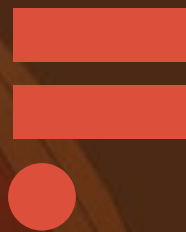


FABIAN



The Australian Fabians Review

ISSUE 2 • JULY 2021



BILL BOWTELL
BOB CARR
STEVEN HAIL
JADEN HARRIS

KIZ JACKSON
MICHAEL KNIGHT
AUDREY MARSH
SALLY MC MANUS

ALAN MILBURN
MICHELLE ROWLAND
KEVIN RUDD
PAUL SANDRINGHAM

ADAM SCORGIE
MARION SCRYMGOUR
KELVIN THOMSON

PRINTED ON GADIGAL LANDS

EDITOR
Zann Maxwell
editor@fabian.org.au

EDITORIAL TEAM
Bryce Craig (Deputy Editor)
Daniel Richardson-Clark
(Deputy Editor)
Declan Davis
Fernanda Trecenti
Paul Sandringham

**AUSTRALIAN FABIANS
NATIONAL CHAIR**
Billy Colless

*'Fabian - The Australian
Fabians Review'* would not be
possible without the incredible
contributions and support of the
members of our movement.

Fabian - The Australian Fabians
Review

Copyright © 2021 Australian
Fabian Society

fabians.org.au

GRAPHIC DESIGNER
Ryan Winter

COVER ARTIST
Joy Li
'Excellent...' (2021)

Joy Li is a dazzling graphic
designer based in Sydney. Joy has
worked with high profile clients
including Adobe, Microsoft and
Future London Academy. Joy has
presented talks at the Sydney
Design Festival, University of
California (Berkeley) and UTS.

In *'Excellent...'*, Joy uses
a fictional setting familiar to
many readers and invites them
to consider the ongoing obfus-
cation of truth in Australia. She
brings us an Australia whose
arid natural landscapes have
been matched by growing "news
deserts" brought about through
media concentration. Just as
television's most notorious
nuclear power mogul blocked a
town's sunlight to maintain his
own monopoly, is our truth being
cast into the shadows?

AUTHORS
Bill Bowtell, Bob Carr, Steven
Hail, Jaden Harris, Kiz Jackson,
Michael Knight, Audrey Marsh,
Sally McManus, Alan Milburn,
Michelle Rowland, Kevin Rudd,
Paul Sandringham, Adam Scorgie,
Marion Scrymgour, Kelvin
Thomson.

PUBLISHER
Australian Fabian Society

ISSN
2652-9076

DATE
July 2021

PRINTED BY
Seed Print Group

BILL BOWTELL
Bill Bowtell AO is a former senior
advisor to the Keating Government
and remains one of Australia's
foremost health policy strategists.
Bill was instrumental in Australia's
successful response to the HIV/
AIDS pandemic.
@BillBowtell

BOB CARR
The Hon Bob Carr is a former
Foreign Minister of Australia and
was NSW's longest continuously
serving Premier. Bob is a widely
published author and currently an
Industry Professor of Climate and
Business at UTS. @BobJCarr

STEVEN HAIL
Dr Steven Hail is a lecturer in
economics at the University of
Adelaide, a research scholar at the
Global Institute for Sustainable
Prosperity and founder of the
Modern Money Lab think-tank
and the Sustainable Prosperity
Action Group. @StevenHailAus

JADEN HARRIS
Jaden Harris is an environmental
campaigner from Sydney. He is
the NSW state convenor of the
Labor Environmental Action
Network (LEAN) and a non-execu-
tive director of OzGreen.
@JadenHarris95

AUDREY MARSH
Audrey Marsh is the Co-Con-
venor of the NSW Gay and Lesbian
Rights Lobby and a Senior Policy
Officer at the Planning Institute of
Australia.

KIZ JACKSON
Kiz Jackson is an activist and
advocate based on Gadigal Land.
They are currently working in
Disability Advocacy, and studying
a Masters in Teaching.
@KizMJackson

MICHAEL KNIGHT
Michael Knight spent 20 years as
the Member for Campbelltown
in the NSW Parliament. He held
positions as Minister for Roads,
Minister for Public Works and
Services and Minister for the
Sydney 2000 Olympics.

SALLY MCMANUS
Sally McManus is the Secretary of
the ACTU and a prominent polit-
ical and feminist activist. She was
previously the leader of ASU (NSW/
ACT) representing community,
public sector and private sector
workers. @SallyMcmanus

ALAN MILBURN
Alan Milburn was an MP in the UK
for 18 years and served in Tony
Blair's Cabinet, first as Chief
Secretary to the Treasury, and
subsequently as Secretary of State
for Health and Chancellor of the
Duchy of Lancaster.
@AlanMilburn1958

MICHELLE ROWLAND
Michelle Rowland is the Federal
Member for Greenway and the
Shadow Minister for Communi-
cations. Michelle was previously
a senior lawyer working in tech-
nology and competition.
@MRowlandMP

KEVIN RUDD
Kevin Rudd AC served as Australia's
26th Prime Minister, first taking
office in 2007 in a landslide victory.
Kevin also served as Foreign
Minister, and since his retirement
from parliament has occupied
various leadership roles, including
his recent election as President
and CEO of the Asia Society.
@MrKRudd

ADAM SCORGIE
Adam Scorgie is a Masters student
at the University of Adelaide
researching economic, political
and cultural nationalism.
Adam won the 2020 John Curtin
Research Centre Young Writers
Prize. @AdamScorgie

MARION SCRYMGOUR
Tiwi woman Marion Scrymgour is
the Chief Executive Officer of the
Northern Land Council, a former
Member of the NT Legislative
Assembly and is currently prese-
lected as the Labor candidate for
the seat of Lingiari.

KELVIN THOMSON
Kelvin Thomson was previously
the Federal Member for Wills,
occupying a variety of Shadow
Ministerial roles as well as
Parliamentary Secretary of Trade,
and later Schools, in the Gillard
Government. @HonKelThomson

PAUL SANDRINGHAM
Tracing his descent from convicts
transported to Van Diemen's
Land in the 1820s and 1830s, Paul
Sandringham is a writer and
historian.



Contents

6

EDITORIAL

Is this what Victory looks like?

Zann Maxwell

16

ESSAY

A Land of Flooding Clichés

Bob Carr

32

EMERGING VOICE

A Fabricated Culture War

The supposed battle between LGBTIQ Australians and working class communities.

Kiz Jackson & Audrey Marsh

46

FEATURE

Social Democracy 3.0

Lessons from New Labour for renewing the left.

Alan Milburn

66

EMERGING VOICE

Manufacturing the Future

Australia’s dependency on commodity exports leaves us dangerously vulnerable. But there is another way.

Adam Scorgie

72

ESSAY

Big Australia

Why the Morrison Government should not take us back.

Kelvin Thomson

8

Letters to the Editor

18

FEATURE

The Return of Full Employment

How the unemployed became a tool to discipline workers and keep wages down, and why it doesn’t have to be this way.

Steven Hail

34

FEATURE

How to pick an Opposition Leader

The Rock Stars, the Relentless and how Popularity is Overrated.

Michael Knight

52

INTERVIEW

Coalition of Miscommunication

An interview with Michelle Rowland MP.

Interviewed by Bryce Craig

70

IN PROFILE

Marion Scrymgeour

78

BOOK REVIEW

New ideas, old ideas, and the Right’s ‘culture of ideas’

Declan Davis

10

ESSAY

New Variant, Old Politics

Nature creates viruses. But poor politicians and politics create and sustain pandemics. And pandemics create new politics and transform societies.

Bill Bowtell

26

ESSAY

Forward on Climate

Learning the right lessons from the Hunter by-election.

Jaden Harris

44

ESSAY

Permanently Lost?

Without action, permanent work will be a thing of the past.

Sally McManus

56

FEATURE

Murdoch and the Mega Challenges

From climate change to the rising influence of China and the falling of real wages, to the instability of our economic model and the media monopoly through which it is all reported, the five mega-challenges facing us in the post-COVID era.

Kevin Rudd

80

FICTION

Hospitable

Paul Sandringham

EDITORIAL

Is this what Victory looks like?

ZANN MAXWELL

Conventional wisdom has coalesced around the idea that pandemic politics is bad for oppositions, whatever their stripe.

That appears to be true in the immediate sense; we're seeing governments of either persuasion rewarded with strong approval ratings for as long as they show basic competence, while oppositions have struggled for oxygen even when governments stumble.

However, the longer-run war of ideology extends well beyond election cycles. In that struggle, the pandemic could be one of those seminal moments that herald the end of one ideological era and the beginning of another.

There have been two other such moments in living memory. First, the Word Wars of the 20th Century sounded the death knell for laissez-faire economics and the gold standard, ushering in the era of Keynes and the New Deal. The second was the stagflation of the 1970s, brought on by the OPEC oil crisis. This discredited the Keynesian post-war consensus and cleared the way for the neoliberal order that we've endured for the last forty years.

One could argue that the Global Financial Crisis of 2008 should be included on that list, as the fatally discrediting moment for the neoliberal order. It may indeed have been discrediting, but unfortunately the fatal ingredient was missing: a 'New Idea'.

One of the ideological architects of the neoliberal order, Milton Friedman, once said:

"Only a crisis - actual or perceived - produces real change. When that crisis occurs, the actions that are taken depend on the ideas that are lying around. That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes the politically inevitable."

Well, when crisis struck in 2008, there was nothing laying around on the Left of politics. It offered no serious, coherent alternative model of prosperity, no New Idea.

The pandemic has now accelerated the velocity of neoliberalism's death spiral. Caught in its wake, the Liberal Party has been forced to abandon the centrepiece of the conservative political project and embrace debt, deficit and activist government intervention in the economy.

In 2002, Margaret Thatcher was asked what she considered to be her greatest achievement. She replied: "Tony Blair and New Labour. We forced our opponents to change their minds."

Well, *our* opponents appear to have now changed *their* minds. So does this mean that despite repeatedly losing electoral battles, the Left has won the war for the next ideological era?

Is this what victory looks like?

One of my favorite economic commentators, Ross Gittins, thinks it might be. Writing for the *Sydney Morning Herald* he says:

"What's true is that the old paradigm fitted our Liberals much more comfortably than the new one does. Morrison and Frydenberg will have their hands full sending their backbenchers to re-education camp. They'll need to drop their populist fear-mongering over debt and deficit, and their private good/public bad rhetoric. The new paradigm fits Labor a lot more comfortably – provided it doesn't take too long to realise the wind has changed, and get its courage back."

I'm encouraged, but not ready to pop a cork yet. To the extent that the Right of politics has given up on its ideology, it only represents half a victory; and as Bill Bowtell argues in these pages, it may be no more than a tactical retreat.

My broader concern is that the pandemic has put us in a big spending, highly interventionist paradigm through slap-dash crisis response, as opposed to purposeful design. Many will consider it temporary. This is because it is yet to be woven into a coherent new framework or model of prosperity that can replace neoliberalism and define the next ideological era - what I've been calling a New Idea.

After all, "It takes a theory to kill a theory" as Harvard economist Alvin Hansen claimed.

IT IS MY hope that this magazine can be a space for the Fabian movement to build on its long history of political ideas and make some contribution to forging that coherent new framework for the next New Idea.

Speaking of Tony Blair, after another shocking by-election result for UK Labour earlier this year in Hartlepool, he wrote an article in the *New Statesman* in which he suggested that the technology revolution is the central political challenge of our time. Blair argues that those who understand it and are able to show how it can be mastered for the benefit of the people, will deservedly win power. I for one am willing to accept that the only person to lead UK Labour to victory in the forty-seven years since 1974 might know something on this front.

A star contributor to this second issue of the *Fabian* is himself the only person to win a national majority for the Australian Labor Party in the twenty-nine years since 1993. Kevin Rudd agrees with Blair that technological disruption is one of the 'mega-challenges' that will need to be confronted by the modern Left.

In these pages, Rudd focuses on the cancer that Rupert Murdoch's media monopoly represents in our

democracy, but he also sets out four other 'mega-challenges', in addition to technological change, that the modern Left will need a clear plan for: recurring pandemics; demographic decline; the rise of China; and the continued economic and environmental devastations of climate change.

In one way or another, this second issue of the *Fabian* has attempted to touch on each of these 'mega-challenges' among its contributions; for example, Jaden Harris shows the way forward for climate politics in the aftermath of the Hunter by-election, and Kelvin Thomson sets out a perspective on 'big Australia' that is different to Rudd's, but one that we hope will encourage a lively and productive debate. I encourage Fabians across the country to heed Rudd's call to help craft a policy vision for Australia's future that tackles these mega-challenges.

The editorial team greatly appreciated the feedback that members and subscribers gave us after our inaugural issue last year. You'll see that we've listened and have made this issue bigger in size, scope, and yes, font! We're also pleased to be including letters to the editor, a fiction contribution, and book reviews for the first time.

Thanks to your support, we're also proud to have again paid our emerging voice contributors union rates for their writing. We have Adam Scorgie's thoughts on the nation's hollowed-out manufacturing capacity, and Audrey Marsh and Kiz Jackson exploring the how the Right of Australian politics weaponises LGBTIQ issues to fabricate and fuel a culture war.

As I wrote in our first issue, it is more difficult than ever for new and talented writers to find opportunities for paid work; the expectation that unestablished writers publish their work for free pervades the Australian media landscape. With your support, the *Fabian* will be a desperately needed exception to this rule.

