

PIBCI - Monthly Perspective

Spring 2024 Edition

The fear agenda

Fear keeps us off balance, compliant and docile. But, how real are the fears we face today?

Our world is woven from the fabric of perception where the borders of reality and illusion often cross over into one another. This 'grey zone' that stands between reality and illusion is a hotly contested piece of real estate that powerful interests seek to colonise and control. The key strategy used by those with power and wealth to inhabit the grey zone is fear. Via the billionaire owned media and the government-controlled media, fear is used to illicit emotional responses. Such uncritical emotive responses are intended to deprive the public of the ability to reason and rationalise issues, thereby facilitating individual and collective manipulation. This is why the mainstream media pummels the public with a broad array of news and stories laced with fear. Military conflicts, terror alerts, radical political movements, violent protesters, environmental catastrophes, pandemics, job insecurity, energy shortages, gang violence and an uncertain future are all used as triggers to keep the public fearful, compliant and docile. Yet, why does the public continually fall for the fear agenda? How can we tear down the false narrative?

Fear factory

Fear is a very powerful human emotion which can keep us safe and out of harm's way. It can also be debilitating by stifling clear thinking and measured action. Hence, is important to understand that those in positions of power have been employing fear as a tool to manipulate society. As humanity progressed through the industrial revolution, we have collectively moved beyond fearing the elements, starvation and the vagaries of widespread death and disease. As these fears dissipated over time, new fears have promptly replaced old ones. However, the majority of fears that we face today have either been created in our own minds or have been manufactured by the small section of society that own the means of production, distribution, communication and exchange.

For millennia, those in positions of power have recognised that social reality is woven in the fabric of perception in which reality is blurred with illusion. As such, fear has been employed by politicians, governments and dictators to maintain control over society. Today, the use of fear has become a refined art, strategically employed by political parties and corporations via the megaphone of the mainstream media. The political elite exploit fear by dialing up the terror alert, emphasizing the malevolent acts of 'other state actors' and repeating headlines that urge the public to prepare for conflict.

Fear is not the exclusive domain of law and politics. The corporate sector is adept in applying a broad spectrum of fear mongering tactics. This extends from fear inducing marketing techniques persuading the public to buy 'essential' products and services through to exploiting workers' anxieties such as losing jobs and financial instability. So pervasive are

the tactics used by corporations that the public are led at every turn to believe that a crisis awaits at every corner. Both individually and collectively we are kept in a perpetual state of anxiety, cowed into being compliant and docile consumers.

The Fear Agenda

As the smell of burning plastic and capsicum spray have dissipated from the city of Melbourne following the three-day international arms bazaar, we are reminded how powerful the mainstream media is in setting the social and political agenda by nurturing a culture of fear. Well in advance of the three-day arms bazaar, the mainstream media confidently predicted violent protests. The mainstream media strategically dialled up such concerns, which ultimately helped to justify the initial \$15 million (now \$30 million) being channelled to policing the event. As the mainstream media honed in on the spectacle of the protests, the real show was largely omitted from public debate. Little attention was dedicated to joining the dots between the macabre collection of arms dealers being hosted in Melbourne and the fifty-five conflicts that are currently being waged across the globe. Furthermore, the mainstream media brushed aside all questions related to Melbourne hosting an arms bazaar during an active genocide.

A cursory glance over the mainstream media's leading headlines reveals a plethora of fear evoking stories that constitutes today's fear agenda. Likened to a vice, the corporate owned media on one side and the government-controlled media on the other work in unison to squeeze public perception into shape. By concocting new fears such as a looming gas shortage and violent pro-Palestinian student protesters with old chestnuts such as an impending conflict with Chinese, the Australian public is frightened and distracted into watching the fear agenda unfold whilst missing the real issues.

Old chestnuts

For years, our major political parties have dutifully followed the US government's cue by resuscitating the 'yellow peril'. The corporate owned media and government-controlled media have been working overtime priming Australians for conflict with our largest trading partner: China. The fear of the 'yellow peril version 2.0' has been rebooted for the contemporary audience to watch with bated breath.

Another Cold War chestnut has resurfaced in the form of 'the Russians are coming'. After two years of fighting its smaller neighbour, the colossal Russian nation is currently fending off a deep incursion its own territory which undermines paranoid western fantasies of a Russian invasion of Europe. Despite this, the mainstream media continues to parrot U.S. talking points espousing the support of 'democracy' in Ukraine, a nation that banned opposition political parties and the use of foreign languages long before the conflict began in February 2022. The federal ALP government has already pledged another \$100 million to this conflict while one in four Australians receiving government support have cut back buying meat, fresh vegetables and fruit. This begs the question 'who's interests are being prioritised?'

