

# PIBCI - Monthly Perspective

**March 2022**

## Politics is not an option

The smell of an election is in the air, soaked in the stale odour of old ideas and desperation. Currently the polls show that the sitting Prime Minister is lagging behind his main rival in the ALP. With an election imminent, Scott Morrison needs to turn things around very quickly before May if he is to stave off an electoral defeat, a belated leadership challenge or both. So why is the popularity of the LNP leader so poor? And what is the ALP offering to Australians given their silence when it comes to policies? Before we sharpen our HB pencils and cast a vote from our cardboard election booths, we need to ask the question - are the major parties up to the challenges that we face going forward? Or do we need a change in politics?

### Setting the agenda

The LNP have gone into overdrive with the aim of capturing the daily narrative in an attempt to gloss over its long list of scandals, its culture of incompetence and deception. Under Scott Morrison's leadership, Australians have had to stomach the LNP's bushfire recovery fiasco, the botched vaccine rollout, the slipshod Rapid Antigen Test rollout, the regretful mess in aged care, the grants scandal, the messy submarine purchase, the millions of taxpayer dollars squandered by government through JobKeeper, and the list goes on.

Morrison's PR team is going to have to do better than sending him out donned in a hi-vis vest, working at a hair salon, and attempting to use an arc welder. The needle on the desperation gauge leapt into the red zone as Scott Morrison awkwardly sat through a 60 Minutes interview that relied on his wife to show Australians how wonderful her husband is and why we should give him another term in office. He may be able to cook up a formidable curry on national television, but can he cook up a fair and equitable future for Australians based on the same old neoliberal recipe using stale ingredients from the LNP pantry?

## Priorities

Despite being one of the richest countries in the world, the LNP's tenure of nearly ten years in government has not prioritised the care of Australia's less fortunate. However, the Morrison-led coalition *has* prioritised the nation's 122 billionaires. In the face of the pandemic, the LNP's economic policies have benefitted the nation's wealthiest individuals. Currently, a person living in the highest 20% of the income scale lives in a household with almost six times as much income as someone in the lowest 20%. All this translates into growing inequality across Australian society. While the nation's billionaires reap greater and greater profits, less resources are available for our schools, hospitals, public housing and support for our most vulnerable members of society.

A glance across to the ALP opposition gives Australians little hope. Since their last election loss, the federal ALP has taken on a small target strategy. The lack of policy detail, the disturbing similarities with the LNP's direction, and the wafer-thin opposition they have put up against a bumbling government provides little confidence that the ALP will have the grit and imagination to make necessary changes to improve Australia.

## Just add national security and stir

Behind the LNP is a trail of scandals and blunders. It has also failed on its promises to get up their Religious Discrimination Bill and a federal ICAC. With a dismal performance report card in hand, the Morrison-led coalition government has gone back to the musty old LNP pantry for ideas and pulled out an old chestnut - national security.

The use of fear and insecurity are the favourite tools of desperate politicians and political parties who have run out of ideas. The past month witnessed the LNP exercise the 'fear of China' card in its campaign. The Morrison-led coalition sunk to a new low by accusing Anthony Albanese of being the "Chinese government's pick at this election". This was followed by the LNP stating that Labor frontbencher Richard Marles is a 'Manchurian candidate'. The politicisation of national security aimed at the ALP opposition prompted ASIO director-general Mike Burgess come out in public and describe the politicisation of national security as "not helpful".

Whilst Morrison announced to the nation that his government would not make Rapid Antigen Tests free to Australians, he signed off on the purchase of \$46 billion worth of tanks from the US. In effect, he has banked taxpayer money on a possible threat that may or may not materialise sometime in the near or distant future, or if ever at all. This dubious decision was prioritised ahead of making RAT tests free to Australians, a key tool in identifying and controlling the very real and current spread of Covid-19.

As the nation gets closer to the federal election, talk of national security is likely to ramp up as the LNP will work overtime to redirect the nation's focus from its long list of failures towards a national security agenda and a budget that is bound to shower the electorate with shiny coins in the hope to swing the vote their way.