We look forward to being able to expand our paid platform in the future, and are extremely grateful to all Australian Fabians members who have chipped in to support this necessary work.

With every new Fabians member, our capacity to create valuable and increasingly rare space for paid, progressive writing expands. With that in mind, we encourage you to ask your friends and family to become Fabians members too. We also now have the option to just subscribe to the *Fabian* magazine for a reduced rate.

Finally, I would also once again like to express my appreciation to the team that pulls this magazine together. Their enthusiasm, dedication and talent is what makes it not only possible, but also a great pleasure to be part of 🍷

Letters to the Editor

To submit your letter to the editor, please email: Zann Maxwell
editor@fabian.org.au

THANK YOU AND all your team for the first issue of *Fabian*; in a world which often seems inundated with bad news and trivia it is wonderful to read intelligent articles which portray compassionate and economically literate possibilities.

However, I want to highlight one absence: the importance of the humanities and social science. The Federal Government has created fierce financial penalties for students daring to study in these areas at university and the Government continually argues for the importance of STEM – Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths – partly because that is where the jobs of the future lie. This mantra has been repeated by the editors of newspapers and industry, despite the evidence that graduates in A – Arts – have employment outcomes that prove the Government claims wrong.

Anthony Albanese's article stresses the need for "respect for science" and concludes that Australia's success in combating the COVID pandemic "is also thanks to our high level of scientific and medical expertise – and crucially, the fact that it was listened to and acted on". There is no doubt about the importance of STEM but the Labor leader and others should

take note of that last clause: it is humanities expertise that enables the communication and listening which is crucial to the success of STEM subjects. Those writing articles and speaking of the importance of STEM ironically don't notice that when doing so they are not using STEM expertise but A expertise. The contrast between Kim Williams' piece on Gough Whitlam's legacy in valuing the arts and Anthony Albanese's is striking.

The consequence of devaluing Arts expertise is demonstrated starkly in the riotous attack on the US Capitol. We need STEAM, not STEM, and this should be one way in which Labor policies are differentiated from those of the current Federal Government.

DENNIS HASKELL AM
Perth, WA

THE OPTIMISM TRIGGERED in me by the editorial on page 1 of the first edition of the Australian Fabians Review evaporated at page 1 of the first contributed article, by Anthony Albanese, Leader of the parliamentary party.

Zann Maxwell wrote "We cannot allow the



Illustration by Kika Fuenzalida, @kikafuenzalida

economic settings which have immiserated so many, for so long, to endure beyond the latest crisis." The editor was referring to the "neoliberal order" which faltered – again – during the pandemic.

But next Mr Albanese wrote "Productivity is the key that unlocks faster economic growth, greater international competitiveness and higher living standards." In this single sentence, the leader aligned the Party with the neoliberal order, based as it is on unlimited economic expansion, free trade, disregard of employment levels and neglect of environmental limits – in summary, on an ethic of "get richer, faster".

Let's examine the first word, productivity, for example. The mainstream definition of multifactor productivity sees economic activity as the outcome of an exchange between labour and capital, in which 'success' can be achieved by squeezing more output from labour, or replacing labour with capital. The natural resource base is a silent and uncoded contributor, assumed to be available free of charge in unlimited quantities.

The most charitable – and I hope correct – interpretation of Mr Albanese's article is that a speechwriter in a hurry gathered up a bundle of clichés and submitted

it over his name. If it truly represents the parliamentary leadership's position, it is neglectful of collapsing environmental systems (other than climate, which gains a mention); the malevolent influence of the Murdoch press and Sky News; the importation of religious fanaticism into the Parliament; the rapid decline of ethical accountability in Parliament and never-ending attacks on scientific institutions and the ABC. There is no coherent vision of what a party inspired to pursue the public interest might do to restore competence and trust to government.

There is a vast and rich recent literature in progressive causes such as sustainability, environmental protection, social justice, peace studies, faith and ethics that can map out fresh directions for a post-COVID society. If there were any justification a decade ago for what the editor called a squandering of an opportunity presented by the global financial crisis to the political left without a platform of "serious, coherent alternative solutions", there is no such justification now.

GEOFF EDWARDS
Godwin Beach, Qld

New Variant, Old Politics

Nature creates viruses. But poor politicians
and politics create and sustain pandemics.
And pandemics create new politics and
transform societies.



© Ilyas Tayfun Salci / Shutterstock

BILL BOWTELL

Every new month of the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates how the Australian government is using a serious but manageable health crisis to engineer a radical 'New Deal' for Australia. On 2 July 2021, Scott Morrison announced a "National Four Phase Plan to Transition Australia's COVID-19 Response". The Plan was devoid of numbers, facts, targets or commitments. But Scott Morrison declared it to be a "New Deal".

It would be tempting, but mistaken, to pass this off as just one more politician riffing off President Franklin Roosevelt, who coined the phrase in 1932. But Morrison's ambitions for his New Deal extend far beyond extricating Australia from the increasingly onerous response to COVID created by his government. Inspired by American Republicans, Boris Johnson and our home-grown libertarians, the Morrison New Deal aspires to be every bit as radical and ambitious as FDR's.

Now, as in 1932, politicians are using an all-encompassing crisis to reshape their societies.

In 1932, President Roosevelt was confronted by a social and economic catastrophe caused by unregulated free-market casino capitalism. In 1929, the stock market imploded, plunging first America and then the world into the Great Depression. For three years, severe austerity and balanced budget policies pressed on governments by the same interests who had brought about the disaster in the first place had created only mass unemployment, business failures and social unrest.

By the time of Roosevelt's election in 1932, a

manageable crisis had morphed into one that threatened the foundations of capitalism and liberal democracy. Roosevelt's genius was to understand that the time for timid half-measures had passed. A bold and radical reshaping of the American economy and society was required to overcome the crisis and forestall the rise of domestic alternatives to American democracy.

The core of Roosevelt's New Deal was redistribution of wealth from the few to the many. Roosevelt ran large budget deficits, increased government spending and taxation, imposed regulations to rein in the worst excesses of the banks, broke up corporate monopolies and commissioned massive public and social works programs. Roosevelt's New Deal shifted the balance from profits to wages, created millions of new and better-paid jobs and stabilised American society at a higher and better level. The New Deal spent big to save on the grandest scale.

All-encompassing crises erode order, trust and confidence. Whether caused by Depressions or pandemics, by exposing systemic flaws and failures, such crises can clear the decks for radical reform and renovation. The question is in which direction and in whose interest.

ROOSEVELT'S NEW DEAL left America and the world a better place. Roosevelt's New Deal was socialist in instinct, redistributive in practice. It shifted hundreds of millions of people from poverty to sustained prosperity all within a commitment to liberal and open democracy.



© US Department of State

Strong, democratic government provided public goods – national defence, education, welfare, infrastructure, regulation, rule of law and health care. In this framework, people, families and businesses could thrive and prosper while a strong safety net supported those in need. The reality never quite matched the aspiration, but the direction of travel was clear and supported by the people.

After 1945, the New Deal's public health principles created a complex of new national and global health structures, institutions and policies. Most western countries, including Australia, re-built their health services based on the model of the socialist National Health Service implemented in the United Kingdom.

However, the resurgence of casino capitalism in the 1980s reinvigorated the free-market opponents of the New Deal settlement, especially in the United States and the United Kingdom. In the United States, the neoliberals laid waste to much of the New Deal public health system. In the United Kingdom, decades of "market reforms" to the National Health System steadily eroded the principles of public health provision.

These reforms were prosecuted in the name of providing choice and efficiency and went largely uncontested by the public. But they had long-term and serious consequences that the COVID pandemic cruelly exposed.

Neoliberalism undermined the ability of public health structures and institutions to provide independent and open scientific advice. When COVID emerged,

the responses of the world's governments diverged rapidly between the neoliberals and the rest.

AT THE BEGINNING of the pandemic, the United States, United Kingdom and Brazil were run by neoliberal governments, committed to free markets, small governments and budgets balanced by massive reductions in outlays on education, welfare and, ominously, public health in all its forms.

In those countries that moved rapidly to apply tried and tested public health principles through long-established and resilient structures, COVID deaths and illnesses were, with difficulty, contained. They dealt with the realities of COVID as best they could and strengthened their responses as dictated by the accumulation of facts and evidence. Broadly, science dictated the response.

But the governments of the United States, United Kingdom and Brazil put politics first. They subordinated once-fiercely independent scientific and public health advisers to walk-on roles to support the ideological imperatives of neoliberalism as applied to a viral emergency. They proclaimed that politics could prevail over the iron laws of physics, chemistry, biology and mathematics.

The facts reveal the truth.

EIGHTEEN MONTHS INTO the pandemic, the US, UK and Brazil together recorded 57.2 million cases and 1.25

“In Australia, the split between traditional public health principles and the new neoliberal response to COVID was apparent from early 2020.”

million deaths directly from COVID-19 and many more indirectly.

When the virus hit, they refused to shut their borders, impose domestic movement restrictions, mask mandates or swift national lockdowns. The point of moving rapidly at the early stages of any pandemic is to buy time, reduce illness and death in the hope that applied science can come up with treatments, vaccines or cures.

But in the name of “freedom”, the governments of the US, UK and Brazil initially abandoned their people to the consequences of “letting it in and letting it run”. For neoliberals, the coronavirus was apparently just another participant in the viral free market.

At the other end of the spectrum, collectivist, though not necessarily liberal democratic, countries galvanised to contain COVID. With geopolitical consequences still to become apparent, China moved fast and eliminated the threat of a COVID pandemic derailing its politics and social equilibrium. China has thus far recorded 92,000 cases and 4,636 deaths.

In Australia, the split between traditional public health principles and the new neoliberal response to COVID was apparent from early 2020. The initial response of the Morrison government and its planning for COVID was deeply influenced by their neo-liberal colleagues in the United Kingdom and the United States. The Morrison government did not accept that the Commonwealth government had over-arching national responsibility for public health outcomes.

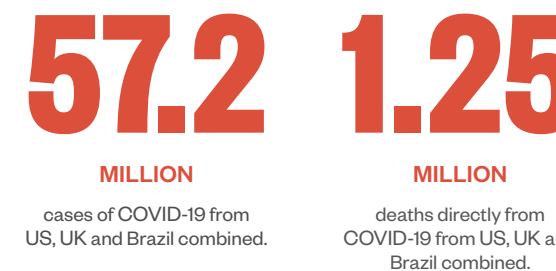
As cases occurred in the states and territories,

the responsibility for the response rested with them. In 2015, the federal government devolved its border protection and quarantine functions to the states and territories. In practice, the federal government abandoned its constitutional responsibility for quarantine entirely.

In the critical early months, the Morrison government kept most borders open, limited surveillance of incoming travellers, shipped off PPE packs in bulk to China and let aged care operators follow free-market self-regulation principles in the hope of reducing risk to aged care residents and staff.

This laissez-faire approach provoked dismay and incredulity within the robust public health system.

Propelled by public health professionals and the Australian people, on 22 March 2020, Australia locked down and, after a rocky few months, brought about COVID zero. This bought time and options to build effective quarantine and organise vaccine supply. But the Morrison government squandered the gift.



“The Morrison government’s New Deal is a blueprint for a post-COVID Australia that will be radically different in every way from the Australia we left behind in January 2020.”

As COVID has played out in Australia, the radicalism of the neoliberals strengthened. As in 1930s America, the crisis allowed the government to hack away at impediments to deep and radical political, economic and hence social change.

The Morrison government did not create COVID, but it has skilfully magnified the impacts of COVID in Australia to clear the decks for its own “New Deal”. The only thing of substance that Morrison’s New Deal has in common with FDR’s is massive deficit spending.

From March 2020, it was clear that a lockdown and other behavioural changes applied by State Premiers against the wishes of Morrison would bring transmission rates under control relatively rapidly. Letting the virus in and letting it run, as so catastrophically applied in the US, UK and Brazil, was precluded by the Australian lockdown.

The mass dismissals of employees that occurred in March 2020 and much of the huge stimulus packages required to support the newly unemployed were driven by the fear that Australia would be engulfed by COVID, as was happening in the United States and Europe.

But that never came to pass. To the astonishment of the neoliberal fatalists in the Federal government, application of public health principles stopped the virus in its tracks.

Yet the disruption caused by the fear of COVID delivered the Morrison government an unexpected opportunity for rectification of Australian politics

and society along neoliberal lines.

The Federal government precipitated an unnecessary unemployment crisis. The sharpest blows and cuts fell on the universities, arts sectors and casual and gig economy workers. JobKeeper arrangements largely excluded the hundreds of thousands employed in these sectors, while redistributing taxpayer funds to the rich and well-connected. Once the Melbourne second wave had been dispatched and COVID zero achieved, by October 2020 COVID-19 was as over in Australia as it was in China.

From mid-2020, the economic and social disruption caused by the COVID response should have begun to dissipate. But instead, in mid-2020, the Morrison government made the critical decision that prolonged and intensified the misery of the COVID response.

In a series of meetings in July and August 2020, the Morrison government declined to pursue options that would have secured the delivery of vaccines developed by Pfizer and Moderna by the beginning of 2021. In doing so, the Morrison government rejected the better strategy of reducing risk by multiplying suppliers. It chose to back only one vaccine candidate – AstraZeneca.

