

PIBCI - Perspective

2025-2026 Summer Edition

It is up to you

Neoliberalism: Is it fit for purpose or is it destroying our spheres of politics, economics and culture?

With twenty-six years into the 21st Century, the hopes of a bright and prosperous future appear to be disappearing at a rapid rate. The stench of decay is filling the streets of our capitals, suburbs and regional towns as Australian politics and mainstream politicians circle around the carcass of the dominant ideology hoping for a sign of movement. Despite the landslide victory of the ALP that secured a massive majority at the last federal election, the Albanese-led ALP remains comfortable meeting its low expectations. Meanwhile, the global economy is in an advanced state of decline as trade barriers go up, economic sanctions multiply and international tensions escalate on a daily basis. To meet the challenge, our foreign policy direction has been calibrated to support and provide cover for the most belligerent nations on the planet. Despite the immense natural wealth of our nation and the liberating potential of technological advances, all predictions of more leisure, less work and a richer and fulfilling society have all but vanished. Under the surface of our materially rich society is a population that increasingly suffers from anxiety, stress, depression and fatigue. What has gone so wrong since our nation made the switch to the neoliberal ideology? Why have the massive profits generated by our economy not trickled down to most Australians? Is the neoliberal system not fit for purpose?

Living the neoliberal dream

Our society is in a state of gradual decay. The spheres of politics, economics, culture and the institutions that uphold them are suffering from necrosis. This slow death has not been triggered by war, plague or a natural disaster but caused by the neoliberal ideology that died following the global financial crisis in 2008. Without a viable alternative ready to replace neoliberalism, the zombie-like system continues to stalk the planet wreaking death and destruction in its wake. Propped up oligarchs, large corporations, puppet-like governments and the corporate owned media, the status quo continues to function while the rest of society suffers from fatigue. This collective weariness has the effect of sedating the public and undermining all forms of action seeking to bring about progressive social change. The outcome is that economic stagnation, political sterility and cultural decay are allowed to fester, thereby keeping the ideological zombie functioning while the pillars of society slowly erode.

Solution or sickness?

After fifty years, neoliberalism has reached its zenith. Built on an agenda of privatisation, deregulation, globalisation and corporatisation, the neoliberal coup d'état took place following the failings of Keynesian economics in the 1970's. Promoted as the remedy, governments across the

western world ditched Keynesian economics for the neoliberal economics which reshaped our lives and in the process stole all hope of a bright future.

It is not an understatement that neoliberalism has changed our way of life. It has transformed western liberal democracies into nations increasingly controlled by a small coterie of western oligarchs and large corporations. We live in a society where the rich have become richer and a small number of corporations have concentrated ownership by swallowing up their competitors. Neoliberalism has extended beyond the sphere of economics by spreading into the realms of politics and culture. It has supplanted the public's sense of cooperation and social responsibility with the values of competition, consumption and hyper-individualism. In essence, neoliberalism is a virulent strain of capitalism that demands individuals to abandon community and collective solutions and replace them with self-reliance, individual entrepreneurialism and a winner take all mentality.

The rapid spread of the neoliberal ideology has gifted the world with a global system of exploitation and manipulation. Under its thin veneer, people, animals and the environment are regarded as inanimate resources to be used for profit with the least expense as possible. It has ushered in waves of privatisation and an onslaught of deregulation. During this time, governments have abdicated their role serving the public and become managers overseeing the outsourcing of public services. They have sold state assets, handed over essential human services to the private sector and watered-down worker's rights and environmental protections. The neoliberal order has promulgated corporatisation across society and facilitated globalisation. Restraints on monopolisation have been lifted enabling corporations to swallow-up their competition and destroy small business in the process.

Jobs

Successive governments – both Labor and the LNP coalition – have abandoned their role of looking after the public's interests through the provision of essential services. Riding on the ideological wave of neoliberalism, the major political parties have introduced neoliberal policies that have damaged and degraded public services. In its wake, privately run faith-based charities and like organisations receive large government grants to provide essential public services whilst making a healthy profit. Such organisations flaunt lofty values and humanitarian mission statements whilst swallowing up smaller community-based providers making them too big to fail.

