs more public housing to provide secure and affordable shelter for our homeless.

Accountability to future generations comes from taking immediate and meaningful action on addressing the climate emergency, not elastic targets that are set into the distant future. The mismanagement of the response to bushfires, floods, the pandemic and the slipshod vaccination rollout highlights the need to manage disasters that ensures Australians can rely on all levels of government to support the public. Such accountability can be assured via a Universal Basic Income (UBI) that protects citizens from crisis and disasters. A UBI is a safety net for all citizens during hard times, and can provide the necessary support to all Australians regardless of the situation they find themselves in. Accountability to the first nation's peoples has been sorely missing during the current government. The inability to meaningfully address the successive government policies and practices that have impoverished and disenfranchised generations of Aboriginal people and their culture highlights a deep gap in our society which needs urgent attention.

Solutions to Australia's growing inequality will not come from privatisation and deregulation. Living standards will not improve through short-term tax cuts. Stagnant wages will not change with the rise in the number of billionaires. National security will not be assured by purchasing F35 fighter jets, spending \$3.5 billion on Abrams tanks, and sinking more taxpayer funds into US nuclear submarines after wasting \$5 billion.

Economic improvement will not come from political parties wedded to the neoliberal economics, nor will social and cultural progress come from the dominant neoliberal ideology. The democratic deficit that Australia is experiencing emanates from the severe decline in accountability from our government, from our politicians, large corporations and wealthy individuals. This election, don't just let it continue to happen.

Accountability starts with you

Political accountability starts with you. Your willingness to research, your ability to think critically and your dedication to make change happen are the best tools in your kit to enhance understanding of what truly is at stake amongst your family, friends and community. In order to turn the tide, collectively we need to demand accountability from the political-class and corporate elite. For too long, accountability on behalf of our politicians and corporate leaders has been disregarded to the detriment of the majority of Australians. As citizens we have allowed this to happen guided by a complicit mass media.

Under the stewardship of the major political parties, we have witnessed the wholesale privatisation of public assets, decades of deregulation and the undermining of the labour movement whilst billionaires have flourished and inequality has grown at an alarming rate. Stagnant wages, tax cuts for the wealthy, broken election promises and rubber-stamping corporate power through parliament have formed the backbone of the political status quo for well over a decade. Meanwhile, the lack of transparency on behalf of our political class has been buried under a bunker reinforced with a layers of PR advisors, bureaucrats, and servile media operators. In reality, politicians serving the major parties have limited contact with real people outside of election campaigns. Their image is filtered through the corporate owned media or the government-controlled media, via photo opportunities or staged visits and events. Our political culture has stagnated in the decades-old petri dish of neoliberalism.

Casting a vote requires critical thinking and consideration. Don't waste your vote on the same old major political parties or mining oligarchs posing as an alternative. This election, don't allow the status quo to continue. It is up to you to make change happen and give someone else a go.

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