They then tied the delivery of AZ to a manufacturing deal with CSL, a deal that CSL reluctantly but eventually was obliged to embrace. Alone of the OECD countries, the Australian government failed to procure a range of vaccines that would have allowed rapid, mass vaccination of the population by mid-2021. And



Sydney, Australia — March 27, 2020: Bronte Beach closed after crowds ignore virus warnings, Bronte Beach Australia. © RugliG / Shutterstock

after the more infectious Delta variant emerged in December 2020, the Morrison government adamantly resisted all entreaties, pleas and scientific evidence to build Delta-proof quarantine facilities.

The effect of the two decisions on vaccine procurement and quarantine has been to prolong Australia’s emergence from the botched COVID response until at least sometime in 2022. Inbound travel has been slashed.

In July 2021, the application of “lockdown as a last resort” libertarianism shut down Sydney for at least eight weeks and perhaps longer. It is not possible any longer to give the Morrison government the benefit of the doubt and ascribe these decisions to bad luck or incompetence. Rather, the cat was belled by the New Deal announcement on 2 July.

On the present trajectory there is no way that most Australians will travel abroad again until sometime after March 2022 - the second anniversary of the lockdown that saved Australia.

The Morrison government’s New Deal is a blueprint for a post-COVID Australia that will be radically different in every way from the Australia we left behind in January 2020.

It’s not a New Deal but an Old Deal.

An economy run for the benefit of the wealthy and well-connected. And the abandonment of national government responsibilities across the board – including public health. It is deeply wrong that such a blueprint is being put together in secrecy, with the

input of like-minded politicians, sectional interests and lobbyists, but without the involvement of the Australian people.

All the goals, assumptions, modelling, advice and arguments should be published in a White Paper.

Let the Morrison government make its best case for opening Australia to COVID without full vaccination of the population and variant-proof quarantine. Put on the table the plans for vaccine passports and how the international travel system might be reconstructed to let people travel and not the virus. Rather than concentrate on the benefits of “freedom” also outline the many and varied costs in lives, illness and jobs that will accrue to vulnerable and less-wealthy Australians in the ‘new’ neoliberal Australia.

Let’s have a full and frank discussion of the increase in surveillance and the erosion of rights and liberties that are being planned in the name of containing COVID. And be told what, if anything, is being planned to ensure that the next pandemic will be managed far better than the Australian government has managed COVID.

Only a process based on the values of truth, transparency and debate can rebuild the confidence and trust shattered by the Morrison government’s mishandling of the COVID response.

The New Deal Australia wants and needs is not the Old Deal being resurrected in Scott Morrison’s Canberra office. 🚩

A Land of Flooding Clichés

BOB CARR

Laying down a view on celebrating January 26, Scott Morrison implied that Indigenous complaints were overstated because it wasn't "a flash day" for convicts either.

The leader of conservative Australia may have been struggling to recall things half-heard at a dinner of the Menzies Institute. But if in the 1920s, Russian scientists had planted the brain of a dead Bolshevik in the cranium of a Siberian Husky and the parahuman had offered a similarly monosyllabic locution, they would have regarded their experiment as a setback for Soviet science.

Menzies, Fraser or Howard might have made a better conservative defence of January 26. My own side might also be doing better at the language of politics.

The politics of the pandemic has got Labor repeating negatives about itself with a half crazed, dogged insistence

After the Upper Hunter by-election, former leader Jodi McKay gave her own party a tongue lashing. It was always a Coalition seat and if you say Labor lost its loyal supporters that just multiplies the damage. Joel Fitzgibbon savages Labor about climate when he could indict- not his own party- but boardrooms like BHP's for putting profit above jobs as they vacate coal.

One Labor Senator last year wrote that she was sick of people who look down on those who sent kids

to private schools. The Wizard of Oz didn't provide a weaker straw man. In 17 years as a Labor leader I never heard anyone scorn constituents for choosing private education. As Premier I talked up the contribution of the low-fee, non-state sector. So have all Labor leaders.

Oppositions also get trapped by defensiveness, stuck with a telltale phrase, pleading "The problem is.."

The problem is the 24 hour news cycle, the problem is media won't report our policies, the problem is the government is living off Labor reforms...

Drop it. Try a better locution. Begin saying, "the opportunity we have..."

The opportunity we have is parents at the school gate are talking about climate change. The opportunity we have is a block of voters see Morrison as Scotty from Marketing. The opportunity we have is a 24 hour news cycle to put our case.

"WORDS, WORDS, WORDS," Hamlet said when asked what he was reading.

Knowing their power, the sainted Labor speechwriter Graham Freudenberg crafted speeches for Gough Whitlam that sent a message: Labor's leader was better than Holt, Gorton or McMahon. Whitlam's speeches, including a famous denunciation of the Victorian ALP, branded him future Prime Minister



and statesman who might meet royalty and presidents and not present us a nation of "rustic clowns."

Speeches from both sides these days don't even aspire to freshness of language or imagery - wearing their flatness as a badge of honour. It's as if George Orwell never wrote *Politics and the English Language*, his essay that insisted, "never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print."

At the end of the bushfire crisis Josh Frydenberg spoke to an Australia-Canada forum in Melbourne. "As the great Australian poet Dorothea Mackellar said, we are..."

The Federal Treasurer, or his speechwriter, rolled the cliché our way, like a hospital trolley rattling along the corridor.

"...a land of droughts and flooding rains."

The image was dead on arrival. Stale as 50 year old potted meat.

Not a "single fresh, arresting phrase," Orwell said about some writing. That might be applied to the speeches of Labor shadows.


Is anyone telling staffers to junk "rah rah" phrases? To dive deep into history and literature, to surface with sprightly words and concrete images? To search Curtin

and Chifley material for something fresher than the catechistic invocation of the "light on the hill"? Just as Frydenberg's staff should have searched Australian poetry for a keener quote than MacKellar's.

Leaders need to be lion and fox, advised Machiavelli - as Paul Keating could be, with the high mindedness of the Redfern address and, as well, a cheeky counterthrust at question time like "...I want to do you slowly."

Where have the gags gone? Prime Minister Billy McMahon taking a break on the Isle of Capri at Surfers? "Tiberius with a telephone," riposted Gough Whitlam. McMahon says the 1972 election will be December 2. "Anniversary of Austerlitz," says Whitlam, when another crushing defeat was inflicted on "a ramshackle, reactionary coalition."

Mockery should be reinstated in the armoury, deft enough to have the electorate chuckling, even the other side hiding grins. It will make your own team stop griping that "the problem is" something or other and start talking about the opportunities if the other side can be painted as risible buffoons.

Good words can be transformative. Unleash them. 

Artwork: 'The Hon EG Whitlam', 1972, Clifton Pugh.
© Historic Memorials Collection, Parliament House Art Collection.

The Return of Full Employment

How the unemployed became a tool to discipline workers and keep wages down, and why it doesn't have to be this way.

A detail from a statue group at the Franklin Delano Roosevelt Memorial that portrays the depth of the Great Depression.
© Matt Ragen / Shutterstock

STEVEN HAIL

The evidence that unemployment has a significant and long-lasting impact on wellbeing is overwhelming. It goes far beyond the purely financial consequences of not being able to find paid work. It is one of very few life events to which most people never fully adjust. Loss of self-esteem, identity, interaction and a sense of purpose, alongside a crushing uncertainty about the future which can become hopelessness. These are corrosive to mental health, family relationships and local communities. Unemployment has been compared to an epidemic, with consequences which can last a lifetime.

It is within the power of national governments to end this epidemic. They have done it before, with involuntary unemployment virtually eliminated for thirty years after 1945. But in the mid-1970s, aided by geopolitical factors, the unemployment epidemic escaped from the economics departments of a number of (mainly North American) universities. It took the form of a virus named monetarism, and since then governments have chosen to live with it rather than to invest in a return to full employment.

There are good reasons for thinking that the permanent elimination of this virus lies in the development and implementation of a federal Job Guarantee. Proposals for a Job Guarantee, as an effective vaccine against involuntary underemployment, have been around for many years, with more recent versions described by economists such as William Mitchell in Australia, and Pavlina Tcherneva in America and their colleagues. Large-scale employment programmes sharing some of the features of a Job Guarantee have been introduced successfully in India and (temporarily) in Argentina. Almost all governments have run programs of one kind or another with the aim of supporting the young or long-term unemployed. Tragically, none have guaranteed all those wanting to work the right to a socially productive and rewarding job, at a fair wage and with good working conditions, for as long as that job is needed. As a result, in Australia, as in other countries, the unemployment epidemic has been allowed to persist for more than four decades.

Imagine instead that Australia had in place a locally managed, but federally funded Job Guarantee. Anyone looking for employment could turn up at their local Job Guarantee office, see a counsellor and select a suitable opportunity from the local 'job bank'. The job bank would be based on a federal template but amended by local authorities in consultation with their communities to fit local needs. Participants might work in a local community garden; on environmental restoration projects; might be involved in mitigating bushfire risks; or could be helping in schools, libraries or local charities. They might be supporting the elderly to remain living

independently. They could be working in local recycling centres. They might be participating in community arts and cultural projects. They might be taking advantage of opportunities to train in areas of local skill shortages. The range of opportunities would depend on the local community.

The job bank would always be available to those who needed it, or who just wanted to work in activities supporting the local community and environment, with good working conditions and at a fair minimum wage. But enough activities would be scalable so that the program could easily expand during an economic downturn and contract when the economy was booming. Done correctly, this would have eliminated both involuntary unemployment and underemployment, and helped match those working in the pool of Job Guarantee workers with vacancies in the private sector (and non-Job Guarantee public sector) as those opportunities arose.

Instead, for more than forty years, job seekers have been left to compete with each other for jobs which have always been in short supply. Those not fortunate enough to find a vacant seat in a great game of musical chairs are described as 'leaners' rather than 'lifters'. All they are offered is a harsh and punitive regime of searching for non-existent jobs, going on poorly designed training courses and being forced onto often pointless work-for-the-dole activities.

PERHAPS THE BEST month to have been looking for a job in Australia in the last forty years was February 2008, when the unemployment rate dipped very slightly below 4.0% of the labour force – the only time this has happened since the mid-1970s. Even then, there were about 450,000 people actively looking for work and not enough suitable jobs to go around. And although Australia officially escaped a recession during the Global Financial Crisis, the number of unemployed persons was about 50% higher than this by June 2009. The unemployment rate has been nowhere near its 2008 level since.

However, we really should not be focusing on the unemployment rate any longer, given the state of our insecure twenty-first century labour market. It is a wholly inadequate measure of the unmet need for jobs, and has been at least since the millennium, when the number of underemployed workers edged above the number of officially unemployed for the first time.

To be officially unemployed, you must be seeking work, available to start right away, and currently have no paid employment at all. One hour of paid employment is enough to disqualify you from the statistic, regardless of how much you need more hours. In a country where more than 30% of those in work are

in part-time jobs, and where underemployment has been decisively above unemployment for nearly two decades, we ought to shift our gaze.

Most analysts agree that the underutilisation rate, which combines unemployment and underemployment, is a better measure of the success or otherwise of employment policy, and it tells a sorry tale.

Australia's underutilisation rate has been below 10% of our labour force only twice since 1982, and then only marginally and fleetingly. Essentially, for four decades, we have failed to create enough jobs to meet the needs of those looking for work, leaving hundreds of thousands searching for jobs that do not exist, and millions in insecure employment. And all the while, politicians of both major parties have boasted about job creation, occasionally even claiming to have achieved full employment. They have tolerated unemployment while at the same time implementing and then maintaining a punitive approach to the unemployed, as though the main problem was with the motivation of those looking for work. It was not and it is not. The problem is a lack of accessible jobs and the cause of this problem is the failure of successive governments to ensure those jobs are available, itself a consequence of an adherence to an outdated and discredited economic paradigm.

IT WAS NOT always this way. On the issuance of its 1945 'The White Paper Full Employment in Australia', the Australian Commonwealth Government accepted responsibility for the achievement and maintenance of full employment. This meant "a secure prospect unmarred by the fear of idleness and the dole". The use of unemployment as a mechanism to intimidate workers and depress real wages was to be a thing of the past. The Commonwealth Employment Service was established the following year to support those looking for work, to liaise with local employers and to analyse and react to skills shortages. By 1948, the Government could with justification claim a real commitment to article 23.1 of the newly proclaimed Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states "everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment".

There followed the most successful decades in Australian economic history. The economy grew faster than ever before or since. Inequality and relative poverty continued to fall. Genuine full employment was maintained for thirty years, with the unemployment rate typically between 1 and 2%, and a slight uptick above 2% in 1962 almost costing the Menzies Government a federal election. By 1974, Australia was a

“On the issuance of its 1945 White Paper, the Australian Commonwealth Government accepted responsibility for the achievement and maintenance of full employment.”

country with Scandinavian levels of inequality. For a generation, workers shared in the benefits of rising prosperity through increased real wages, without the threat of the sack leading to prolonged unemployment and poverty. There were plenty of jobs for the young and long-term unemployment was insignificant.

Then all this was given away, when it need not have been.

AS IN MANY other countries, Australia's politicians reacted to an inflation spike caused by the efforts of a cartel of oil exporting nations to drive up the price of oil. They abandoned our long national commitment to full employment and embraced monetarism and neoliberalism in its place. They chose to react to a problem in the world energy market by using mass unemployment to drive down wages, and recession as a blunt implement to attack inflation.