Genocide: please look the other way

Despite the Israeli's government's best efforts to control the narrative, the grim plight of the Palestinian people has not gone unnoticed on our shores. As the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) continues to level schools and hospitals in Gaza and expand its aggression in the West Bank and into Lebanon, public support for Palestinian citizens has persisted in the form of students defiantly pitching tents across university campuses in solidarity with the Palestinian people. Meanwhile, in his August announcement Prime Minister Albanese found it necessary to upgrade the terror threat from "possible" to "probable". This decision to ratchet up public fear was based on security officials warning of an increased risk of violence "across all ideological spectrums". Yet, the timing of the announcement may be interpreted as a ploy to neutralise rising public opposition to the genocide in Palestine by goading the public into perceiving protesting students and members of the public as misguided pacifists lacking patriotism, and likely to be susceptible to foreign agents seeking to destabilise national cohesion. This is also an attempt to temper the federal government's decision to have Australia abstain from a UN vote to call for a ceasefire in Gaza based on issues around the resolution's wording – so its status quo, and the genocide goes on whilst the vast majority of the world voted yes to stop the slaughter of civilians.

Radical militant unions or unions doing their job?

The attack on the union movement has also featured heavily in the fear agenda. Following allegations of corruption that are yet to be substantiated, the corporate owned media has lost no time in releasing its attack dogs on the Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union (CFMEU). The government-controlled media has marched in lockstep with the corporate owned media opening up a broad-side attack on the credibility of the CFMEU and by implication on its members. The trial by media tactic has exposed the federal ALP government as a weak-kneed rabble buckling to the demands of powerful corporations who own the mainstream media. Without charges being laid nor an official investigation, the federal government has moved to place the entire CFMEU into administration. This action has no precedent in Australian history. The string of official inquiries and Royal Commissions into the Misconduct in the Banking, Superannuation and Financial Services Industry, Robodebt scheme, Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse all highlighted systemic corruption, fraud and/or sexual abuse. Yet, not a single bank, church or government department were placed into administration following damaging findings. Nor was a single banker or politician found guilty despite the damning findings. Nevertheless, the federal ALP government has acted on mere allegations and placed the CFMEU, its separate branches and the Construction and Building Union's Superannuation fund (CBUS super fund) into administration. The implications of this decision are highly disturbing and significant to all citizens. As such, the government has demonstrated that it will use its powers to shut down organisations and individuals based on spurious allegations and nothing more. Such actions highlights how thin our democracy has become over the past decade, and the weak state of citizen rights in Australia.

Scarcity in the land of abundance

Despite Australia being blessed with copious natural resources, the absence of natural land borders and being located a hemisphere away from the vagaries of warring neighbours, the

public are being groomed to expect scarcity and insecurity to hit our shores. The politics of scarcity is being promulgated by fear mongers in the legacy and digital media who rehash models, projections and warnings that Australians will need to brace themselves for tougher times. Anxiety provoking scenarios adorn the mainstream media's headlines extending from gas shortages, global financial instability through to war in the pacific and the collapse of international peace. Despite the lack of credibility behind the stories, the public are being coached into expecting the worst, and primed to settle for the current state of declining public services.

A case in point is the fear narrative's growing warnings of gas shortages in spite of Australia exporting 82% of our gas. Such warnings fly in the face of the nation's billionaires plundering off shore gas fields and selling the precious resource overseas, royalty free. To add insult to injury, the Western Australian government have noted that the plunderers are not meeting the requirement to provide the state with 15% of the on-shore gas that is being extracted. Meanwhile, the eastern states do not have such minimal requirements. As a consequence, the voracious cabal of resource oligarchs are playing the politics of scarcity by generating the scenario that gas is fast running out in the eastern states and the public will need to bare the rising costs of gas or foot the hefty bill by transitioning to electrical appliances. In effect, Australians are being forced off gas so that bloated resource corporations can sell our gas to the lucrative overseas market. Clearly, the privatisation of the resource market has failed the public again, and governments are too timid to rectify the situation by prioritising Australian resources for the Australian public. The idiocy of privatisation has artificially manufactured resource scarcity in a nation with vast energy resources.

