

PIBCI - Monthly Perspective

October 2023

Title: Government or management?

When did governing society turn into managing society? What does it mean for the public?

Parallel to the spread of neoliberalism has been the gradual decline in the quality of political leadership. This decline has been marked by the deliberate transition of governing society to managing it. Over the course of the past four decades, major political parties have given up on developing a brighter vision for the nation. No longer do they pursue new ideas and implement progressive policies to augment social change. Instead, the major political parties have been content to paint a grim picture of a world facing instability, uncertainty and conflict in which they seek to manage each crisis as they arise. Through the mass media, governments present a narrative that the existing system must be kept stable. This implies that balance and stability can only be achieved through a public that is docile and compliant, while the government manages the system so the status quo can continue on its merry way. This managerial approach to government is based on a market driven logic that perceives the world and everything within it as simple, selfish, acting rationally and ultimately predictable. However, the world and its inhabitants are dynamic, complex and act emotionally in an environment that is in a perpetual state of change. The current state of declining equality, injustice, conflict and the myriad of social, political and economic crisis is testament to the failed experiment we know as neoliberalism. It is time for change.

Life is complex

Despite humanity's incredible accumulation of scientific knowledge coupled with the extraordinary strides in communications and computers, contemporary life continues to present us with complex and perplexing challenges. Finding solutions to pandemics, power generation and political conflict continue to vex the best and brightest minds. Inequality, injustice, failing health outcomes, pollution and homelessness continue to plague large parts of Australian society. Regardless of the insights and knowledge that lie at fingertips of government, the political elite continue to muddle their way from one crisis to the next keeping in line with their brand of ideology that produce mixed results. How can it be that consistently poor political responses occur in a time of blossoming technology and increasing sophistication of communications? May it be that the phenomenal improvements

in science, technology and communications have been tainted by the stagnant waters of mainstream politics that are focussed on maintaining the decades old status quo?

The aftermath of the second world war witnessed the defeat of the fascist ideology. Many decades later, the collapse of the Soviet Union promulgated the fall of communism. Thought out this time capitalism has stood fast, shifting and shaping itself under the guidance of the neoliberal ideology. Following the collapse of the great ideologies, the victors of the post-Cold War era pressed ahead to build a world based on the logic of market economics. Behind the colourful curtain of competition and consumerism, western societies were subjected to widespread rationalisation, technical administration and the growth and power of the mass media. Power was transferred from politicians to large corporations through the sale of public assets and securing contracts to perform services that government departments once fulfilled. With this development came the oversimplification of reality. On one hand, all forms of alternative political, economic and cultural views were hijacked, absorbed or debunked by the neoliberal order. On the other hand, complex issues were repackaged as cartoon-like matters requiring little thought and questioning by the public. Meanwhile, self-serving neoliberal pundits self-validated market economics via the billionaire owned media.

Managing a cartoon world

We live in a world that is hurtling towards the future at an ever increasing pace. Each day new trends develop, novel ideas surface and crisis materialise at a blink of an eye. This rapid pace presents policy makers with issues that are complex and have far-reaching implications if not dealt with cautiously, with due consideration and supported by bold and timely decisions. Despite the complex nature of contemporary challenges, the political and corporate elite have elected to disregard cultural nuance, historical complexities and sociological underpinnings of local communities and society more broadly. Investigation and critical analysis have been replaced with political expediency that aims at keeping the status quo in place. Complexity has been masked by simplistic views promoted by pundits on the payroll of the billionaire owned media. Root cause analysis has been substituted with moralising and chest beating designed to evoke the public's emotions rather than getting to the truth of the matter. For decades, we have been presented with a long list of global villains hell-bent on destroying our 'democratic' way of life while key facts that shape geopolitical realities have been swept aside, and international relations have been hijacked by international alliances that do not necessarily serve Australia's national interests.

Governments and corporate leaders do not adequately investigate problems seeking to discover and create alternative ways to break away from age-old practices that simply support the decaying status quo. They simply manage the current order, seeking to stabilise it in the face crisis. Public perception is carefully managed through the sieve of the corporate owned and government-controlled media. The political elite and corporate oligarchs churn out a version of reality that is simplified to the point that it is cartoonish. The simplification of politics, economics and culture is used to wallpaper over complex issues. Instead of engaging in community consultation and presenting brave statements and making difficult decisions, the political and corporate elite erect a paper-thin façade of events and call it reality. Meanwhile, the root cause of our social, political and economic ills are largely disregarded, and left to fester.

The status quo - good for some

We are where we are as a direct consequence of decades of neoliberal rule. Australia's rates of inequality, homelessness and child poverty did not appear overnight. They are the byproduct of decades of neoliberal policies that have privatised public assets, and fattened the nation's wealthiest individuals. Such policies have ushered in waves of deregulation, promoted corporatisation and spurred on globalisation. Under the neoliberal order, our politicians and corporate elite have enchanted the public with slogans of 'freedom of choice,' the 'trickle-down effect,' 'efficiencies of the market system,' 'democratic freedoms' and so on. Meanwhile, the means of production, communication, distribution and exchange have been captured by the 1%. This is the status quo that keeps the 1% brimming with wealth and power and the rest of society having to face rising energy costs, failing infrastructure, stagnant wages and contemplating how to pay next week's spiralling household bills.

Trapped in a fantasy world?