In place of full employment, policy makers borrowed Milton Friedman's notion that there was a "natural" rate of unemployment which could only be reduced by policies that increased inequality, shifted bargaining power from labour to capital, and punished the unemployed.

Later, essentially the same concept was called the "non-accelerating inflation rate of unemployment" (or NAIRU), and the use of unemployment to discipline workers and keep real wages down became permanent government and central bank policy. Policy makers were persuaded that pushing the unemployment rate too low would be unsustainable and inflationary, and that 5% or even 8% unemployment could legitimately be described as "full employment". This is a very attractive notion to any politician who wants an easy life. It means that whatever the official unemployment rate happens to have been in the recent past can be defined as full employment. It means that policies to favour major donors and political insiders, and which appear to shift the blame for unemployment onto the unemployed themselves, can be portrayed as sound common sense.

IT SEEMS ABSURD to manage the economy on the basis that it is essential to create a scarcity of available jobs to limit inflation, while portraying those who are unable to find jobs as 'dole bludgers', or at least as people lacking in employment skills. And yet that is what happened, first under Paul Keating and then later and more fully under John Howard and Peter Costello. Over time, the Commonwealth Employment Service was transformed from an institution designed to support jobseekers, to one with a focus on enforced job search and concerning itself with employability

rather than genuine employment opportunities. The logical endpoint was reached when most of its functions were privatised, leading to the much maligned Jobactive network.

THE YEARS OF full employment between 1945 and 1975 were based on a Keynesian approach to economic policy. In its crudest form, this meant ensuring total spending in the economy was always high enough to ensure that there were sufficient employment opportunities for everyone, with the public sector standing by to mop up anyone who missed out.

Based on the budget papers as published at the time, rather than later amendments to the accounting, this involved Governments planning for budget deficits every year from the early 1950s into the 1970s, with discretionary increases in deficits when unemployment threatened to breach 2% and lower deficits when the economy was closer to its full employment ceiling.

The risk of rising inflation due to a wage-price spiral in a fully employed economy was not ignored. It had been discussed in the 1945 White Paper, where it was argued that the difficulties of managing inflation in a full employment economy were worth it, given the importance of full employment for individual well-being and social prosperity. This risk was contained, with the cooperation of unions, employers and government, until the mid-1970s, and that spike in oil prices.

The 'Phillips Curve' relationship between inflation and unemployment may have become more difficult to manage over time, even if the oil price shock had never happened. Structural unemployment can raise the NAIRU, due to an increasing mismatch between the skills required to compete for jobs in the modern economy and those possessed by people looking for work. But this did not suddenly become an issue in 1975.

The American institutional economist Hyman Minsky, writing in the 1960s, had a more sophisticated analysis. The apparent success of the Keynesian revolution after 1945 was contingent on a particular financial and industrial structure, state of technology,

“The years of full employment between 1945 and 1975 were based on a Keynesian approach to economic policy.”



“Just as the central bank can always rescue the banking system, should it be short of liquidity, the federal government is always able to rescue job seekers, should the economy be short of jobs.”

institutional set-up and set of social attitudes and historical experiences which was likely to break down over time. Keynesian stop-go policies would become less effective as time went by, and more inflationary and prone to financial crises. Minsky’s institutional analysis was far more grounded in realism than Milton Friedman’s abstract monetarism, but less susceptible to mathematical modelling, and less attractive to fellow economists and their conservative supporters. As the Keynesian consensus of the early post-war decades crumbled, the world had a choice between Friedman’s abstract monetarism and Minsky’s institutional analysis. Minsky never had a chance.

Minsky believed that genuinely full employment could only be sustained in the long run if the federal government acted as an employer of last resort. Just as the central bank can always rescue the banking system, should it be short of liquidity, the federal government is always able to rescue job seekers, should the economy be short of jobs. If banks could have a lender of last resort in the interest of financial stability, workers could have an employer of last resort, in the interest of macroeconomic stability and social justice. Minsky recommended that the federal government offer a perfectly elastic demand curve for labour at the federal minimum wage.

MANY OF THE modern proponents of a Job Guarantee are former colleagues or students of Minsky or are at least heavily influenced by his work. This includes leading American modern monetary theorists,

Randall Wray, Stephanie Kelton and Pavlina Tcherneva. Minsky himself saw Keynes as his greatest influence. The proposed Job Guarantee developed by economists at the Centre of Full Employment and Equity in Australia did not have its roots in Minsky, but in the work of William Mitchell, who is more influenced by Kalecki and Marx than by Keynes. Mitchell is one of the original developers of modern monetary theory, alongside the fund manager Warren Mosler and Wray. Not all proponents of a federal Job Guarantee are modern monetary theory economists, but the increasing prominence of this school of thought within macroeconomics, and particularly the success of Kelton’s best-selling book *The Deficit Myth*, has certainly helped to promote it.

The modern monetary theory federal Job Guarantee establishes an effective minimum wage, as opposed to one which is conditional on the recipient being able to obtain employment in a labour market with insufficient jobs to go around. It is funded by the currency-issuing federal government. Estimates of the fiscal impact of the Job Guarantee are consistent with there being no need to raise taxes or introduce new taxes to offset any inflationary impact from associated spending. It is genuinely universal, and available to all who are not already in full-time employment. It is voluntary, as a right which is accessible to all, but compulsory for none. It does not require the elimination of other programs. It is designed to be a permanent feature of economic management. It is to be administered locally, reflecting local needs and the skills of local workers. It is not intended to involve

for-profit organisations, but to be for the benefit of participants and their communities. It should not compete with local firms or involve any substitution of conventional public sector jobs. It is green, in the sense that the jobs should ideally enhance the environment and assist with a transition to a zero net emission economy, or at worst have a neutral impact.

To introduce a Job Guarantee is to move away from an approach to managing the economy based on the maintenance of a buffer-stock of involuntary unemployment towards one based on a Job Guarantee pool enjoying the benefits of participating in social provisioning, with a fair wage and decent working conditions. The Job Guarantee is a superior counter-cyclical stabiliser than the one currently provided by our tax and welfare system.

While implementation would be an administrative challenge, there are numerous examples of similar programs being introduced quickly and effectively in the historical record. Given an appropriate investment in administrative capacity we could run a national employment service as efficiently and effectively as we run healthcare, education or national defence.

Econometric studies indicate that the fiscal impact of a Job Guarantee is far smaller than that of a universal basic income. They show that It is not inflationary, not in any sense unsustainable, and that a Job Guarantee can set at the margin the appropriate level of the fiscal deficit (or surplus) to maintain non-inflationary full employment.

Perhaps best of all, a Job Guarantee can remove

the threat of the sack from those in poorly paid, insecure jobs with poor working conditions. It can begin to correct the excessive inequality which has been allowed to develop in Australia over almost half a century. It can permanently eradicate the non-financial costs of unemployment, improve social well-being, and have a diverse range of benefits beyond ending the waste of resources which goes with forced idleness.

Surveys indicate that this policy option is popular with voters right across the political spectrum, with people of all ages and genders. It is being discussed increasingly widely by policy makers in Washington DC and elsewhere, and in Australia has been supported by the majority of branches of Young Labor, and by a motion passed through the Tasmanian Parliament in 2020 by the Greens with ALP support.

WE LIVE IN an environment where jobs are under threat from automation or the need to reduce or eliminate some activities to limit climate change, and where the implications of dividing up a society between those in secure jobs and those who no longer have easy access to employment are well understood. It is inevitable that the role a Job Guarantee could play in a transition to environmental sustainability and social justice will come increasingly under the spotlight 📺

Forward on Climate

Learning the Right Lessons
from the Hunter By-Election.

JADEN HARRIS

The recent NSW Upper-Hunter state by-election should serve as a stark reminder to Labor that there are no simplistic solutions to the challenges posed by the clean energy transition. Sticking our heads in the sand and pretending nothing is happening will not revive our electoral fortunes. It is a sure path to electoral defeat.

This by-election arguably received more nationwide media coverage than the recent Tasmanian and Western Australian state elections, and it sent shockwaves through the NSW Labor Party – ultimately resulting in a leadership change. The resonance of this by-election demonstrated how the Hunter is viewed as a nationwide litmus test of how coal communities are responding to the economic shift to clean energy, and there are important lessons for Labor to draw.

The narrative of this by-election was set up as a dichotomic contest of pro and anti-coal forces. Malcolm Turnbull and a cast of independents on one side; and the Nationals, Labor and One Nation all jostling to out-coal themselves on the other. But NSW Labor didn't just play into this narrative, we actively helped to create it. The campaign was built on the faulty assumption that a full-frontal embrace of coal would deliver a 1 in 100-year electoral miracle.

Early in the campaign Joel Fitzgibbon boasted that Labor could win the seat, despite its historic difficulties,

with “the right script”. That script – a former miner as candidate, a total embrace of coal, turning a blind eye to the economic changes ahead, and the sort of dog whistling about “inner-city greenies” we normally get from One Nation or Barnaby Joyce. In the final days Fitzgibbon described the campaign and candidate as “one of the best”, suggesting it might be a template for Labor moving forward.

Instead, Labor's vote collapsed by nearly a third, and delivered us a measly 21.2% primary vote. This campaign was a test of how Labor will perform in the regions when we abandon credible climate change policy and ignore the nuanced economic realities and genuine anxieties on the ground. The future outlook for our party if we replicate this approach is dim indeed, and that's before we begin to consider the electoral impacts this approach will deliver in the cities and other regions facing climate impacts.

This simplistic and naive approach fails to learn from the best of Labor's history, and it is now proven to be an electoral dud.

The truth is that views in our resources regions are much more nuanced than this false dichotomy. Opinions on coal in the Hunter are less about climate change or inner-city greenies and more about land use conflicts: the local impacts on agriculture, water and air pollution. Labor has over many years sought to

Left image:
© Tom Fisk / Pexels

Right image:
© Giorgi Iremadze / Pexels

make credible and science-based policies to balance these conflicts, and that should never be abandoned for a simplistic rhetoric which doesn't resonate.

Outside of land use conflicts, the larger issue is the rightfully felt anxiety these communities feel in the face of the major economic shifts. The Hunter has seen more than its fair share of economic disruption over recent decades, the bruises and scars of which are felt today by many. The changes ahead could perhaps be the most significant for the region since European colonisation.

A key lesson of the 2019 federal election was that we don't win these communities over through vague talk of market mechanisms and the promise of jobs to come. We need proof and market interventions to guarantee outcomes. The other lesson: Labor will never win when our core constituencies are divided. Trade unionists, environmentalists, and those of us concerned with creating livable and viable communities all share common values and visions, and we must never let our opponents divide us up.

After 2019, the Labor Environment Action Network (LEAN) recognised these realities, and through our local branch in the Hunter region, got to work with allies from across the union and environmental movements to form the Hunter Jobs Alliance (HJA). The HJA is an alliance of nine unions and four community environment groups, united in our vision of a prosperous and sustainable future for the Hunter region, where workers, their families and the environment can all thrive.

The Alliance was established to create a space for locals to come together, turn down the heat in the debate, and build a coalition to fight for sustainable and diversified job creation opportunities. We focus not where our opinions may differ, but on what unites us. Standing together, we can ensure all our voices aren't left out of the debate about our collective futures which is too often dominated by big business.

Forming the Alliance involved bringing people together at kitchen tables and pubs across the region with their union organisers and community leaders. Every time, the values shared between all our groups became clearer and stronger. Everyone shares a sense of pride in the region's industrial history and its role in powering the state's economy. Everyone wants the region to be a place where families can continue to raise children with decent job opportunities. Everyone wants their kids to live in a safe climate and clean environment. And everyone wants to have a say in shaping their own community's future.

Nobody is pretending the solutions are simple, or quick. Views among both analysts and the community continue to differ about the phase of economic change ahead. Those finer details can be debated



© Pixabay / Pexels

“Regions like the Hunter across Australia are facing three intersecting crises. The climate crisis, a jobs and economic security crisis, and a crisis of democracy.”

endlessly. But that's not productive. The HJA argues that our focus should instead be on *how we respond* to the inevitable changes. We need to learn the painful lessons from regions overseas that haven't coped well with changes. We need to work together, and to start that work as early as possible.

Throughout our conversations it was clear that most people can see the change coming, and indeed many are already starting to feel it. Jobs are becoming less certain, apprentice numbers are falling, pay is flat, and there are fewer coal trains running down the valley. Matters are being made worse by China's restrictions on Australian coal exports, news of which broke on the same day we launched the HJA, making a

strong case for economic diversification on the front page of the local *Newcastle Herald*.

Yet some workers told us that despite witnessing this for themselves firsthand, and recognising the realities of climate change, they were still skeptical about the prospects of jobs in future industries. They told us they weren't loyal to coal or to polluting the environment. They were loyal to their decent, union jobs. They were loyal to their families and their economic security. Fair enough. For those of us who aren't on the coalface, I reckon most of us would feel and react the exact same way, even if we struggle to admit it. It was a reflection for me as an environmentalist that our movement needs to do better at campaigning for

“We can be clear eyed about the scale of the threat posed by climate change and, like Joe Biden, promote a view of climate action through the lens of job creation and opportunity.”