### **The fog of war**

Savvy politicians will never let a crisis go to waste. The devastating events unfolding in Ukraine highlight this very point. Prior to the invasion of Ukraine, several western leaders shrewdly used the situation to turn around their flagging popularity. The dismal political prospects of UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson took a significant turn once he jumped on jet to visit his Ukrainian counterpart in Kyiv, whilst leaving his Covid party scandals and prospects of losing the top job behind in London. President Joe Biden's plummeting popularity following the disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan and his growing domestic failures has received a shot in the arm as the US once again beats the drums of war with enthusiasm. Meanwhile, French President Emmanuel Macron has been busy flying east and west across Europe playing diplomat in an attempt to step his declining popularity at home ahead of an election in April. Politicians will be politicians and the fog of war provides them with an excellent cover to talk tough, redirect the public's attention and call for unity by backing a 'safe pair of hands' rather than seek political alternatives.

Back in Australia, we are not immune from politicians talking tough from afar, highlighting security concerns and needlessly goading our 'rivals' as an election draws near. However, talking tough about national security simply misses the real crisis that we face. The climate emergency will not stop to watch governments

and politicians wax lyrical over conflicts in Ukraine, Yemen and Syria. Nature will take its course, and governments will continue to put their populations at risk whilst they ignore what is in front of them. The major parties have not demonstrated that they are a safe pair of hands when it comes to the climate emergency or international diplomacy.

As citizens we cannot wait for the political class to make the right decisions. The LNP has been in power for nearly ten years. During this time, inequality has continued to grow driving a deeper wedge between the haves and the have nots. Corporate profits and the wealth of Australia's richest individuals has surged despite the detrimental impact the pandemic has had on the majority of the population. The mishandling of the vaccine roll-out through to securing RA tests in a timely fashion also highlights how this long-term government continues to fumble its way through crisis. Meanwhile, the federal government turns to crowdfunding as a solution to help Queenslanders following the devastating floods. This begs the question: why do we pay taxes to the government? The poor state of housing, the growing division in public and private education, the appalling state of indigenous affairs and stagnant wages for working people are key markers that all voters need to bear in mind when considering who to vote for come election day.

The LNP's string of scandals and failures has been matched by the ALP's silence, its acquiescence to LNP policy proposals and its woeful performance holding the government to account. In essence, the difference between the federal Liberal Party and the federal Australian Labor Party is negligible. Both major political parties blindly promote the neoliberal formula as the only way to run the economy through privatisation, deregulation and corporatisation. For the past forty years, the neoliberal template has gutted our institutions, dumbed down the aspirations of the population, and weakened our nation's capacity to deal with crisis. Working within the neoliberal bubble, the major political parties cannot think beyond the sandpit.

### **Politics is not an option, it is a must**

With a federal election on the horizon, engagement in politics and the political process is vital. Sensationalisation and distraction will be the strategy played out

by the billionaire-owned press and the government-controlled media, as they will present a lazy world view of political issues and political options. As citizens, it is vital to engage in politics by asking the hard questions. Demanding transparency and accountability from politicians and corporate leaders alike. Talking up national security should not distract from real issues such as rising inequality, the gaps in health care, the holes in aged care and the need for public housing. Buying tanks and big talk about military alliances are not solutions or ideas to the challenges we face at home.

The languid approach by the major political parties will simply result in more of the same. More inequality based on the same old ideas. However, we cannot afford to continue down the same path. Change is necessary if we are to break from the status quo. Covid-19 has put the spotlight on what is vulnerable in our society, and put into focus what is broken. Health insecurity, income insecurity, and the inability to satisfactorily support our most vulnerable demonstrates the need for a new politics, and real change.

The current government has demonstrated a willingness to promptly funnel billions into corporate pockets via the JobKeeper scheme and send billions overseas to buy tanks and submarines. Yet, a practical solution to supporting the public during crisis and hardship can be implemented via a Universal Basic Income (UBI). A UBI is both a practical and contemporary approach to supporting Australians in times of need by making available income that will ensure every citizen over 18 will have food on the table, and a roof over their head. By making a UBI available to the public, it will mitigate against all economic downturns, support the public during crisis like a pandemic, flood or bushfire and significantly reduce the stress and anxiety amongst people who are in a time of need.

A change in politics is vital to shift from the current approach that places profit ahead of people. Politics does not begin with security, it begins with people – our family, friends and community. With a federal election in clear view, it is important to put politics at the forefront our minds. We need to collectively discuss the failures of the major political parties, and we need to promote a change that puts the public's interests first.

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