Manufacturing collective anxiety (impact on Society)

By nurturing and prolonging a culture of fear, governments, major political parties and corporations have been effective in disempowering the public both at the level of the individual and collectively. As the wealthy and influential one percent of society use the mainstream media as a megaphone to amplify the fear agenda, the public are psychologically robbed of their cognitive and rational faculties. Emotional responses are easily manipulated as the mainstream media and digital media platforms help to conflate issues of their choosing. Yet, the perpetual state of fear does not come without cost. The levels of anxiety and stress related illnesses in the community continues to rise spurred on by the gig economy, the fear of losing employment and financial insecurity. The mainstream media serves as an echo chamber of doom and gloom whilst social media is a hotbed of hate, racism and violence. This environment places all Australians in danger of mental stress.

Symptoms: Social Anxiety

By instilling fear into the public's psyche, levels of stress and anxiety are artificially kept high and constant. Consequently, people become weary of neighbours, distrustful of new people in the community and are more likely to withdraw into loneliness. The inundation of political and social problems confuses the public into thinking that "it's all too much to deal with" or "that's just how it is, and I can't do anything about it".

While the major political parties do their bit to stoke fear in the public and amplify false narratives, the average punter increasingly has become distrustful of politicians and politics in general. Political apathy is a very dangerous development in a society where facts and rational debate are being dismissed as 'fake news'. Reasoning is being turned upside-down, and reality is being recast to suit the needs and wants of the beholder. Decades of disenfranchising the public from politics has given birth to a form of anti-politics, which is evidenced in the United States and UK where fake news and conspiracy theories dominate the social, political and cultural debate and mob violence and political assassinations coexist with their crumbling democracies.

Conspiracy theories

The escalation of the fear agenda partnered with advances in communication and information technology has super-charged the growth of conspiracy theories. However, the burgeoning spread of conspiracy theories cannot be attributed to information communication technology alone. For decades, the neoliberal ideology has been decoupling politics and economics from citizens. That is to say, for over four decades a process of depoliticisation has been taking place in which citizens have lost agency. Citizens have devolved into consumers whilst being goaded out of the realm of politics. The rise of corporate power has witnessed a shift in parliamentary politics where political parties act to appease the needs of corporations instead of the public they are meant to serve. The lack of control felt by many, coupled with politicians deficient in credibility only adds to the suspicion that those in power have an alternative agenda. Unfortunately, small groups and individuals tap into people's fears and co-opt the truth thereby taking advantage of crises for their own ends. As a consequence, conspiracy culture has burgeoned. This has helped to undermine truth and reality. Such theories like to draw links between random events, and accidental patterns to support their view of reality. Armed with their superior perspective on events, such theories do nothing to improve the situation. They do not contribute to the ameliorate the problems but paralyse followers into a false sense of security weaved in mystical insight and useless commentary on unfolding events. Conspiracy theories merely help the status quo by fanning distrust, nurturing conflict and taking no action to help the situation or promote meaningful change for the public. In essence, the rise in conspiracy theories and their followers signals that reasonable and healthy political instinct in the community is on the decline.

The real agenda

Through the means of distraction or deception, the corporate owned media and the government-controlled media aims to keep the public's eyes off the ball. Sensational news stories, celebrities and sport help to keep our attention focussed away from the real agenda. Where this does not work, the fear agenda doubles down to keep us afraid of violent protesters, the waving of banned flags, energy shortages, conflict with China, the tobacco wars, or teenage violence.

By exposing the fear agenda that constitutes a large portion of the dominant narrative, we can identify the difference between manufactured fears that serve to keep the public compliant and docile, and those issues that warrant the public's immediate attention.

Privatisation

A clear view of the social, political, economic and cultural damage that privatisation has inflicted on our nation would illicit the horror of any onlooker. For decades, the slow-motion train wreck has been hidden from public view by those who continue to profit from the rolling neoliberal crisis. The billionaire owned media and the government-controlled media continue to omit broadcasting the decades of devastation resulting from successive governments imposing the privatisation revolution.

The baseless claims that the private sector run organisations more efficiently than the public service have all but collapsed around us as essential human services have buckled and broken under neoliberal policies pressing for privatisation. Decades of privatisation have witnessed governments abandon governance by selling public assets to corporations. The stewardship of essential public services has largely been paced into an abstraction called 'the market'. Today, it is evident that market efficiencies have not materialised. Profits have been channelled to shareholders and corporate executive bonuses, the quality of services have rapidly declined and the public have been left with no more than higher charges for broken systems and dysfunctional services.