© Daniel Mitchell / Shutterstock

real and tangible solutions. Campaigning for projects that workers can see happening in their communities and literally get their hands on. Projects with decent union jobs that employ real people, people that live and breathe these communities. That is how we build confidence that renewables are not a fairy tale, that they can in fact power heavy industry and manufacturing. An endless focus on targets (as important as they are) without any substance behind them is not a recipe to win – it distracts us from talking about the benefits of action.

The Hunter has no shortage of sustainable diversification opportunities in front of it. Australia's abundance of renewable energy, combined with the region's industrial skills base, and access to a seaport all position the Hunter well to succeed in a carbon-constrained world. Vast opportunities exist in the production of green steel and value-adding manufacturing supply chains. Securing the future of the Tomago Aluminum smelter with firmed renewables will ensure that it remains globally competitive. Mine rehabilitation and land restoration can create thousands of jobs with positive benefits for ecosystems and agriculture. Resource recovery and sustainable materials manufacturing, particularly for coal fly ash, can also create jobs with positive flow-on benefits. Of course, not all of these jobs can be created overnight, but the planning needs to be started now. Investment decisions are being made, and we can't forget that we are competing with regions overseas that are well ahead of us thanks to governments that understand the importance of investing in industry and stable energy policy.

Regions like the Hunter across Australia are facing three intersecting crises. The climate crisis, a jobs and economic security crisis, and a crisis of democracy. Trust in major political parties and institutions is low and falling. We saw this at the by-election with 48% of voters leaving the major parties. This lack of trust in government to deliver outcomes makes it difficult for those of us campaigning for action on climate change and social democratic outcomes more broadly. But trust in community leaders, through unions and environment groups remains strong. This is the foundation that the HJA is built upon - being grounded in the local.

Reaching deeply into communities and building alliances is tough work, but it can be done. The Labor Party is at its best when we build broad coalitions and present a positive vision for the future. Labor has only ever won government from opposition at a federal level by doing this, and notably combining this with strong environmental commitments as Whitlam, Hawke and Rudd all did.

AS ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN rises across the electorate, Labor's commitments on climate and environment have enhanced our electoral prospects. The Emerson/Weatherill review and the 2019 ANU Australian Electoral Study both confirmed this to be the case for the 2019 federal election. At a state level in NSW, climate and the environment were key issues in the only two seats we picked up in 2019: Coogee and Lismore. I can't imagine the Upper Hunter campaign rhetoric enhanced our prospects of retaining these seats in 2023. The other two seats that changed hands in that election were Barwon and Murray. Both were gained by the Shooters Fishers Farmers (SFF) from the Nationals where environmental issues also dominated, namely water mismanagement and local opposition to coal seam gas mining (CSG).

Labor cannot rest on the laurels of its historic environmental achievements. We now face a politicised environmental flank on both our left and right. The NSW Liberals have recognised these lessons from 2019 and installed Matt Kean in the environment portfolio after years of neglect and downright vandalism. The Nationals, too, have begun to nuance their position on economic transition. During the Upper Hunter campaign, they announced a Mining Communities Future Fund and a statutory Hunter Expert Panel to guide new investment decisions for job creation.

Younger voters casting ballots for the first time at the next election don't recall the environmental wins of Hawke and Keating. They probably don't know that Kevin Rudd signed the Kyoto Protocol over ten years ago, let alone its significance. They don't know Bob Carr introduced world leading emissions policies and expanded the Parks Estate in NSW. Without consistent and strong commitments Labor risks seriously damaging our long-term electoral prospects with a new generation of voters across Australia who are extremely concerned about their future.

In the wake of Upper-Hunter, and with more elections fast approaching, we cannot let the lessons of the 2019 elections continue to go unlearned. The solution to these challenges is not to try and turn back the clock on Labor's proud climate legacy and retreat to a nothing-but-coal narrative. We must continue to lead on climate, whilst doing better at standing with regions that feel vulnerable - by making interventions to secure their economic future. We can be clear eyed about the scale of the threat posed by climate change and, like Joe Biden, promote a view of climate action through the lens of job creation and opportunity. Rebuilding trust in our core constituencies that Labor in government can deliver projects that create decent, union jobs isn't easy. But failing to do so only risks leaving them behind, to the benefit of far-right political opportunists taking advantage of vulnerable workers. ■

A Fabricated Culture War

The supposed battle between LGBTIQ Australians and working class communities.



KIZ JACKSON &
AUDREY MARSH

For those of us with an intersecting interest in LGBTIQ rights and the labour movement, the final scenes of the 2014 film *Pride* are a particularly heart warming affair; dozens of Welsh trade union activists pile off a bus to stand in solidarity with their LGBTIQ comrades at the 1985 Gay Pride Parade. Of course, this is inspired by the real story of Lesbian and Gays Support the Miners, an organisation which formed in support of the National Union of Mineworkers during the Thatcher years. While these scenes are notable for the delight found in the union of unlikely comrades, how unlikely is such an alliance in 2021?

If you open the pages of *The Australian* or listen to the vitriol of Mark Latham and other One Nation parliamentarians, you would be led to believe that there is a war raging on every suburban street. On one side is LGBTIQ activists, hell bent on abolishing heterosexual marriage and cisgender identities, and on the other side are nuclear families with opposite sex parents clutching their pearls, shocked by the notion of marriage equality. These images drive Facebook comments and give purpose to reactionary politicians, but they sell short the nuance and complexity of the LGBTIQ experience and the makeup of the modern Australian community.

LGBTIQ people, especially trans and gender diverse Australians, are the latest in a long line of ‘others’ ridiculed by certain corners of the Australian media and political landscape. Our conservative media has been all too ready to import a culture war from the United States, with fights over inclusive bathrooms, trans girls in sports and gender affirming hormone therapy. You only need to read the most recent publications of organisations like Advance Australia to understand that anti-trans and LGBTIQ politics comes from the same toxic swirling pool of ‘wokeness’ fear and anti-‘cancel culture’ rhetoric that dominates American political discourse. That a fear of trans rights is driven by the same fear that causes outrage about discussions of race, diversity and even climate change.

The use of trans, gender diverse and LGBTIQ people as a scapegoat for these fears is deeply rooted in successful cultural moments like Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, anti-marriage equality arguments and the gay panic defence. While the victory for marriage equality in Australia has arguably dulled some of the energy from culture wars targeted at same sex attracted people, it has kicked anti-trans propaganda up a notch. While it seems some time ago that marriage equality was decried for creating motherless and fatherless children or equating homosexuality with

bestiality or paedophilia - this energy has been channelled into generating fear of trans women in bathrooms or making little boys wear dresses without their consent at school. Fear-based politics works. It distracts us from the real issues of education, employment and the economy. It solidifies alliances between conservatives against elite progressives.

In the 2016 Australian Census, 1,260 people gave an intentional and valid sex/gender diverse response. This is an underrepresentation and the Australian Bureau of Statistics acknowledged that “people who have been treated with disrespect, abuse and discrimination because of their sex or gender may be unwilling to reveal their sex in an official document”. Even with limited data, we can be relatively sure that trans and gender diverse people comprise a small portion of the Australian community. But organisations like Advance Australia would have you believe that policy reform to enhance trans and gender diverse people’s equality is “nothing short of a full-scale assault on mainstream Australian values in our classrooms”.

HERE IS WHAT it really is - fighting to make it easier for trans people to change their identity on their birth certificate, ensuring trans people aren’t fired from their jobs, upholding policies that protect trans kids at school and reducing bullying for one of the most at-risk communities in Australia. Trans people are significantly more likely to self-harm or kill themselves, they face violence for using the correct bathroom, are more likely to be homeless, be mistreated in medical care and are less likely to graduate from school due to bullying and harassment. What do we have to lose by allowing this community to win?

If you read Mark Latham’s inaugural speech to the NSW Parliament you will find the following list: “A Christian, a conservative, a libertarian, a nationalist, a working-class larrikin, an outsider from the vast suburbs and regions of our nation.” These are the people he claims to represent.

But there is a patronising myth inherent in how Australians discuss our suburbs and the people who inhabit them. Right wing politicians like Latham assure us that they understand the ordinary people, the silent majority and middle Australia but “their conception of ordinary Australians reduces the people that they claim to speak for to an opposing caricature as code for anti-progressivism and anti-political correctness”. And the 2019 federal election result told us that Labor continues to climb an uphill battle on winning working-class suburban seats and face the ongoing challenge of balancing the perceived views of its inner city and outer suburban constituencies. We must silence the scare campaign and believe working class communities are capable of nuance

- in opinion and demography. The CFMEU publicly backed marriage equality back in 2017 and the AMWU told us that “equality is union business”. These declarations did not cause these unions to crumble. There are Rainbow Families Playgroups in Penrith, First Nations LGBTIQ art workshops in Blacktown, targeted youth services in Sunshine, PFLAGs in Port Macquarie, queer basketball teams in Darwin and aged care services with the rainbow tick everywhere from Nowra to Narrabeen.

It is simply naive to think that there are not LGBTIQ people living as part of every community around Australia and that traditional suburban communities are not capable of open-mindedness. And before we start to break down our suburban communities into even smaller demography subsets to explain why anti-LGBTIQ politics makes sense – let us look at the facts. 2021 survey data from LGBTIQ+ Health Australia tell us 16% of LGBTIQ adults in Australia were born overseas and 20% of transgender and gender diverse adults living in Australia were not born here.

LGBTIQ people are not all living in Darlinghurst and trying to change the curriculums of schools in Doonside. They are community members, culturally and linguistically diverse people, parents at schools, residents in aged services, retail workers at the supermarket and patients at the local hospital. They are multi-faceted voters who elect representatives based on the quality of local infrastructure, the funding of their kids’ school and the wait time at their emergency department.

The call for LGBTIQ rights is not about pushing gender fluidity on children, ending the practice of Christianity or instilling cultural Marxism. It is about affording LGBTIQ people safety, dignity and legal protection. Equality Australia is fighting to end gay conversion therapy, streamline transgender birth certificate updates and ensure that LGBTIQ people are safe from discrimination at work. We could not find a single reference to a campaign for cultural Marxism on their website.

As progressives, we cannot pander to the fear that conservatives spread about LGBTIQ people and especially the trans and gender diverse community. We do not need to meet conservative reactionaries where they are. We need to meet suburban communities where they are. To acknowledge their nuance, to allow them to hold their faith and open-mindedness at one time, to acknowledge the existence of LGBTIQ people and their families in Australia’s suburbs. And finally, to genuinely see the trans and gender diverse community, their experience and what they are asking us for 🏳️

Illustration by Kika Fuenzalida. @kikafuenzalida

How to pick

The Rock Stars,
the Relentless
and how Popularity
is Overrated.

MICHAEL KNIGHT

an Opposition Leader

Leading the main opposition political party in any parliament in Australia is a temporary job, not a career. It either ends in becoming the leader of a government; or it ends in tears. Many lose the leadership after their party fails to win a general election.

Some don't even last until a general election defeat. Almost every Leader of the Opposition has periods where their colleagues, and the media, speculate on whether he, or she, is the right person to lead their party to victory. Sometimes that talk crystallises into a formal challenge.

Earlier this year Anthony Albanese, Labor's Federal Leader, was the subject of intense media speculation that he will be replaced before the next election. Aspirants were trailing their coats, though no formal challenge has emerged, and looks increasingly unlikely. In Victoria, the state Liberal Leader, Michael O'Brien, is under siege. Those who covet the position have not been shy about briefing the media on what they see as O'Brien's failings. O'Brien survived a formal challenge by Brad Battin on 16 March. Battin was a surprise challenger and the numerical victory seemed comfortable: 22 votes to 9. However, O'Brien's more serious possible challengers, and their supporters, voted for O'Brien. It was not a ringing endorsement of O'Brien. Instead it was the preservation of their "right to challenge another day".

In NSW, Labor Leader Jodi McKay for months appeared to be holding on by a thread – which snapped following a very poor result in the Upper Hunter by-election on 22 May. Her successor, Chris Minns, has made a good start. He might lead NSW Labor to victory, possibly in 2023, perhaps in 2027. But, whether or not Chris Minns becomes Premier, it's a safe bet that at some point while he is leading the Opposition there will be media speculation that he should, or will, be replaced. Whenever surveys of public opinion fail to show that an Opposition Leader is almost certain to win the next election, then both the media and some of their own parliamentary colleagues will start agitating for change.

Whenever there is talk of replacing an Opposition Leader, the focus is usually on the perceived personal popularity of the contenders. I believe this is a superficial approach which fundamentally misunderstands the nature of political leadership in the Australian electoral context. Generally, media pundits (and some MPs) want to pick rock stars. But those often turn out to be shooting stars, who burn brightly for a short while in the glow of media, public, or party adulation. But they seldom win elections, and definitely don't win consecutive elections.

At the outset we should acknowledge just how complex leadership of a major political party can be,

especially in Opposition. I will use a Rugby League analogy to illustrate this, but you could do the same with any professional sports team, female or male. Last year the NRL Premiership was won by the Melbourne Storm. Their coach was Craig Bellamy, Cameron Smith was their captain, and Ryan Papenhuyzen was their star player in the Grand Final. In the AFL their equivalents were Richmond's Damien Hardwick, Trent Cochran, and Dustin Martin. Three big jobs; three huge talents.

But in a parliamentary party, especially in opposition, those three jobs have to be done by the one person. The Leader has to be the star player – the best at confronting the Government in Question Time, the best at pushing the Opposition's agenda in the media and on the stump, and the best at relating to potential voters.