Neoliberalism has drawn upon economics, finance and consumer psychology to establish and maintain its dominance. Through the market economy and global finance, neoliberalism has planted its roots across key institutions and transnational corporations that have weaved a web around our lives. The way we interact with the economy, how we buy and sell and interface with businesses big and small all come under the neoliberal canopy. This is further reinforced by the application of consumer psychology via sophisticated marketing and the endless chain of advertising that beams out of every screen and billboard

permeating each and every nook and cranny of our environment. Governments sympathetic to neoliberalism have abandoned their obligations under the social contract. Public health, education, power generation and distribution, infrastructure and much more have been handed over to the private sector. In effect, politicians have handed the reins of power to the private sector in the belief that corporations will be able to run society more efficiently and effectively. Meanwhile, governments have voluntarily relegated themselves to the sidelines, awaiting to manage the next crisis. Diplomacy, statecraft, political engagement and building a bright vision for the future have faded away as the political elite take a backseat enabling the corporate sector to drive society based on market economics. Despite this approach, social, political and economic decay continue to mount, which cannot be covered up by the thin sheet of neoliberalism. Yet, how is neoliberalism able to persist?

Perpetuating the myth

The omnipotence of the neoliberal ideology has enabled it to perpetuate the myth that it is the only way. Through the legacy media and social media, the neoliberal ideology has been able to control the narrative and displace all forms of opposition. By setting the social and political agenda, the proponents of neoliberalism work on the basis that people are fleshy information processors aiming to maximise individual advantage. This rudimentary belief perceives people as selfish actors who unconditionally apply rationality to all interactions with one another. This belief views people as highly predictable creatures striving to maximise gain whether that be through negotiating a good deal, out doing someone else to make personal profit or competing to secure resources. Cooperation, altruism and community do not figure in the neoliberal calculus. This approach has witnessed governments opting to manage society, politicians managing public perception and corporations managing customers by harvesting their data and manipulating purchasing habits.

By providing an infinite number of the same goods in an array of colours, the neoliberal order works on the basis that the population will lose itself in the multitude of shopping centres and on-line shopping platforms. The public are further sedated by a host of infinity pools that inhabit the digital world, drawing each individual away from real issues that need immediate attention. A distracted public is a compliant one. In effect, consumer society acts as a parallel universe that exclusively exists to capture the attention of the public and reconfigure reality to reflect the neoliberal universe. Through the mass media and the array of 'digital sedatives,' the neoliberal order provides a comfortable and deceptively non-

threatening world where everything can be bought, sold and explained using comic-like simplicity. Through the lens of market capitalism, citizens are fast devolving into consumers. All human interactions are fast becoming monetary transactions in the world dominated by the logic of the market.

Meanwhile, those societies that exist outside of the neoliberal sandpit are being forced into adopting neoliberal values. Operating outside of the neoliberal order is tantamount to treason, and must be dealt with sanctions, coup d'état or military intervention.

Power is invisible

As we fast approach five decades of neoliberalism, the fantasy world it has weaved across our society and many others has diminished the public's appetite for real change. The political elite supported by their corporate benefactors have tactfully employed distraction and deception to disorientate and bewilder the public causing widespread apathy and ambivalence towards politics and much needed social change. With the public immersed in a sea of infotainment, sensationalisation and spectacle, waves of privatisation have been unleashed over the decades transferring public assets over to the corporate sector. While the billionaire owned press and government-owned media have trumpeted the wonders of neoliberal policies, the number of local and international oligarchs has grown. Large corporations have captured entire markets, offering the public the perception of competition through a few businesses outlets that ultimately feed the coffers of a parent company. The growth in power and influence of the small section of society is unprecedented. Much of this power is invisible as it exists in an opaque shadow world of politicians, corporate leaders, think tanks masked by the mainstream media.

Despite the daily failures of neoliberalism evident in declining public services, increasing living costs and stagnant wages, those who benefit from the status quo continually work to drown out the public's growing dissatisfaction.

Change is inevitable

We live in a world that is undergoing colossal change that demands contemporary solutions to the mounting number of current challenges. For too long, the political and corporate elite have applied a basic market-driven formula to direct the public, sedate individuals and solve the array of social, political and environmental challenges. The results of the application of the market logic over the decades are clear: rising inequality, environmental degradation,

endless conflict, social instability and a grim future. The neoliberal experiment has backfired.

For decades, the neoliberal order has groomed the public into believing the status quo is the only way. Today, the population is addicted to consumerism. Spellbound by the bright lights of the digital world, reality has been hijacked by a fantasy world in which world events are simplified, conflicts are portrayed as cartoons, world leaders are comic characters and bad things only happen to others. However, reality cannot be kept at bay as the number crisis have been building up over the decades, along with their cumulated impact. We are now at a juncture where ignoring social problems, oversimplifying international conflicts and managing society rather than governing it has added to the problem rather than alleviated it.

The neoliberal fantasy land that maintains the status quo is no longer sustainable. In fact, it is in a state of collapse which is evidenced by the multitude of disasters across the globe. Regardless of whether a viable alternative will emerge or not, we are at a point in time where social, political and economic change is cutting its way through neoliberal's thin grip on reality.

No longer can we accept governments simply managing society by stabilising the status quo based on the primitive market driven model. Nor can we continue to accept the cartoon version of the world of heroes and villains, black and white, right and wrong that is served up to us 24/7 via the corporate owned media. The day-to-day realities of growing inequality, homelessness, stagnant wages and international conflict cannot be covered up by the thin veneer spun by the dominant neoliberal narrative.

Become a member of PIBCI today and join the growing chorus of voices seeking an alternative social and political path to secure a better future.

Anthony B – Website Editor
October 2023