Deregulation

The mainstream media has worked overtime to redirect the public's gaze away from the damage and destruction caused by decades of deregulation. The deregulation of the financial sector precipitated the near collapse of the world's economy as the global financial crisis (GFC) hit in 2008. With the GFC, public assets were sold and large corporations espousing the virtues of a free market and minimal or no state intervention quickly turned to the state for handouts that have cost the public innumerable financial pain and suffering. With deregulation, environmental safeguards have been decimated along with labour standards. In Australia, deregulation coupled with anti-labour laws have made it difficult for unions to effectively fight for workers' right and safeguards. Meanwhile, deregulation has nurtured the growth of the number of billionaires. It has also released them from a variety of restraints and taxes, thereby allowing the one percent to capture more wealth from society.

Globalisation

The dominant narrative has provided a sketchy explanation of globalisation. At best, it has sensationalised obscure elements of globalisation whilst avoiding the alarming impact of globalisation on nations and local communities across the planet. The form of globalisation that we have been subject to has been built on the scaffolding of supranational institutions such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the G7 to name a few. Such global institutions view the world through a narrow economic looking glass that override the sovereignty of nations in the quest to lock-in free trade deals that invariably benefit large international corporations. Through the means of so-called free trade agreements and military coups, globalisation has opened up every corner of the planet to aggressive looting and the exploitation of human and natural resources. The monetary profits extracted from people and the environment have invariably worked their way up to the world's richest human beings. Meanwhile, waste, devastation, pollution and

death become matters for local communities, the flora and fauna to deal with for generations to come. For those nations rejecting the neoliberal template of globalism, financial sanctions and military intervention awaits.

Militarism

The disturbing growth of militarism across western democracies is regularly omitted from public discourse. Little is said in the mainstream media about the growing military expenditure western democracies dedicate to arms production and arms procurement. Moreover, the growing profits of international arms companies is kept out of the mainstream press. The public would be horrified to know that core western nations currently make-up 75% of the world's arms expenditure. Surely the public would be appalled to learn that many western democracies continue to fund a genocide twelve months into the conflict being waged against the Palestinian people.

The swing towards militarism can be explained in the context of the gradual decline of the world's leading neoliberal nation, the USA. Following the USA's failure to maintain its supremacy in production, it turned to maintain its international authority through financial dominance. Through the dominance of the US dollar, the USA has been able to establish international trading organisations and beneficial trading arrangements which helped to tip global finance in its favour. However, with the US economy in decline, and nation after nation turning their backs on the US dollar, the US has pivoted to maintain global dominance through its military power.

The USA's global network of over 800 foreign bases, numerous military alliances and subservient partners enables the US to exercise its military dominance to compensate for its economic and financial decline. As the USA struggles to maintain its technological edge, it has increased its aggressive posture via economic sanctions. Where this has failed, it has eagerly flexed its military muscle, regularly calling upon its western allies to support global policing and enforcement of the neoliberal order.

With multiple conflicts raging across the planet, the Australian government has hitched itself to the US by joining AUKUS. Following the previous LNP government's eagerness to sign up Australia to the AUKUS pact, the current ALP has dutifully followed suit by opening the doors of Australia's Army, Navy, Airforce and space technology to foreign powers. Our defence and security arrangements are being enmeshed with foreign partners who have an active history of war, plunder and colonialisation. Australia's partners are also amongst the major supporters and arms suppliers to Israel, which is in its twelfth month of an active genocide in Gaza and spreading conflict into the West Bank and Lebanon.

Despite Australia's geographic location in the Southern Hemisphere, our copious natural resources and highly educated population, the federal government has saw it fit to enter a military alliance with partners who are actively involved in adding to the 55 conflicts that are currently raging across the globe. Shouldn't Australia be more active in promoting peace rather than joining warring nations and hosting arms expos?