The Leader also has to be the captain of the team, the person who manages the day to day tactics, decides what issues to "run on" each day, which team members should get their hands on the ball (a speech, a question in Parliament, a media appearance, a visit to a region etc), what percentage of the time to spend trying to disrupt the other team (the Government) and what percentage to spend trying to advance the Opposition's own policy agenda. The Leader is also responsible for keeping up team morale when things are not going well. This role of "team captain" requires intelligence, toughness, vision, and interpersonal skills. And it's made even harder because there are always some members of the team who only want to play their best if they, or someone they are close to, gets to be the captain instead.

To cap it all off, the Leader has to also take on the coaching responsibilities – to pick the team, that is, select the Shadow Cabinet and the Shadow Parliamentary Secretaries; and hire the support staff. (The way the NSW parliamentary staff budget works is that the Leader gets a lump sum to hire the staff, in her or his office, to support not only the Leader but all of the Shadow Ministers). The Leader also has to drop



Courtesy of Chris Minns

players who aren't performing and wear the odium for that. Above all, they must devise a game plan for how to win the next election. And, like any good sporting coach, the Opposition Leader has to work closely with the club's management – the party office – to have a common vision for the party, its mission, policy agenda, and the role of its members, stakeholders, and supporters. They also have to work co-operatively to recruit the next generation of talent into the parliamentary team.

Not surprisingly, many Opposition Leaders struggle to fulfil this range of roles. Regrettably, some fail in all three of them. The way in which these roles mesh is crucial. The voting public and the media are used to seeing the Opposition Leader as their party's main salesperson. What they usually see much less of is the role the Leader must take in the even more important task of developing the product.

Significantly, it is those Opposition Leaders who master all three of the main roles – star player, captain, coach – who go on to have the most electorally

“Whether or not Chris Minns becomes Premier, it’s a safe bet that at some point while he is leading the Opposition there will be media speculation that he should, or will, be replaced.”

successful careers. John Howard (federal) and Bob Carr (NSW) are two classic examples. Yet, neither of these Leaders initially fitted the media archetype of what an ideal Opposition Leader should look like. They were not deemed to be “charismatic” or widely regarded as especially good looking. Above all, they were not “popular” to start with.

But they both had characteristics that I believe are far more important for successful political leadership: high intelligence, a strategic mind, resilience, and political judgement.

POPULARITY, AS MEASURED in opinion polls, is a risky basis for predicting whether a Leader will win a future election. There are cases of Opposition Leaders who trailed badly in the polls but who went on to win multiple elections. Again, John Howard, federally, and Bob Carr in NSW, are two who polled poorly but became long term leaders of governments.

During his first period as Opposition Leader, the *Bulletin* magazine, on 20 December 1988, carried a photo of Howard on its front page with the savage headline: “Mr 18%. Why on earth does this man bother?” Inside there was a Roy Morgan poll showing Howard’s preferred Prime Minister rating at 18%, compared to Bob Hawke’s 69%. Howard never got to find out if he could win the 1990 federal election. He was ousted by Andrew Peacock in May 1989. In March the next year Labor narrowly won re-election (with only 49.9% of the two party preferred vote). The handsome, charismatic and “television friendly” Andrew Peacock never fulfilled his long talked of “destiny” to become Prime Minister. Yet the nerdy John Howard, in very different circumstances, won the Prime Ministership from Paul Keating in March 1996. Howard held it until November 2007. He served the second longest time of any Australian Prime Minister, only surpassed by Bob Menzies.

There is obviously a symbiotic relationship between how well a Government is perceived to be performing and the standing of the Opposition Leader. The higher the figure for the incumbent as preferred Prime Minister or Premier, the lower the figure for any Opposition Leader must be. When Bob Hawke was at his zenith, Howard’s rating as an alternative had to be low, whether he was any good or not. Similarly, in the leadup to the 1996 election, when Paul Keating’s government was on the slide, Howard’s preferred Prime Minister rating was much better than it was previously.

Bob Carr had an uninterrupted route to the NSW Premiership, although it did take him seven years as Opposition Leader. And it was not without regular trauma. I served in the NSW Parliament when Carr was Opposition Leader and his core business included

suffering regular media commentaries about why he couldn’t possibly win, while simultaneously fending off threatened leadership challenges, both real and imagined. Carr’s poll numbers reflected this negative view of him. He was not burdened by high expectations. Prior to the 1991 election the *Sydney Morning Herald* gave great prominence to an article by its State politics reporter, Matthew Moore, headlined “Heading for a Carr Crash”. In fact, at that election, Labor dramatically improved its position from holding 43 seats out of 109, to winning 46 seats in a parliament which had been reduced to 99 Seats. In the leadup to the 1995 election, the conventional wisdom was that the bookish, awkward Carr - who didn’t even have a drivers licence, let alone children - could not possibly beat the “everyman” image of avuncular, ex footballer, family man John Fahey. Yet Carr not only won the 1995 election, he later became the longest continuously serving Premier in the history of NSW.

A year before the 2011 NSW election, Barry O’Farrell trailed Kristina Keneally as preferred Premier (30% to 45%) in a Newspoll survey. The estimated two party preferred vote for the coalition he led was favourable – 55% compared to Labor’s 45%. But there were regular concerns that O’Farrell could be a drag on his party’s vote at the election, that Labor could ride a wave of personal popularity for Kristina Keneally to victory. However, at the subsequent election, the O’Farrell led coalition increased its representation by a staggering 34 additional Seats, while the Keneally led Labor Party was reduced to a rump of 20 MPs.

On the other side of the coin, there are Opposition Leaders who looked good in the polls but failed to win government. In March 2004, the then Labor Leader, Mark Latham, had a Newspoll personal approval rating of 66% - still the second highest of all time for a federal Opposition Leader. But he did not win the election against John Howard only seven months later. Instead he is now a One Nation representative in the NSW upper house. The third highest Newspoll approval rating ever for a federal Opposition Leader belongs to the Liberal John Hewson, at 55%, in January 1992. He also lost the subsequent election, just over a year later to Paul Keating.

I don’t believe in replacing an Opposition Leader simply because of bad polling, especially when their party is competitive on two party preferred projections. Both sitting MPs and media commentators sometimes get seduced by the notion that a “more attractive leader” will clinch victory for a party which is competitive in the polling, but not a certain winner. This often ignores the role that the incumbent might have played in getting their party to that competitive position. However, an Opposition Leader’s case for survival is much weaker if they have had a reasonable

“‘Popularity’ is one of the most overrated things in politics.”



Michael Knight with then Wran government Minister for Planning and the Environment, Bob Carr. Courtesy of Michael Knight.

period in the job and both their party’s polling and their personal approval ratings are very poor. More importantly, if the bad polling is reflecting deeper, fundamental reasons why they are not up to the job, then there is definitely a need to make a change.

If you don’t pick your Opposition Leaders based on opinion polls, then how do you know who would be best? Part of the problem is that you never know who is any good at the job until they get to do it. Like at any job interview, some aspirants can present superbly, but turn out to be hopeless after you have given them the job. Conversely, some don’t do so well in the “job seeking phase” but grow into the job surprisingly well. So what are the clues to look for?

“POPULARITY” IS ONE of the most overrated things in politics. Of course, it is always better to be popular than to be loathed. But “popularity” is often spoken about as though it exists in a vacuum, as though it is some individual character trait. In fact, a leader is more likely to be popular because they are being successful in their job, rather than being successful in their job, because they are popular. Significantly, John Howard and Bob Carr morphed from being “unpopular” Opposition Leaders to “popular” heads of government – when voters liked how their governments were performing.

If I have learned one thing in the decades I have spent involved with electoral politics it is this: electoral popularity never lasts. Unfortunately, it usually lasts longer for your opponents than you would like; and it never lasts as long for yourself as you want. But it never endures for anyone.

I recall a sort of collective political depression amongst NSW Labor MPs after Mike Baird’s electoral victory in March 2015. They had bought into the general media narrative that Baird was hugely popular and therefore unbeatable. Similar things are now being written about Gladys Berejiklian in the wake of opinion polls which, justifiably, reflect her strong performance confronting the COVID-19 pandemic. However, following a range of self-inflicted political damage: forced council amalgamations, lockout laws in parts of Sydney, a failed attempt to ban greyhound racing; Baird’s popularity collapsed. Between December 2015 and September 2016 his net satisfaction rating fell by a staggering 46%. Writing in *The Australian*, veteran political journalist Mark Coultan described it as “the biggest fall in net satisfaction of any mainland state premier in the history of Newspoll”. Quite sensibly, Baird retired mid-term.

Longstanding Liberal pollster, Mark Textor, has coined a wonderful phrase to encapsulate the transitory nature of “popularity” for many politicians. They

might be superficially personally popular, but the underlying fundamentals of what they stand for, and how they perform, cannot sustain that. Alluding to an unusual body of water between Canberra and Goulburn, Textor refers to “Lake George popularity”. Like its namesake, such popularity is wide but shallow. And it can completely evaporate with little warning.

Popularity can be ephemeral. Intelligence is not. Howard and Carr might, or might not, have been the most intelligent members of their teams. But there is no doubting that both Howard and Carr are highly intelligent. A high level of intelligence is a much undervalued quality for political leadership. Nobody votes for leaders because they consider them to be particularly intelligent. And it’s not a characteristic that anyone should campaign on. But, unless an Opposition Leader is very bright (not just ‘street smart’ or cunning), they are unlikely to win an election. While a Prime Minister or a Premier can’t be expected to know the intricate details of every portfolio all of the time, they need to have a breadth of intelligence to understand how they all fit together. And they should have the intellectual agility to very quickly get across the detail of any issue in any portfolio when it emerges as a political or policy challenge. High intelligence is a basic requirement for the job; it is not an optional extra.

No matter how badly a government is doing, it is extremely difficult to defeat them if the voters do not think that the Leader of the Opposition is capable of becoming the head of a functioning government. High intelligence is a significant part of that, although not the only factor. When they were Opposition Leaders, both Carr and Howard suffered numerous criticisms, some justified, some not. They were both frequently characterised as “not being electable”. But there was never any widespread perception that they were “not up to the job” of running a government if they somehow managed to get elected. In contrast, think of some of the recent Leaders of the Opposition who have failed to win elections that were genuinely up for grabs: Deb Frecklington (Queensland 2020), Peter Debnam (NSW 2007), and Michael Daley (NSW 2019). All of them pleasant and decent people. But the internal party research of the winning party revealed a perception that, rightly or wrongly, the voters did not consider them to be “up to the job” they were seeking.

WHILE “POPULARITY” IS probably the most overvalued quality in political leadership, the most underrated quality is “political judgement”. It is the great intangible of politics but it is nonetheless profoundly important. You can’t teach it – though, over time, John Howard seemed to have developed it himself.

It is the quality that always accompanies successful long term political leaders. Neville Wran was attractive, intelligent, well spoken, and the TV camera loved him. He also had fantastic political judgement. Wran instinctively knew where the voters were on particular issues, which issues he could move them on, and which positions he had to accept whether he liked it or not. Bob Hawke, Carr, and Howard also had great intuitive political judgement. The same could not be said of all of their successors. Annastacia Palaszczuk has it in spades whereas Campbell Newman appeared to have a congenital deficit. Mike Baird’s lack of political judgement led him badly astray on several issues, including his attempt to ban greyhound racing.

I acknowledge that “political judgement” is a less objective characteristic than “high intelligence”. But it is nonetheless both real and immensely important. And the effluxion of time usually shows whether a leader’s political judgement was on target or not. Rather than try and define it, I want to give two examples. Following his victory in 1988, Nick Greiner introduced legislation to create the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC). Many in NSW Labor feared this would be a sort of standing Royal Commission into their recently completed 12 years of Government. Bob Carr insisted that Labor support the legislation. He stared down massive opposition in his own party. His political instincts were that unless he did this, Labor would be perceived by voters as pro corruption and covering up for past misdeeds; that Labor would never have clear air to attack the Greiner Government on their performance failures. Not only did Carr’s judgement prove to be accurate but an ICAC inquiry later led to Greiner himself being forced to relinquish the Premiership.

In July 2016 Mike Baird announced his intention to completely ban greyhound racing. He relied upon a report from former High Court Judge Michael McHugh outlining some pretty horrific animal cruelty. There was initially strong support for Baird’s proposed ban from media commentators, and also from many in the State Parliamentary Labor Party. Opposition Leader Luke Foley’s instincts were that, whatever the problems in the greyhound industry, Baird’s proposals were an overreaction that could rebound on him. Foley felt that no-one would shift their vote to Baird because of this single policy. However, substantial numbers of voters, particularly in rural electorates, could shift their votes away from the government on this policy alone. Foley came out quickly against the proposed ban. This was not initially popular with his colleagues and some of them tried to use this issue to undermine his leadership.

Like Carr with ICAC, time vindicated Foley’s judgement. Baird’s greyhound ban was a significant

“I am always wary of the leadership aspirant who believes that the voters will choose them over the incumbent Prime Minister, Chief Minister, or Premier simply because they are a better person, or more attractive, or more deserving.”

contributor to the Nationals losing the by-election in Orange on 12 November 2016. This led directly to the forced resignation, two days later, of Deputy Premier Troy Grant. And to Baird’s own voluntary retirement two months later. Whatever you might think of the merits of the issue, Foley’s political judgement on how it might play out was proven to be accurate.