Read PIBCI Perspective: Government or management

Behind polished inclusion statements, cultural awareness strategies and glossy annual reports, private sector jobs have increasingly become insecure, repetitive and meaningless. Corporate restructures, take-overs and the relocation of jobs overseas translates to lower wages, insecure employment and a working environment lacking in purpose and trust. Under half a decade the neoliberal order has rolled back the hard-earned benefits of the labour movement making the workplace a site for rampant exploitation and mistreatment.

Today, our real job is to consume. The myriad of cut and paste shopping centres that dot the cities and suburbs and the on-line shopping portals are the real (and virtual) factories of our time. Consumption overrides production in a world where profit outranks public needs. The addictive

world of shops and online trading platforms serves as a temporary respite from the real world and the real challenges that face society.

Politics and the triumph of low expectations

The major political parties no longer offer the public with a positive vision for the future. Neither the ALP nor the LNP have a strategy to lead the nation out of the current political and economic malaise. While they remain tightly wrapped in the neoliberal straight-jacket, the ALP and the LNP coalition demonstrate a clear inability to sketch out lines of advance for the nation. To keep in power, the major political parties repeat the mantra that voters must support them as they are best equipped to stop the situation from getting worse. However, we know that they are not in control, and we know who got us into this quagmire. Equipped with the outmoded neoliberal ideology, the major political parties cannot generate new solutions to contemporary problems. Their default is to maintain the status quo and steer the nation in the same direction that was plotted almost half a century ago. It is evident that political change will not come while large corporations and oligarchs are consulted to formulate national policy, and larger allied powers decide on our foreign policy directives.

Outcomes once mattered more than well-crafted slogans and political rhetoric. Today, the major political parties have become proficient in burying their failures to meet the public's basic expectations in a combination of spectacle, rhetoric or silence. Consistently, the major political parties have failed to reduce the wealth gap. They have failed to roll back child poverty. They have failed to reign in corporate tax evasion, and they have failed to provide the public with reliable and consistent public services. In reality, the major political parties have abdicated their role governing society and opted to manage society via the private sector, thereby distancing themselves from the reality on the ground. This has reduced their control of the levers of power and handed it over to the private sector.

Under the guidance of neoliberal think tanks funded by oligarchs and wealthy interest groups, the vision of a bright future and a better world has been replaced with a grim vision of a volatile and an insecure world. The major political parties' message to the public is that a brighter and better future needs to be shelved so the government of the day can steer that nation through difficult and dangerous waters, and the public needs to be fully on board with the program. As a consequence, opposition to the status quo is muzzled by new laws or drowned out by the shrill cacophony of the corporate owned media. Alternative views, independent voices and opposing opinions are stifled along with the potential to improve the future. The consequence of such actions is that the desiccated corpse of neoliberalism is permitted to roam the land sucking the political system dry of meaning and purpose whilst snuffing out the sparks of change.

Institutions: a democratic façade

The inability and ineffectiveness of our key institutions to tackle corruption and demand accountability of political and corporate leaders highlights the sad state of our democracy. Regardless of the legislation, codes of conduct and the numerous Royal Commissions that have taken place, our institutions have had little impact bringing about real change that meets the public's most basic expectations. Following from decades of neoliberal policies and practices, our key institutions have been captured and emasculated. As a consequence, they have lost clarity of

purpose, courage and the necessary support required to curb government largesse and corporate deceit and deception. Through the strategic tweaking of government and corporate funding, political appointments, cheer leading by the mainstream media and numerous other means, our key institutions have been undermined and weakened. As such, public trust is eroded when institutional appointments are seen to be political in nature, expertise is swapped out for political or economic expediency and institutional decisions and recommendations are biased and ineffective.

The long list of Royal Commissions highlights the futility in righting the wrongs of the abuse of power and the deep-seated corruption and ineptitude in government and our institutions. The Royal Commission into the Robodebt has largely been ineffective. The Royal Commission into Misconduct in the Banking, Superannuation and Financial Services Industry did not hold banking executives to account nor did it stem the misconduct perpetuated by the nation's largest banks. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse yielded little effect nor comfort for the scores of victims while significant and sustained opposition to the findings and recommendations was mounted by the nation's most powerful religious institutions and their powerful supporters. The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody also highlights the ineptitude of our institutions to make real social, political and cultural change for those hardest hit by those in power.

The public's ability to freely express opinions is under increasing attack. Independent journalism and alternative media is being rolled back. The fact that the free flow of information is facing an assault by those in power supported by select interest groups highlights the dire situation whereby public interests are being trampled on. Such an abuse of power further highlights the failures of institutions to hold power to account.

It should be no surprise that Australia is experiencing persistent signs that public trust in the nation's key institutions is steadily declining. Trust in the government (federal and state) is falling. Trust in the major political parties is steadily evaporating. Faith in religious organisations has suffered a critical blow. Public confidence in the legal system is progressively being diminished. Trust in the media is in free fall. The inability of our key institutions to function to their full capacity and deliver fair and just outcomes is further undermined in a social environment where a growing number of people are experiencing financial hardship and do not receive the necessary care and support from the institutions created to help them out.

Nurturing a culture of frustration and futility

The neoliberal order has mired the spheres of politics and economics in a pit of sterility and stagnation. This state of decay has had a knock-on effect on our culture which is apparent across our cities, suburbs and regional towns. For close to five decades our culture has been lowered into the neoliberal Petri dish. The ideological brainwashing that commenced in the 1970's has gradually supplanted our society's values of cooperation, community and collective action with competition, consumption, conflict and hyper-individualism as the accepted modes of behaviour. After decades of training and education we have been groomed to be self-serving individuals primed to get ahead of our neighbours, place our individual interests ahead of the community and put our lot ahead of everyone else's regardless of the impacts to society. The values of neoliberalism have transformed our culture thereby limiting our imaginations and stifling our vision for a better society.

Based on the promise that the free-market is superior to all other economic systems, politicians across the western world including the major political parties in Australia actively reshaped everyday life in accordance to the neoliberal template. Governments and corporations alike work on the premise that people are mere individuals acting with self-interest to compete and consume. Transformed, our culture now emphasises individual responsibility, lessening reliance on the state and other institutions. To succeed in the neoliberal society, each consumer must be self-reliant, work on self-development and pursue personal gain. As individuals we are expected to be responsible for our own success and bear the consequences for our failure. The neoliberal transformation has shifted the focus from being a member of a community to being an atomised consumer. Volunteering and being a member of a community group has mutated to joining online communities and being a householder solely focussed on keeping up-to-date with this season's furniture style and looking the part by updating your car, clothes and iPhone. The complete transition from citizen to customer is nearing its logical conclusion – we are all consumers now, and everything has been commodified – all is available for buying and selling.

Under the neoliberal paradigm, the idea that we all can be wealthy if we try hard enough has been normalised through the pursuit of profit. However, the fact remains that we live in a world of finite resources. The planet cannot sustain the levels of consumption demanded by a global population of millionaires and billionaires. Furthermore, today's oligarchs currently hoard an immense amount of wealth that they are unwilling to share any of it. Unfortunately, neoliberalism's fallacious promises that everyone can be wealthy continue to be normalised through our institutions and mainstream culture. The billionaire owned media and mainstream arts reinforce neoliberal values, focusing on individualism and commodification. Through TV, radio, the press, magazines and social media, the ultra-rich are revered as hard-working geniuses who have reached the zenith of wealth through individual determination, genius and entrepreneurialism. Without them, many Australians would not have a job. The reality that many of neoliberalism's oligarchs have acquired wealth and power through shady practices, inheritance and networking with powerful individuals continues to be camouflaged by the media that they own. The ultra-rich continue to be wealthy while millions go without food, shelter and a basic education.

Creativity and innovation

Despite the constant drone that capitalism is the best system that spearheads creativity, innovation and entrepreneurialism, the fact remains that business and intellectual life is going around in circles. Despite the hype and the overblown excitement when a new iPhone hits the shops, the height of human creativity and innovation passed over a century ago. For decades, repetition has become the norm and innovation has taken a back seat. Very little that is vital to humanity is created.

On the surface, innovations in communications and information technology (ICT) appear to be a powerhouse driving change. However, this is a thin veneer covering the reality of the state of affairs. The ICT industry has been resting on the laurels of the development of the internet and the mobile phone. These two innovations were developed decades ago, and have greatly shaped our society. Yet, real innovation since their introduction has been thin, particularly when compared with the great leaps and advances in innovation during the late 19 century. Our recent advances in IT, communications and medicine seem quaint when compared to the great leaps and bounds of the previous century with the advent of the antibiotics, television, radio, washing machine, aeroplanes,

telephone, air conditioning and refrigeration. Since the 1970's, significant innovations such as the computer, internet and mobile phone have been concentrated in the digital sphere. In general, the rise in neoliberalism comes with a fall in creativity and innovation. Today's progress is largely limited to improvements of existing inventions. We communicate more and have endless options to be entertained. We chat more, snap more pictures, watch more stuff and send an endless number of text messages all on our devices. However, our culture has not progressed but has entered a cycle of recreating what already exists. Corporations are in a state of stagnation trapped in a cycle of upgrading products rather than innovating. Profits are poured into executive bonuses, shareholder dividends and corporate takeovers rather than into research and development, innovation and quality. The age of oligarchs has commenced, and the objective is not to improve or innovate but to downsize and squeeze profits from what is left.

Commodification of art

Our culture of art has become an exercise in repetition. Music has become repetitive and disposable. Songs from the past have been recreated for contemporary audiences. Covers of 1960's, 70's, 80's and 90's music flood the airwaves and clog headphones. The film industry is dominated by sequels and remakes all part of existing comic franchises. The profit motive has turned the vibrant creative arts into a sterile environment where the safe bet is to recycle old movies and use old characters in updated settings. As a consequence, boredom and fatigue has infected mainstream arts. Great works have been commodified. Mass produced music and films provide cheap entertainment for the masses. The age of neoliberalism has transformed art from a powerful means for human expression, communication and connection into a disposable product. The purpose of art as a universal language to convey ideas, preserve heritage and stimulate imagination has been downgraded to an ephemeral flicker on a screen and another file in amongst a battalion of files in a division of folders on a device. The logical conclusion for art under neoliberalism is to snuff out arts role of offering comfort, inspiring social change and enriching human lives into a cheap and disposable commodity.

It is up to you

2026 offers great opportunity to make positive changes. However, such opportunity can also be squandered. As we have witnessed over the past five decades, the neoliberal system does not work for the majority of the world's population. In fact, it is a system that was designed to make the rich much richer by remoulding the spheres of economics, politics and culture. With almost half a century of the neoliberal order, it is abundantly clear that neoliberal policies and practices have impeded human progress, thwarted political alternatives and prevented economic substitutes. Unfortunately, the spread of neoliberalism has infected the cultural sphere where vibrant new ideas are born inspiring the next generation to better the human condition. Neoliberalism has super-charged commodification which has hollowed out all that is good leaving society with a husk to deal with in the future.

With 2026 in front of us, it is important to understand that society is shaped by the public's thought, imagination, and its ability to transform the way we live. In each and every one of us are the seeds of progress and change. We can germinate those seeds by taking part in activities that cultivate community relationships to counter the harmful effects of the neoliberal behaviours such as consumerism, competition and hyper-individualism.

2026 can be transformed into a social turning point. It is up to you to foster and engage in alternative social, economic and political ways of life that help to speed up the collapse of the decaying neoliberal order. It is up to you to initiate and participate in community-based projects that promote public health care, food distribution and housing, independent media, non-corporate art and culture that is independent from the mainstream. It is vital to turn away from state run and corporate owned media outlets that flood our screens with a narrative that distorts reality. It is vital to join cultural and political actions and engage in alternative social projects that work to fulfil our primary human needs. Therefore, the task today is to acknowledge that our society is in a state of political, economic and cultural decay that will only get worse. It is important to understand the causes for social fatigue and exhaustion stem from the dominant ideology that serves the wealthy and powerful one percent of society. We need to act now and stop pretending that everything will get better. The small section of society that own the means of production, distribution, communication and exchange have no interest in changing the status quo. Therefore, it is up to you.

Join PIBCI today.

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