

PIBCI - Monthly Perspective

July 2021

Recycle, reuse and reject

The leadership change within the National Party is a timely exercise in rearranging the political furniture as the Coalition prepares itself for the next federal election. The ousting of Michael McCormack in favour of Barnaby Joyce as party leader should come as no surprise given that Joyce was previously shamed out of the top job and had no option but to hand it to McCormack. Joyce carefully timed his move against McCormack knowing his window of opportunity was limited. He pounced while the Nationals party numbers were in his favour. With the leadership coup out of the way, the junior partner in the Coalition has wasted no time in flexing their political muscle in order to remind the Liberals not to take them for granted. In real terms, the leadership change means little for regional Australia, and even less to the broader Australian public. During his last stint as Nationals leader, Joyce demonstrated a clear lack in his ability to bring about positive change for regional Australians. His pro-corporate and pro-coal credentials are well established. What the recent leadership change simply highlights to the public is that the major political parties are content with digging up and reusing the same old politicians and the same old political ideas. This begs the question: are we really willing to accept this kind of political recycling at the next election?

Putting the coal back into Coalition

The ascension of Barnaby Joyce to the National's leadership is merely a distraction from the main game; winning the next election. Furthermore, the National's flexing of their political muscle over the Murray-Darling Basin plan has temporarily given the billionaire owned media an excuse to refocus the public's gaze from the long line of unresolved scandals the Coalition had been plagued with. Joyce will continue to stir up dust when he can to distract from the real issues such as the sluggish and confused COVID-19 vaccine rollout that the Morrison-led government continues to bungle and delay.

The resurrection of Barnaby Joyce needs to be put into clear context. Joyce is a coal crusader, a friend of fossil fuels and an avid backer of Australia's billionaires. Australia's richest individual, coal magnate Gina Rinehart herself has called him a "champion of farming" and personally handed him a cheque for \$40,000 at the inaugural National Agricultural and Related Industries prize. Joyce later declined the giant novelty cheque, after being roundly criticised by his opponents and from within the agricultural sector. With this in mind, we need to understand that despite the fact that rural Australians are bearing the brunt of the climate disaster, Joyce is ideologically wedded to fossil fuels despite the damage the industry does to Australian farmers and our climate.

The question remains, who does Joyce and the National party prefer to back - farmers or big business?

Same old

Since the outbreak of COVID-19 in Australia, our state and federal politicians have also become immune to change. Federally, the Morrison-led Coalition has ducked and weaved its way through scandal after scandal. It has made a habit of zig-zagging between its failures and when these tactics haven't worked, it has simply ignored questions about its conduct and lack of accountability in the face of overwhelming evidence. The Liberal party has recycled its ministers when they have come under scrutiny. This includes former Attorney-General, Christian Porter who following intense public pressure in light of a historical rape allegation, was moved into the position of Minister for Industry, Innovation and Science.

The latest leadership change comes directly out of the Coalition's play book: change the 'same old' with the 'same old'. Joyce's second attempt at the National's top post sees a man placed in a key leadership position despite the cloud of controversy and unanswered questions following his earlier demise. Joyce wasted no time in recycling National party politicians by demoting those who supported McCormack and promoting his backers to cabinet positions. It is understood that Joyce was reappointed to the party leadership with the support of resources minister Keith Pitt and backbenchers Bridget McKenzie, Susan McDonald, Matt Canavan and Perrin Davey. The promotion of discredited

Senator, Bridget McKenzie again highlights the Coalition's lack of political standards. McKenzie's political career was shelved 18 months ago after quitting over the sports rorts scandal. This scandal was brought to light by the Australian National Audit Office who published a report into the Community Sport Infrastructure Program titled 'Award of Funding under the Community Sport Infrastructure Program'. This report noted that 'the award of grant funding was not informed by an appropriate assessment process and sound advice, and the successful applications were not those that had been assessed as the most meritorious in terms of the published program guidelines. The outcomes of the report resulted in broad media coverage due to Minister McKenzie using her ministerial discretion to favour marginal or targeted electorates in the allocation of grants. Her fortunes have been resuscitated after backing Joyce for Nationals leadership. She now returns to cabinet to take on the regionalisation, regional education and regional communications portfolios, along with drought emergency management. As things stand, the major political parties will be offering the Australian public the same political fare as we rapidly move towards the next election.

Little change has permeated through to the state level of politics. Daniel Andrews in Victoria, Gladys Berejiklian in NSW, Anastasia Palacyszuk in Queensland, Mark McGowan in Western Australia continue to have a firm grip on power. Meanwhile, opposition at both the state and federal levels can be described as feeble at best.

