

PIBCI - Monthly Perspective

December 2023

2023: You be the judge

2023: Did we experience a leap forward or more of the same? You be the judge.

As 2023 rapidly draws to a close, we should pause and take stock to reflect on the year that has passed. It is without doubt that we live in interesting times; much of this year has been coloured with a multitude of struggles, upheavals and conflicts that have cut short millions of innocent lives whilst billions of dollars have poured into the bank accounts of world's largest corporations including international arms manufacturers. This year witnessed the vicissitudes of global financial markets and the growing precariousness of employment which has become a permanent feature of contemporary life. What was absent in 2023 has been a decrease in poverty, a fall in corporate profits, the redistribution of wealth and a formal recognition of Australia's indigenous peoples in the constitution. The year did not observe leaders of the richest western nations press for negotiation and diplomacy to bring about peace in some of the bloodiest conflicts this decade. In fact, 2023 witnessed humanity degenerate on multiple fronts. The year watched levels of propaganda rise to soaring heights in an effort to fool the public into believing that war is peace, and that neoliberalism is the standard bearer of prosperity and stability. Unfortunately, 2023 followed a predictable pattern that conditioned the public to live a dual reality whilst effectively distracting the public from finding truth. The thin veneer of the neoliberal dreamworld struggled to cover up the reality of growing corporate power, escalating international tensions and the rising mediation of information and surveillance of the public by governments and large corporations.

Was 2023 been a year of peace and progress? You be the judge.

Corporate takeover

The grim thought of a world ruled by a handful of oligarchs via a small handful of corporations makes for a good storyline of a dystopian Hollywood block buster. However, 2023 continued to enshrine this nightmare reality. Through the growth in the number of billionaires, the scaffold of corporations owned by a couple of ultra-rich oligarchs further reinforced the reality of this nightmare.

This year saw large corporations continue to infiltrate governments and manipulate public policy thereby enabling corporations of all shapes and sizes to minimise paying tax and avoid contributing to society. Large corporations have been effective in watering down legislation thereby making it easier to exploit the natural environment. Through the funding of political parties and lobbying politicians, corporations have been behind deregulation making it easier to exploit workers.

2023 highlighted how the neoliberal system facilitates corporations by aiding and abetting corporate leaders constant communication with governments, world leaders and global institutions. Through their incredible wealth and corporate muscle, oligarchs are able to manipulate governments and democracies. They are able to set the social and political agenda, frame government policy and set the next trend through the power of the corporate media.

Clearly, the power and influence of the 1% did not diminish in 2023. On the contrary, the 1% have tightened their grip by controlling more, and enriching themselves at the cost of the rest of the 99%. Aside from the most notable global oligarchs such as Jeff Besos, Elon Musk and Bill Gates, the ultra-rich generally exist in secrecy. They are shrouded by layers of security and privacy. They live behind the high walls of exclusive estates, and their wealth is spread across a range of businesses, investments and off shore companies that make it near impossible to assess their net worth. The ultra-rich operate in a shadow world that exists beyond the reach of governments, outside the parameters of democratic politics and in a universe where ethics and social responsibility do not see the light of day. This corporate shadow world continues to spread its tentacles across broader society feeding on a politically weak society by promoting fear in an environment where employment is precarious, the financial system is unstable and public services continue to be centralised, leading to a handful of large corporations.

Unfortunately, the rising number of billionaires, the centralisation of essential public services and government's heavy reliance on the corporate sector highlight the symptoms of a disease that has been left to fester in 2023.

Globalisation gone bad

2023 has been marked by a grim uptick in conflicts across the globe and the continued offshoring of jobs. Both issues have instilled fear and insecurity into the public's consciousness during 2023. While the death toll of each raging conflict rises on a daily basis, so have the profits of international arms companies. Such conflicts have also opened the gates to unstable international financial markets, rising energy prices and the tightening grip of governments over its population. The precarious nature of jobs feeds into financial insecurity, stress and anxiety as governments no longer hold a vision of a brighter future, but rather call its citizens to brace themselves for turbulent times ahead.