Good political judgement is particularly an issue for Opposition Leaders. They frequently need to respond, at very short notice, to government announcements, mistakes, and initiatives. Often there is little time to consult. Unlike in government, there is no time (or money) to research public attitudes. In the example above, Luke Foley had to personally make a very quick decision. These decisions are driven by judgement (good or bad) not by focus groups.

The climate in which Opposition Leaders need to exercise their political judgement is becoming more difficult. Both the explosion of social media, and the intensification of hyper-partisanship among the keyboard warriors, raise additional challenges. Perhaps the greatest challenge is to decide when to attack and when not to. It is easy for an Opposition Leader to attack the government on everything. That will bring immediate approval from those who follow that Leader on their own social media platforms. Indeed, if the Opposition Leader is not whacking the government at every opportunity, they are likely to be criticised as

too quiet, weak, compliant, lazy, or just plain useless. They will get that from mainstream media commentators, on social media, and from their own colleagues. However, being seen to be overtly partisan on certain issues can be counterproductive with the electorate generally, and swinging voters in particular.

HOW VARIOUS LEADERS of the opposition have handled the politics of the COVID-19 pandemic reveals some very different political judgements.

Michael O’Brien (Victorian Liberal Leader) and Jodi McKay (NSW Labor Leader until 28 May 2021) have been constant critics of the handling of the pandemic by the governments in their states. Harsh words have been used, and resignations have been called for. O’Brien has especially focussed on the second wave in Victoria which emanated from weaknesses in the state government’s quarantine system. But attacking the Victorian Government has been his default position. Interestingly, it has not inoculated O’Brien from those members of his party who seek to replace him. Some of his colleagues have still criticised O’Brien for being “too soft on Daniel Andrews and his government”. McKay was a strident critic of Gladys Berejiklian and her Health Minister, Brad Hazzard. The Ruby Princess debacle and the tragic deaths at Anglicare’s Newmarch House aged care facility were

particular targets. But, no failure escaped her attention, including the inevitable problem of waiting times the first day a new pop up clinic was set up in response to an unexpected outbreak.

By contrast, when there was a COVID-19 outbreak in South Australia in November 2020, Peter Malinauskas, Labor’s Opposition Leader, was quick to pledge bipartisan support to fight the virus. He specifically made it clear he would not be adopting the approach taken by Michael O’Brien. In part, Malinauskas’ media release said:

“Doing this the South Australian way means we’re going to look after each other as much as we look after ourselves. We’re going to fight for each other, not against each other. Which means, as far as I’m concerned, unlike in Victoria, as Opposition Leader I’m here to support the government, not undermine it.”

Since then Malinauskas has been overwhelmingly non-partisan. But not silent. From time to time Malinauskas has raised suggestions that he hoped the government would embrace. When they have not done so, he has expressed disappointment rather than outrage. Where they have embraced his ideas, Malinauskas has praised the government, and not indulged in petty claims that he has “won”.

Similarly, in the federal sphere, Opposition Leader, Anthony Albanese, and his then Shadow Health Minister, Chris Bowen walked a careful path focussed on confronting the pandemic rather than the government. Their approach could best be characterised as “yes, but...”. For example, they acknowledged the government’s good work in signing deals with several possible vaccine producers, but suggested they should get some extra players involved to spread the risks. Similarly, they supported the government’s initiatives in JobSeeker and JobKeeper, while also pointing out gaps in those programs and the risks of ending them prematurely. Compared to O’Brien and McKay, there has been more emphasis on cooperation and less on conflict. On the occasions where Albanese and Bowen diverged substantially from the government, they picked their targets carefully and positioned themselves unambiguously on the side of the community rather than simply being ‘against the government’.

With Australia’s COVID-19 suppression strategy generally working well, Albanese has now turned his attention to three areas where the government’s position is much more contentious: the extremely slow rollout of the vaccination program, the appropriate role for the federal government in relation to quarantine facilities, and the nature of the post COVID recovery. Albanese adopted a bipartisan approach

for over a year while Australia was locked into a daily fight for survival against the virus. He is now becoming more assertive in the contestable space of how a national government should secure the future of our citizens against the ongoing threat of COVID-19 and other potential pandemics.

Chris Minns has started his time as an Opposition Leader in NSW by adopting an approach on COVID-19 similarly to Anthony Albanese’s earlier iteration, and mirroring that of Peter Malinauskas. One of Minns’ first acts as Opposition Leader was to write to Premier Berejiklian, giving credit to the government for its success in combating the pandemic and declaring that “as the new Leader of the Opposition, I want to join the fight against COVID-19 and I offer you my bipartisan support in this endeavour”.

Which of the political judgements is the correct one? The O’Brien/McKay model or the very different Malinauskas/Minns/Albanese approach? As with all political judgements, time will tell which were sound. But the fall of Jodi McKay and the imminent political demise of Michael O’Brien does not augur well for their general strategic approaches.

SO, WHEN IT comes to picking the right Leader of the Opposition these are the qualities I would place a premium on: high intelligence, resilience (it’s a tough job in which you are bound to have more bad days than good days), and political judgement. I would always favour someone who can straddle the multiple roles of star player, captain and coach over someone who the commentariat merely declares is popular. Above all, I want someone who thinks strategically about how to win the next election, how to progress that plan, and how to implement a defined agenda in government.

If they look and sound nice, that’s a significant bonus. But I would be looking for someone who understands how tough it is to win from opposition. I am always wary of the leadership aspirant who believes that the voters will choose them over the incumbent Prime Minister, Chief Minister, or Premier simply because they are a better person, or more attractive, or more deserving - those whose underlying electoral strategy is: see me, love me, vote for my candidates.

I always prefer a potential Leader of the Opposition who can tell me how they can win rather than why they should win. By and large, those are the same leaders who do win closely contested elections. And who then go on to lead long term governments 🇪🇺

Permanently Lost?

Without action, permanent work will be a thing of the past.

SALLY MCMANUS

AUSTRALIANS TODAY FACE a very different job market compared to the generations that came before them.

The era where reliable, secure, decently paid and permanent jobs were the default started with Australia's post-war economic boom, supported and upheld by strong union membership - has truly ended. Once thought of in Australia as a right, these jobs have been eroded by legislation doing the bidding of big business.

Millennials saw their parents build lives around these jobs - permanent, adequately paid, full-time, with entitlements - and wondered whether they would eventually come. However, while millennials were finishing the university degrees they were vehemently told would be their pathway to 'good' employment, it changed. Ironically in the meantime, university job losses are occurring across the country by the hundreds, and the TAFE sector remains sadly underfunded and neglected.

Generation Z are now entering a workforce where unreliable and insecure work has become the norm not only for them but for all workers. As of 2019, permanent full-time workers make up the minority in Australia for the first time ever. We have one of the highest levels of non-standard, unreliable work in the OECD.

The Morrison Government has changed the laws to make it easier for employers to turn permanent reliable jobs into casual, unreliable jobs. A shift in the standard employment relationship to practices like casualisation, fractured part time work, labour hire,

and the rise of the gig economy, mean that it is significantly easier for businesses to avoid their most basic obligations to their workers. This has been driven by business trying to minimise their costs, and transfer risks from themselves to their employees.

The 'gig economy' describes an entire workforce which did not exist even 10 years ago. It most commonly describes workers who, despite often working regular hours for the same employer, are employed as contractors. This arrangement purports to offer freedom and flexibility to be your own boss. In reality, it absolves companies of having to provide workers with the rights and protections employees are afforded, all the while being grossly underpaid (a TWU survey of delivery riders in September last year found that their average earnings after costs was just over \$10 an hour - significantly below minimum wage).

Tragically last year, in the space of only two months, five delivery riders working under 'gig economy' conditions for companies UberEats, DoorDash and Hungry Panda were killed on the job. Delivery riders were the often unsung and unprotected heroes of the pandemic, often on temporary migrant visas and therefore excluded by the Morrison Government from wage subsidies like JobKeeper and JobSeeker. For every rider who dies on the job there are dozens who are injured in workplace accidents or who are victims of assault at the hands of customers. None of these workers have access to the workers

“If we can’t convince the federal government to adopt a positive pro-reliable jobs agenda, we need to change the government.”

compensation systems which were created to protect workers in these situations.

While the gig economy has created entirely new insecure sectors of our economy, unregulated use of labour hire arrangements have hollowed out what used to be secure, reliable forms of employment. Labour hire firms initially emerged to provide short-term replacement workers in a range of industries. A classic example of their modern use was the basis for the 2016 CUB dispute in Melbourne. Workers were fired from one company, only to be hired by another on a non-union agreement which cut their pay and conditions. An agreement which had been signed by a handful of workers on the other side of the country, and now could be applied to all employees of that labour hire firm.

Casual work has its place. It can be a practical option for those who can't work regular hours every week due to some other commitment, commonly those who are still studying. While casual workers are denied leave entitlements such as holidays or sick leave, they are supposed to receive a 25% loading. But a recent study by Professor David Peetz of Griffith University found that over half of casual employees probably do not receive the casual loading. The promise of flexible work hours chosen by the worker is too often a myth; many casual workers have regular hours, and in some instances year-long rosters but they are designated casual because it's cheaper. The average tenure of a casual worker is four years.

Alongside casual contracts, the abuse of short-term contracts has ripped through entire sectors like teaching and higher education, where secure jobs have been replaced with rolling six month or one year contracts. Some academics work with the same institution for decades without seeing an ongoing contract. This has a disastrous impact on the ability of these workers to plan for their futures, secure home loans or take holidays.

Like other forms of insecure work it is crushing

the quality of life of Australian workers. Unreliable work can have profound implications for the quality of working life. It is often characterised by, and leads to, other negatives, such as low pay, less access to opportunities for training and skill development, lack of career path or promotional opportunities, a lack of voice in the workplace and a higher risk of occupational illnesses and injury, insecure or inadequate housing, poor health outcomes, gender based and age-based inequality and inequity, sexual harassment, bullying, and wage theft.

The government can change laws to make jobs more reliable and secure. But instead they're choosing to support big business and multinational corporations. The federal government can and should commit to an agreed upon definition of casual work, so that unscrupulous employers can't label permanent work as casual work, it should also license the labour hire industry and regulate the gig economy.

Other countries have taken effective action against unreliable and insecure work, but we are lagging behind. Our government should recognise that improving reliability of employment is also good economics. The federal government should also reform its own employment practices. Public sector unions have recently won an important battle to end the cap on public sector employment which saw short-term contracts and consultants become the norm. Government procurement of goods and services must be underpinned by a preference for local providers who offer reliable jobs to local workers.

Union membership works and is a statistically measurable countermeasure to insecure, unreliable work - it can't be a coincidence that a staggering 92% of union members are permanent workers. Union members have been campaigning against unreliable work for years. If we can't convince the federal government to adopt a positive pro-reliable jobs agenda, we need to change the government 🇺🇲

Social Democracy 3.0



Lessons from New Labour for
renewing the Left.

ALAN MILBURN

Social democracy is in its worst global crisis for a century. In Italy, Holland and France social democratic parties are in meltdown. In Germany, the SPD is a shadow of its former self. There are liberal-left exceptions to the rule (Canada and New Zealand for example) but in Poland, Hungary and Brazil it is nationalist authoritarianism that is in the ascendancy. And while it is true that in Spain and Sweden social democratic parties are in power, they are hanging on by their fingernails.

It is easy to take comfort of course from President Biden's victory in the USA but it is very possible that without the COVID-19 pandemic a Trump second term would have been the most likely outcome. Meanwhile in the UK, Labour hasn't won an electoral majority since 2005 and Australian Labor since 2007.

This is a losing pattern which progressives the world over can no longer ignore. So why is it happening and what can be done?

The explanations are as multiple as the defeats. For the Hard Left, social democracy got its comeuppance by dancing too willingly to globalisation's tune and ignoring its losers. Sadly for the Leftists who seized control of the UK Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn, the alternative they favoured (a dose of the old style socialist religion) took Labour to its worst result since 1935 when put to the electorate.

Other more progressive voices point to the inequalities and imbalances created by globalisation, particularly after the global financial crisis put

markets in the dock and left social democracy uncertain as to how to create a new state activism without replicating outdated state interventionism. Yet others highlight how the upsurge in a new politics of identity found the centre-left stranded on uncomfortable terrain and without compelling answers.

Profound economic and social change has left many voters clinging to what they know, hence their concerns over place and immigration, identity and security. Tony Blair argues convincingly that the megatrends of change - globalisation, mass migration, growing inequity - left social democrats confused between the ends we believe in and the means we deploy. The one remains fixed - our commitment to fairness and justice, our belief that we achieve more together than we ever can alone. But the other, our means, has to be flexible if we are to keep pace with the modern world. The calibration between what is fixed and what should be flexible is what the centre-left has found most difficult to get right and is at the root of the social democratic crisis.

There is much in these analyses. In my view the problem facing social democracy all boils down to this: right now it is hard to discern what today's social democratic project really is. It wasn't always so.

Social Democracy 1.0 was about giving rights to people who lacked them - workers and women for example. Although there is more still to do, there has been much progress, not least the successful creation of social democratic welfare state systems.

“Today a new agenda beckons but it is not at all clear what the Social Democracy 3.0 project looks like.”

So Social Democracy 2.0, led by Hawke, Keating, Blair and Clinton, moved onto new terrain, trying to make markets and globalisation work for the many not the few. Again social democracy delivered real results with prosperity growing among working families even though inequalities sharpened too.