The current global crisis calls for great responsibility, and yet pork barrelling, allegations of corruption, lies and deception across the major political parties are reported on and then brushed aside by politicians on a regular basis. Meanwhile, opposition parties appear to be politically anaemic. Good government comes with strong opposition: this is what is lacking in Australian politics.

Hollowing out our democracy

Why do the majority of Australian voters put up with morally bankrupt and ineffectual politicians that are recycled and presented to us as viable options? Why do we put up with tired old ideas portrayed as contemporary political policy options for the future of our country? Why do Australians keep voting for the

major political parties despite our distrust, disenchantment and disinterest in their hollow promises?

For democracy to work well, it requires an active and informed electorate. What undermines this is the role ideology plays. It presents a particular view of the world and helps to set the social and political agenda. In our case, the dominant ideology works not to strengthen democracy, but to hold onto power and self-perpetuate its specific principles and set of values.

With forty years of the neoliberal ideology permeating every nook and cranny of our institutions, is it little wonder that certain values have become dominant. Today, the sense of community has given way to hyper-individualism. Solidarity has been replaced with a 'dog eat dog' mentality. We have been trained to be competitive and by default paranoid of other's intentions. This has made us as a society more willing to submit to authority in the hope that we will have more security and comfort at the expense of increasing encroachments on our personal freedoms.

With billionaires running our major media outlets, the public is drip-fed propaganda 24/7 via radio, television, digital platforms and the print media. The need to purchase goods and services is thrust into our faces on a daily basis. Little regard is given to those people who make those luxury items and provide those services. Little thought goes into the 'who' and 'how' those products and services are made and delivered to us. This includes whether they come from sweatshops in developing countries, from local casualised labour or from workers not afforded basic rights or paid below minimum income, such as delivery drivers working in dangerous conditions. We are not expected to question how or by whom the products are made and delivered to our front door irrespective of the human, social and environmental costs. What seems to matter on one hand is that we can choose from an overabundance of cheap products from China, and on the other, the Federal government tells us that we need to prop-up the defence budget by billions of dollars in preparation of possible Chinese aggression. Meanwhile, our largest corporations continue to sell iron ore to that same country.

The role of ideology is to paper over such inconsistencies and over-simplify complex social and political issues. It achieves this by presenting itself as the only viable option that can act as a social 'bonding agent' giving society the impression that it holds the key to political and social harmony. For the past forty years, the neoliberal ideology has promoted itself through government, institutions, education, and the media as the common-sense view of the world. This view has been based on the core principles of the free market, privatisation of public assets, deregulation and corporatisation. Hence, the major political parties, the billionaire class and large corporations have been happy with the status quo. Why change it when it works for them?

The neoliberal agenda has not strengthened nor supported strong democratic institutions. Nor has it helped to inform the electorate about viable political options, solid economic alternatives or new approaches that can build a strong and cohesive society. The neoliberal agenda has simply worked to generate larger and larger profits for the biggest corporations and the richest individuals in our nation. The status quo is what they want, and that is why old politicians and old ideas are recycled and presented to the public as something new.

Time to Change

The opportunity to change is here and now. Given that the next election must take place by March 2022, it is time to send a clear signal to the major political parties that recycling old politicians and rebadging bankrupt ideas as new ones is no longer acceptable for public consumption. The political status quo may work for the 1% of society, and it may offer comfort to the governing class, however, it is not working for the 99% of Australians. The current political and economic arrangement has proven itself incapable of solving the big problems within society. Despite Australia being one of the richest nations in the world, inequality continues to grow unabated as poverty amongst our young people and elderly can be seen on the streets of our capitals and regional towns. The major political parties are relying on the public being disillusioned and resigned to the belief that nothing can change. Large corporations are banking on you to keep the same old politicians in power, believing that there is no other way. What we currently have is a system that promotes private investment for private profit. We have large corporations paying voluntary taxation. We also have the dominant billionaire

owned media presenting an over-simplified narrative to the public which states that there is only one way, their way. The top end of town is counting on widespread political cynicism and political lethargy which plays into the hands.

The reality is that there are multiple alternatives, numerous new ideas designed to support progress. Such ideas are not radical, but aimed at helping society, minimising and eliminating inequality, focussed on addressing the environmental disaster and taking people out of poverty. Such ideas are not radical, they are simply aimed at putting the public's interests ahead of corporate interests.

Our aim is to place essential services back into public hands. Join PIBCI today. Your support will help us to use parliament democracy as an opportunity to make positive change, however small it may be. Its time to reject the major political parties and embrace new ideas that support a fairer society for all.

Anthony B – Website Editor

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