War is peace

Both the conflict in Ukraine and the Palestinian - Israeli crisis highlight that the world is in a state of transition. The global order is shifting from a unipolar world once led by the omnipotent United States, to a multipolar world where other centres of power such as China and Russia (to a lesser extent) are on the ascent as the United States is steadily declining. Western hesitancy to appreciate this reality has manifested itself through its reluctance to engage in negotiations and diplomacy to solve pressing international issues. Against all reason, governments of western nations no longer negotiate for peace, but have opted to force 'peace' by increased funding for belligerents, training foreign troops for battle and increasing the supply of weapons. The lessons from recent military disasters left in Iraq and Afghanistan seem to have been forgotten by western nations in the fervour to hand over weapons and military support to fight the USA's newest enemy.

The recent tussle at the United Nations over calls for a cease fire in Gaza highlights how the USA and many western governments continue to apply different standards to different nations. As innocent Palestinian civilians, a large proportion of which are children suffer the brunt of the conflict in Gaza, the world's largest superpower (the USA) upped its annual military funding to Israel, and opted to vote against a ceasefire despite the majority of the UN general assembly voting for a ceasefire.

Globalisation, corporatisation and exploitation

Globalisation and corporatisation are in a period of transition as the complex world of international relations is in a state of flux. Conflict, climate disasters, pandemics and global financial markets all feed into the widespread instability that we are currently experiencing. The reluctance to cooperate and seek sustainable peace further destabilises the global

system. Unfortunately, peace in neoliberal societies such as Australia is sustained by a state of violence and exploitation. This comes in the guise of war in other nations where resources are siphoned off by large corporations and sold to rich western nations. It also comes in the form of centuries of exploitation of the native inhabitants. Furthermore, the neoliberal approach is based on the exploitation of local and overseas work forces which furthers the precarious nature of work. The undermining of unions assists in the erosion of workers' wages and safety while adding to large corporate profits at the expense of local communities.

Massaging information

This year continued to witness large corporations tighten their grip on the means of communication and the distribution of information. The corporate capture of internet platforms has ensured that news, views and opinions are mediated through fine corporate filters before emerging on the screens of public devices. The corporate owned media and the government-controlled media have worked in tandem to cocoon the public in a fine web of lies, deceit and propaganda aimed at creating an alternative reality that masks the truth.

The conflict in Ukraine and the Palestinian - Israeli crisis have clearly highlighted how the mainstream media has shut down opposing views, perpetuated a cartoon version of reality and entirely disregarded recent history and complexities that have led up to the eruption of both conflicts. The mainstream media continues to present the public with the myth that both conflicts started following an invasion in February 2022, and a terror attack in October 2023 respectively. Both conflicts have been depicted as sudden and irrational events. Meanwhile, the billionaire owned media and government-controlled media flood the airwaves with a lopsided view on issues and screen out matters of equal or higher importance. The minimal media coverage and lack of debate over Australia's \$386 billion dollar purchase of nuclear attack submarines, and the stationing of US B52 nuclear bombers was papered over by the usual mantra about security concerns over China, our largest trading partner who does not see eye-to-eye with United States foreign policy.

The manipulation of reality by the elite political and corporate class further undermines the public's ability to apply independent thinking. The skewing of views and the massaging of information makes war a more palpable option for the public when other nations are presented as irrational actors hell bent on destroying democracies. Shovelling money and material into a conflict a world away is not going to bring peace and stability in Eastern

Europe. Hesitating to call for a cease fire will not stop the shelling of civilians in Gaza. Sending naval ships across to other regions of the world in contested waters is not a formula to deescalate tensions with China. Who is actually doing the thinking to bring about peace and cooperation in 2023?

Drowning in conspiracy

It is unequivocal that conspiracy theories have hit an all-time high in 2023. How many of your friends, family and colleagues have fallen prey to the copious number of conspiracy theories that flood the internet, social media and make their way into day-to-day conversation?

Given that we live in an attention economy, where the ability to capture the public's attention has been monetised, it is little wonder that the quality of 'facts' has diminished, and news has been swapped out for "infotainment." Flashy headlines and attention grabbing thumbnails are used to reel in people onto a slippery slope where advertising takes over. This new reality has resulted in the increase in the quantity and not the quality of news. This has opened up a dark and damp environment where conspiracy theories thrive.

In a society that is time poor and has a short attention span, conspiracy theories have made 'fact gathering' quick, easy and interesting. By adding a couple drops of truth, huge doses of emotion and a half plausible story, the conspiracy theory industry has thrived on winding up the public, pointing fingers at certain individuals for systemic problems and singled out minority groups within the population. Everything from climate disasters to the longevity of wealthy celebrities can be explained away by a conspiracy theory. Unfortunately, conspiracy theories act as a stop gap to critical thinking. They provide simple answers to complex issues. They are also a very effective tool in the hands of powerful interest groups in society who do not want the public to get to the truth of a matter. Conspiracy theories act as a tool of distraction, leading the public down a rabbit warren that keeps people off the right track leading to the truth.

We do not need elaborate (and not so elaborate) conspiracy theories to tell us that the ills of the world can be traced back to lizard people controlling a world government. Nor do we need stories that rationalise all the ills of the vaccine roll out to a particular individual in the US administration. Nor do we need more stories about the WEF planning to wean the public off meat and onto eating insects. Conspiracies are geared to catch your attention, play on

emotion, and mix fragments of fact to give a veneer of truth to ridiculous stories. However, they are successful in avoiding a critical analysis of events. They eschew from root cause analysis preferring to focus on individuals and /or target minority groups in society. They will not focus on the underlying system that permits all of the ills to perpetuate. Neoliberalism is the system that currently generates the bulk of society's problems. It also is the vehicle that keeps the rich and wealthy in power. This is why the conspiracy theory industry is supported by many who form the political and corporate elite, as it is an effective means of keeping the public's eye off the real issues.

Learnings

2023 has been another year of triumph. This triumph is not one for the majority of citizens, not for democracy, nor has it been a triumph for common sense. This year has been another triumph for the neoliberal order. 2023 has been another year where the majority of Australians have once again tolerated the status quo: more corporate greed, further exploitation of the natural environment and advanced methods of the exploitation of workers and people across the nation and across the globe. This year is another one where oligarchs have extracted more wealth from the public purse and corporate leaders have received fat bonuses after decimating their work force. The major banks have made billions in profit, and the Australian taxpayer has been milked hundreds of billions of dollars which have been transferred directly to international arms manufacturers.

This year has also observed internet platforms being tightly controlled by large corporations. Freedom of speech has been erased by corporates censor voices that speak out against the dominant narrative. The corporate owned media coupled with the government-controlled media have pumped out a version of reality that does not reflect the one on the ground, making it easy for the public to swallow propaganda instead of seeking out vital facts. It is clear that 2023 has threatened the act of questioning and critical thinking with extinction. In its place, conspiracy theories have run rampant this year working their way across an array of media platforms. The upshot is that the public is being duped into thinking that a range of ills in society can be linked to a couple individuals, and foreign countries hell bent on destroying our home-grown democracy. Meanwhile, the real problem resides here at home in the form of an ideology that promotes inequality, feeds on public assets, exploits workers, promotes war and one that is undermining our future. Unfortunately, this system is supported by a local network of oligarchs who greatly benefit from the status quo.

With living costs increasing, financial markets treading unstable waters and international conflicts being managed by the majority of western politicians who believe peace can be whipped-up through unsophisticated rhetoric and increasing arms supplies, now is time to demand significant change before the neoliberal project drives humanity over into the abyss.

Our task for 2024 is to learn from the wins and losses from 2023. We must think beyond the neoliberal sandpit and ensure the exchange and distribution of information remains in the hands of the commons, free from corporate surveillance and sponsorship. Furthermore, it is vital that the public is not alienated from politics. With strong international headwinds on the horizon, we need to build local alliances, strengthen community actions and promote peace and cooperation ahead of profit and individual gain. If we do not make the necessary social, economic or political changes now, we are likely to become next year's neoliberal roadkill.

Make change happen by getting active and joining PIBCI today.

Anthony B

Website Editor
December 2023