Today a new agenda beckons but it is not at all clear what the Social Democracy 3.0 project looks like. That is as true in the UK as it is in Australia.

Of course there are lots of individual policies Labour and Labor are in favour of. But a list is not a project. Political parties have to exist for a purpose. They have to have a big project if their values are to be translated into policies. Without it they are nothing. Both Margaret Thatcher's project to marketise Britain and Tony Blair's project to modernise Britain gave



© David Fowler / Shutterstock

voters a clear sense of what their parties were about. It is no coincidence that they delivered thumping parliamentary majorities for their respective parties. In politics, clarity kills. Today, by contrast, it is hard to disagree with Leftist trade union leader Len McCluskey when he says that people no longer know what today's British Labour Party stands for. I share the diagnosis but part company over the solution.

What is clear is that last May's shocking UK election results are a wake up and smell the coffee moment for Labour. They can no more be dismissed as Prime Minister Boris Johnson enjoying a COVID vaccination dividend than they can be explained by the aftershocks of Corbyn or of Brexit, still less of Keir Starmer's leadership. The rot did not set in over a few months or years. The last time the Labour Party won a general election was sixteen years ago and currently we look likely to lose the next one. That would be two decades in the political wilderness.

It is not a particular surprise. Labour gets what it deserves. With no discernible overarching change or future project, the public have moved on from Labour. Keir Starmer is competent, credible and has shown courage but, set against the headwinds he faces, the pace and scale of reform to date is simply not enough. It is not enough to say that Labour is under new leadership. That has to be proven in practice, day-in day-out.

The disaster of the Corbynite agenda has to be put in the dustbin of history where it belongs and



© ComposPix / Shutterstock

the drift towards Labour becoming a Leftist, wokish, metropolitan party out of touch with aspirational (not just working class) voters has to be reversed. Equally, Labour needs to resist the temptation of putting all of our eggs in the Red Wall basket - those Northern and Midlands seats lost to the Conservatives under Mr Corbyn - and instead work on building a coalition of support across the whole country. To win again Labour will have to take Hastings in the south and not just Hartlepool in the north.

In short, the only way forward is a total reinvention of what Labour is - starting with an open diagnosis of why we keep losing, moving on to a full-scale policy review and a fundamental change in how we organise as a party and are structured. Without a major process of public engagement and far-reaching change the British Labour Party risks going the way of other social democratic parties across Europe. Avoiding that outcome will be hard. There are no easy answers. It will require deep strategic thought and patience.

SO FAR THEN so bad. But here is the good news.

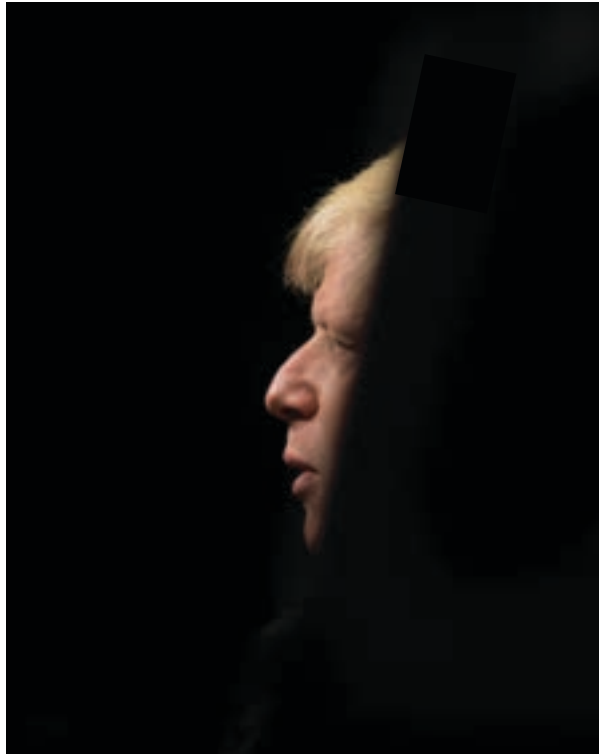
After Labour lost for the fourth time in 1992 many people thought they would never see a Labour government again. What changed? We did. It is possible to turn a streak of losses into a series of wins. Under Tony Blair's leadership Labour became a winning party, not a losing one.

As Peter Mandelson graphically puts it, the last eleven general elections for Labour have been lose, lose, lose, lose, lose, Blair, Blair, Blair, lose, lose, lose. To be clear, I am not advocating a return to the politics of 1997. The world has moved on and so should we. Rather the focus should be learning from what worked strategically to turn defeat into victory.

In essence the lessons are five-fold.

First, forge an electoral coalition of support by becoming as comfortable with individual aspiration as traditional redistribution. Second, make the public's concerns the party's and make their pragmatism (tough on crime and tough on its causes, tolerant on sexuality and immigration but intolerant on a failure to abide by society's rules) Labour's watchwords. Third, separate ends and means by being willing to change old approaches to policy, for example through radical reform of the public services. Fourth, offer hope not fear by championing a sense of patriotic optimism about our country and our place in the world. Fifth, in a world of rapid change, always face outwards to the future rather than finding solace in the positions of the past.

Much is different since New Labour demonstrated how progressive parties could both change and make change. Growing insecurity (about the future of the environment and employment for example) has been heightened by the advent of social media leaving people more sceptical and less tribal, more uncertain and less loyal, more assertive and less trusting.



© Jakub Junek / Shutterstock

People will no longer act as passive recipients of a political message. They want to know that parties and their leaders get their lives and they want to have a say. That calls not just for new policies but for a new politics, one that is different from 1997 and far more engaging.

But in politics there are some constants. Change and the future: these are the ingredients that have always unlocked victory for social democrats the world over. And here too there are some reasons for optimism. Change is the currency of the times in which we live. Shocks on the scale of the COVID-19 pandemic always produce change. Of course people want a return to normality but they also want a better world to emerge from what has happened. It is not a coincidence that Build Back Better is the slogan of choice for both a centre-Left President in the USA and a Right-wing Prime Minister in the UK.

THE WORLD FACES multiple uncertainties in the light of the pandemic. COVID-19 has shown how vulnerable we are, calling for new approaches to improve equity in society and tackle the climate emergency. These are huge challenges that call for a new approach to how government works and what it does. We need a new approach to secure our supply chains, our borders and our care systems. Long term investment is required to secure prosperity for future generations

by investing in new skills, new infrastructure and new jobs. Above all, technological change, which is disrupting all aspects of our lives, has to be harnessed properly to address these challenges and make society more fair, not less.

This has the makings of a new social democratic project. Social democrats believe in the collective action that is needed to secure new jobs, a greener economy, safe borders, better care and less inequality. President Biden is showing, by framing the debate on tax-and-spend in a progressive way, how an argument can be won about an active state being the route to a future that is prosperous, sustainable and fair.

But it must be recognised that this is terrain that the Right is now contesting, rather than assuming it will naturally be the property of the centre-Left. Prime Minister Johnson's levelling up agenda is the centrepiece of a new brand of interventionist conservatism. The age of austerity, the defining right-wing tenet for over a decade, has been ditched. That makes the going still harder for Labour. Of course, he faces the twin problems of having to deliver meaningful change whilst keeping the deep conflict within the Conservative Party between his Home Counties, small-state and low-tax faction aligned with his Red Wall interventionists. But we should not underestimate Mr Johnson or this new conservatism.

The easiest mistake to make in politics is to create a convenient truth about your opponents: that they are not up to the job and that eventually the public will see through them. It is worth remembering that when he became Mayor of London, Mr Johnson was able to win from the Right in arguably one of the most progressive cities in the world. So Labour needs to protect its progressive flank. Mr Johnson has succeeded in making equity an issue over which Conservatives have some ownership.

“The easiest mistake to make in politics is to create a convenient truth about your opponents.”

To wrestle it back, Labour will need to redefine equity as more than a place-based agenda, important though that is. Inequality hurts people, not just places. In particular, grandparents and parents alike are concerned that the social progress they enjoyed will not be repeated for this and future generations of young people. If older people have been on the health frontline of the pandemic, it is the young who seem

“Change and the future: these are the ingredients that have always unlocked victory for social democrats the world over.”

doomed to suffer the biggest economic and social consequences. More than half of under-25s in the UK had been furloughed or lost their jobs by last June. One million of them are already unemployed. Meanwhile the rate of home ownership has plummeted amongst young people from well over half to around one third in just twenty years and the prospects of getting a place on the housing ladder feel increasingly remote.


These concerns about thwarted aspirations straddle middle-income and lower-income families. As both Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair realised, it is aligning behind the politics of aspiration that creates the electoral coalitions that help parties win elections. It is a lesson Keir Starmer would do well to heed.

SO WHAT COULD this analysis mean for Australian Labor? I have worked on election campaigns not just with Tony Blair but also with both Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard. I admire Anthony Albanese who is one of the few Opposition Leaders to have kept his party in a competitive position during the pandemic. I very much hope that he is the next Australian Prime Minister. It may be that the current PM Scott Morrison calls the next election sooner rather than

later. Tempting though it is to dismiss Mr Morrison as “Scotty from marketing”, if I was advising Anthony I would urge him not to underestimate his opponent. Instead he should paint Mr Morrison's party as one that is locked into yesterday's solutions and therefore cannot provide security for Australians in a world that is changing. That will require an argument from Labor about how the world is changing and the insecurities that it is causing.

Of course voters in Australia, as across the globe, are yearning for a return to many of the facets of life from before the pandemic, but if that is the terrain on which Labor allows the election to be fought it will merely favour the incumbent.

Instead, Australian Labor will need to show how the world has moved on and demonstrate that its policies can be woven into a golden thread of narrative around a clear project for the future: one that is about harnessing change, not least in technology, so that families and communities - the young especially - can face a future of security not insecurity.

Focusing on the next generation would give Labour and Labor the most precious of advantages, without which progressive parties never win: an agenda for change and ownership of the future. That is what has been missing. It is time to fill it .

Coalition of Miscommunication

An interview with
MICHELLE ROWLAND MP

Interviewed by
BRYCE CRAIG



MICHELLE ROWLAND MP has served as Shadow Minister for Communications for most of her time in parliament, being first elected in 2010 as the federal member for Greenway. Prior to this, Michelle worked as a senior lawyer specialising in technology, media and communications, and competition law. As we recorded this interview in the sunlit offices of her former (and my current) workplace, Michelle offered a damning take on Coalition communication policy.

BC What do you make of the almost eight years that the Coalition has been in charge of federal communications policy?

MR It's been playing catch up on issues that really needed to be dealt with a long time ago. And it's a crying shame that a lot of the work that was initially initiated under [former Labor minister, Senator] Stephen Conroy, for example, in terms of Labor's *Convergence Review*, and the ACMA's work on 'broken concepts' and 'enduring concepts'. They were important pieces of work on which an agenda could have been built over the last eight years.

But what we saw in the first term was basically the dismantling of the NBN. Only in the last six months or so have they conceded that copper is not the technology of the future. In the second term, a failure to acknowledge the need for media diversity or respond to that crisis in the media sector productively. And this term, really, is playing catch up. All the while, you've just got these relentless attacks on our public broadcasters in particular, the ABC. In many senses, the approach has been half-hearted and incompetent.

In the meantime, you have regulatory uncertainty, which is bad for business, particularly small business. It does not augur well for a sector that has been undergoing massive technological change. And it doesn't augur well for Australian consumers as a whole.

The amount of waste, not just in terms of time,

has a cost as well. It has a cost on consumers. It has a cost on lost innovation. In addition to the obvious budgetary cost. All of this points to the Coalition being bad managers of the communications portfolio and bad economic managers, too.

BC The Coalition may argue that they were in fact rather proactive in their communications policy, pointing to reforms such as the encryption amendments in 2018, the 'Sharing of Abhorrent Violent Material' amendments in the wake of the Christchurch terrorist attacks, and the more recent News Media Bargaining Code and Online Safety Bill. Do you think they have offered some strong interventions in this space?

MR Quite frankly, that is the business of government. It should be the business of government to undertake laws that protect citizens, that remedy power imbalances in instances of market failure, and to ensure that Australian consumers have access to the best in innovation.

And, I would point out for example, the *Briggs Review* was completed over two years ago, and we still do not have the 'Online Safety Act'. But in the meantime, you have ministers out there spruiking, on more than one occasion, that they have this Online Safety Act in place. It is not law. So there is mismanagement when it comes to swift enactment.

It also could not have been made easier for this government to achieve this. Labor has not stood in the way - we have asked questions where appropriate, and we have conducted due diligence, as is required by not an opposition. But Labor has never stood in the way of sensible proposals. We're not going to fight around the edges - it's all about being a responsible opposition.

ON THE NEWS MEDIA BARGAINING CODE

The News Media Bargaining Code has been one of this year's hot topics in communications policy, and one with a very pronounced public debate. Labor broadly supported the introduction of the Code with some important amendments.

BC Do you think that the Code was the most pressing reform item for the Government to pursue from the ACCC Digital Platforms Inquiry (DPI), and why do you think it might have been pursued over other recommendations that might have had a more felt impact in the community?

MR You're right in that there were around 23 DPI recommendations. But I think in the minds of

many, this was the only recommendation that mattered. And to be quite frank, and I don't say this as a criticism, but it was about money. