

PIBCI - Monthly Perspective

June 2022

The value of change

The federal election may be over, but our job as citizens under the new ALP government has just begun. The fact that the ALP has wrested government from the LNP coalition is not a signal that progressive change will sweep through society, and the wrongs of nearly a decade of LNP rule will be righted by the Albanese-led ALP. In many ways, the change of government is analogous to the handing over of the Olympic baton from one runner to another on the same team – team neoliberalism. Today’s ALP and the LNP coalition have been ideologically aligned for decades. They have worked in concert pressing the blunt neoliberal template onto the nation, leaving us with the deep imprints of privatisation, deregulation and the globalisation on our economy, our politics, culture and embedded into the national consciousness that has almost made it a lifestyle.

As the new Albanese-led ALP enjoys its honeymoon period, it appears that ‘steady as she goes’ will be the guiding political motto for government. However, can we afford to maintain the same course as the domestic and international political environment is fast changing? Can our democratic institutions continue to carry the weight of political expedience and ideology over core values and principles? Clearly, the change in government provides some hope, and it is up to us to capitalise on that hope by creating solutions and influencing the political agenda so we may reclaim our future before the status quo re-asserts itself and settles in for another term.

A corporate campaign

The federal election highlighted to us that the standard of political debate continues to take a downward plunge. For the main course, the major political party campaigns served up low-level dross to the electorate only to be followed up with a choice of fear and scare tactics for dessert. Throughout the campaign, the major parties and the billionaire-owned media resorted to the over-simplification of complex issues and entertainment dressed up as the so-called leaders’ debate. The 2022 election campaign further highlighted the symbiotic relationship between the corporate owned media and the political class, with wealth and influence on full display. The regular injection of corporate funding was intravenously fed into the veins of the major political parties. The leader’s debate was

broadcast via Sky News punctuated by advertisements akin to a sporting event. The Australian electorate was flooded by a sea of yellow UAP advertising propped up by the immense wealth of mining magnate Clive Palmer. Furthermore, generous financial backing helped teal candidates topple several Liberal party safe seats. This campaign highlighted that the value of financial support is critical in getting a foot in the door of the democratic process. However, what was largely missing from the campaign was the general lack of focus on political values and principles.

Democracy needs a booster shot

With almost a decade of LNP rule which culminated in a cascade of failures, disasters and ineptitude, we find ourselves picking through the social, political and economic debris that has been left in its wake. However, we cannot expect that the ALP will commence sweeping through the mess and restore order. The ALP itself has been part of problem as both the major political parties are fully subscribed members to the neoliberal club. For over four decades, the political duopoly that have been in government have spurred on waves of privatisation, deregulation and ushered in globalisation across all states and territories. They have injected neoliberal ideas into the economy, wilfully let it penetrate our politics and saturate our culture. What we have gained through the neoliberal agenda has been record corporate profits and soaring executive bonuses, a burgeoning number of billionaires and a disconnected political elite. For the majority of Australians, this has translated into precarious work, weak labour laws, stagnant wages, rising homelessness, and growing inequality.

The major political parties with the support of large corporations have in various forms discarded core democratic values of accountability, social justice, freedom of speech and gender equality. Accountable government has been severely lacking over the past decade following a lengthy list of politically motivated decisions, incompetence, and questionable business dealings. The gaping hole in government accountability was capped-off by the LNP's lack of motivation to implement a federal anti-corruption watch dog.

Liberal democratic nations like ours pride themselves on the values of social justice. Yet, action on social justice has been amiss during the past decade. A close look at the major political party's efforts over the years highlights the unequal distribution of wealth resulting in the growing prosperity amongst the nation's billionaires and corporate leaders. The opportunities afforded to the public have continued to diminish; stable employment has

been replaced by a precarious work environment. As wages have stagnated and support for our nation's most vulnerable dwindles, affordability for life's essentials such as access to health, education and housing continue to take a downward spiral.

Freedom of speech and expression is touted as a fundamental pillar within liberal democracies. Yet, the mass media is held in the tight grip of a handful of billionaires who promote a narrow set of interests. The billionaire-owned media actively regulates the social and political agenda by shaping the daily narrative. News and events are channelled through an ideological filter; some stories are promoted ahead of others, some events are downplayed and others are simply omitted all together. The billionaire-owned press has a vested interest in manipulating the public's understanding of events. As the ALP settles into government, it is very likely that the corporate owned press will commence a campaign of doom and gloom, conspiracy and diligently work to counter any mild reforms that the ALP may attempt to progress. The high concentration of mass media ownership coupled with the demise of investigative journalism have placed a large obstacle in the path of free speech. The deplorable treatment of Julian Assange highlights the hypocrisy promoted by governments, and the democratic values they espouse.

Regardless of the issues underpinning social justice, the major political parties have continued to pay lip service to the issue of gender equality. This was most notable within the LNP, whose reluctance to discuss and take meaningful action on gender equality during their long term in government. For over a decade, the discrepancies in pay and access to opportunities has been allowed to manifest. Again, key pillars that form the basis of our liberal democracy have continued to be left unheard and neglected.

Should the Australian public leave politics to the politicians after the federal election, it is foreseeable that the political status quo will continue to steer good ship Australia into the rocks. The neoliberal map that has guided each Australian government for over four decades has weakened our social and political systems, it has undermined our economic resilience and hollowed out our democratic institutions. There are no solutions unless we all act now, and influence the new government.

The changing global tide

Within days of Anthony Albanese's ascent to the position of prime minister, he was thrust onto the world stage at the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) meeting in Tokyo. He

was quick to assure our Quad partners; India, Japan and the USA that Australia's international trajectory will not divert from the one earlier set by the LNP; that our international policy remains 'steady as she goes.' However, the world has significantly changed since the ALP was in government last in 2013, and the new Albanese-led ALP is entering turbulent international waters. International relations amongst large nations have rapidly deteriorated. Under the previous LNP coalition government, Australia has neglected our largest neighbour, Indonesia. We have overlooked our neighbouring pacific nations, and further soured relations with our largest trading partner China. We have hitched our security with the USA whilst snubbing France, a key political influence in the pacific region. The ALP now find itself in charge as the geopolitical tectonic plates rapidly shift in unpredictable and hazardous directions.

Australia's cosy-up to the USA poses significant diplomatic and security challenges as the global military colossus continues to thrust its military and economic weight across the globe. Partnering with the USA does not come without expectations, obligations and cost.

Since the implosion of the USSR in 1989 followed by the ensuing collapse of the socialist bloc of countries, the US found itself on top of the pile of nations. Militarily and economically, the US resembled a colossus and proclaimed capitalism as the ideological victor, and heralded liberal democracy as the champion political system. Powered by the latest ideology – neoliberalism, history presented the USA with several opportunities. Mutual cooperation amongst states, global peace and disarmament, collective efforts to tackle climate change and so on. However, the US has convinced itself that it is the exceptional state with the role of remaking the world in its own image. As the single superpower standing unchallenged, it has proceeded with an agenda that all nations must adopt the neoliberal template which promotes consumerism, consumption, competition and hyper-individualism. Like the board game Monopoly, nations need to adopt neoliberalism, and those who resist are either nudged, or coerced, via political, economic or militarily means.

Following the end of the Cold War, the USA actively engaged in conflict under the guise of freedom and democracy. Iraq, Yugoslavia, Libya, Syria and Afghanistan have made the headlines through overt US military action. The US has exercised its immense economic power to sanction nations that do not comply with its foreign policy. However, the recent conflict in Ukraine highlights the lengths the US is willing to enter and prolong a proxy war

with a nuclear armed state. Since the deplorable invasion of Ukraine, the US has side-stepped diplomacy, whilst passing record breaking military-funding packages that will effectively prolong conflict and fuel the arms industry to the tune of billions. As Anthony Albanese settles into the prime minister's chair, it is vital that he interprets the unfolding events in Ukraine into an Australian context. The unprecedented measures taken by the US and its western allies against a nuclear power is a clear signal to China the lengths it is willing to pursue in its vision to replicate liberal democracies based on neoliberal foundations across the globe.

Implications for Australia

The relationship between China and the USA continues to plunge to new lows as the declining superpower flexes its immense military muscle as the ascending economic power, China, calibrates its role as a key international power. Under the LNP, Australia's security stance has unequivocally pivoted towards the US as relations with our biggest trading partner have continued to sour. Dropping the French submarines for US attack class submarines was a clear signal to China and our pacific neighbours that Australia is entering a significantly different strategic posture. This has been further bolstered by our membership of AUKUS, and our intent to develop hypersonic missiles. The message from Australia has been loud and clear, we are entering a new geopolitical reality that goes beyond the defence of our borders.

The conflict in Ukraine serves as a clear indicator to Australia that the US has a voracious appetite for conflict. Hitching our security to the US and ramping up diplomatic tensions with China is potentially leading Australia to troubled waters. The benefit of recent history highlights to us the devastating outcomes of previous US military engagements resulting in millions dead, millions displaced, and millions more traumatised from war.

Moving forward

The recent change in federal government does not mark a point in time where our democratic duty comes to an end, and progressive change will automatically commence with the new political party in office. Progressive change rarely emanates from government; it comes from the public actively exercising its political muscle. Exerting constant political pressure on decision makers, holding politicians to account for their actions and demanding change that benefits the community are the immediate objectives if we are to support change.

As the ALP settles into power, the public will need to back positive reforms and steer momentum towards change. There is little doubt that the small section of society that holds great wealth and power will attempt to derail reform however small during the early period of the new government. Lobby groups, large corporations, powerful individuals and the billionaire-owned press will exert great pressure to manipulate the political and cultural agenda in an effort to steer it back to the status quo. However, we are all well aware that the status quo leads to a dead end. Neoliberalism is a doomed ideology which delivers inequality, environmental destruction, social decay and conflict.

Our political values and principles of accountability, social justice, freedom of speech and gender equality need to be reinvigorated. In essence, they are critical ideas. Unfortunately, they have lost their thrust as they have been institutionalised and diluted under decades of neoliberal rule. Our role as citizens is to reinstate such values by pressuring the new government to put such values front and centre of the social and political debate. This needs to be done by pressing for a living dialogue between those who govern and those who are governed. For far too long, the political elite have been disconnected with the lives of the majority of Australians. The link between the public and those in office have been mediated through the billionaire-owned media who have promoted their interests ahead of the community, and regulated the daily narrative.

We need to hold back the tide of neoliberal thought that demands cultural uniformity through rampant consumerism, consumption and competition. When choice, diversity and autonomy are limited within the neoliberal template, we know that democratic values and genuine freedom is on the retreat. Our immediate role is to reclaim our future by taking action today and tomorrow. Democracy happens every day, and your active participation is essential in the struggle to place public interests ahead of corporate interests.

Anthony B – Website Editor

June 2022