Corporatisation

The fact that large corporations have successfully infiltrated the major political parties and wield considerable influence over government should strike fear into the minds of all Australians. The corporate takeover of our democracy and the weakening of key institutions should be a top order concern for the nation's political leaders. However, this troubling topic will never make the headlines. With large corporations calling the shots in Australian politics, the topic of corporatisation will never see the light of day as they dictate the dominant narrative. Through the legacy press and the digital media, the wealthiest one percent of society paint a picture that corporations are a natural part of our society's landscape. Through the steady stream of political donations bolstered by an army of corporate lobbyists and advisors that include a long line of former ministers and prime ministers, corporations have effectively tapped into the development of public policy. Signs of the corporate takeover of government have been demonstrated by decades of political inaction, time consuming reviews, lengthy reports and watered-down policy that simply undermine public interests and strengthen corporate interests. Through privatisation and deregulation, Australia has been transformed into a nation of toll booths for corporations. Government has abandoned its job of governing. It has sold public services to the corporate sector. What public assets remain have been left floundering, creating the pretext to sell floundering public services to the corporate sector to run them more efficiently. This has resulted in the creation of an apartheid system in education and the divide in public and private health system. A select few corporations have formed, cornering the market and extracting top dollar from the public. Competition has become a meaningless word in a country where duopolies exist and artificial markets have been created. Today, a duopoly of corporations control the production, distribution and exchange of goods and services across a range of industries and sectors.

The underlying danger of corporatisation is that it runs contrary to democracy. Cooperation, community and human creativity are the antithesis to corporate culture that promotes individualism, competition and consumption. The corporate takeover of society has resulted in unimaginable levels of wealth that are being hoarded by a small cabal of oligarchs who's names most Australians do not know. By hiding in the shadows and behind highly secured walls, the ultrarich continue to accumulate dizzying levels of wealth at the expense of the rest of society. Where corporatisation will take Australian society next is real cause for great concern.

Authoritarianism

The daily warning signs that our democratic institutions are being undermined should be cause for consternation and action. Coupled with the rise in corporate power, the public should be fearing for the worst whilst planning to reclaim our collective future. The calls by politicians serving in the major political parties and mainstream political pundits in the mainstream media to shut down pro-Palestinian protesters and crack down on students exercising their democratic rights amid an active genocide is disturbing to say the least. The fact that the federal opposition leader visited Israel during an unfolding genocide, and met with Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu named as war criminal by the International Court of Justice, the highest international court barely raised an eyebrow in Australia's mainstream media. Meanwhile, the billionaire-owed media goes into a frenzy to

hunt down and charge flag wavers during a pro-Palestinian rally. Such actions highlights the undermining of democracy in our society. The pathetic reporting and limited support for Julian Assange highlights the gaping holes in our support for investigative journalism and the respect for truth. Meanwhile, former army lawyer David McBride was sentenced to five years and eight months for exposing alleged war crimes in Afghanistan. This highlights the bizarre circumstance where a whistle blower appears to be pursued for speaking out ahead of the perpetrators of the alleged crime. We should be cognisant of the fact that whistle blowers often serve as canaries in the coalmine. If our political elite continue to serve corporate interests and the belligerent actions of nations more powerful than our own, we ultimately are walking down the path to authoritarianism. Such prospects need to be at the top of the social and political agenda, but they are not. The dialling up of the terror alert, the increase in ASIO's budget by \$12.2 million from 2022–23 period to \$532.1 million needs to be understood in the context of a nation that is ruled by a political duopoly that follow the neoliberal ideology, have almost identical foreign policy, are funded by large corporations and send politicians to corporate boards once their time is over playacting as servants to the people.

Facing the fear agenda

The fact that a small section of society employs fear as a means to achieve social, political and economic control over the public is nothing new. Nor is it novel that through a culture of fear, the public is groomed to feel insecure in a world where the mainstream media amplifies the threat of scarcity and conflict. Such techniques have been around for centuries. However, the means by which they are manufactured, communicated and normalised in the public's perception have become far more sophisticated.

By understanding the motives behind the powers that manufacture the fear agenda, we can deconstruct the false narrative that the corporate owned media and the government-controlled media present us with on a daily basis. It is vital to critically analyse the fear agenda by checking the veracity of the latest wave of fear. In fact, we need to make a conscious choice to unshackle ourselves from the chains of fear and compliance. By doing so, we can manage our emotional responses and confront the fears that may well be strawmen and paper tigers manufactured in a corporate media board room. We simply do not have the luxury to take every story at face value. Our ability to see through the fear agenda is key to maintaining a sharp focus on what the real social, economic and political are, and what is important to our community. Only through critical thinking can we collectively tear down the false agenda and tackle the real issues that have been building up over the past four decades: privatisation, deregulation, globalisation, corporatisation and militarism.

As we stand today, the stakes are very high. The one percent of society may have vast power and wealth to continue hoodwinking the public into fearing change. However, we are the majority, and we understand that maintaining the status quo is not an option.

Join PIBCI and help us place public interests ahead of corporate interests.

Anthony B – Website Editor

October 2024

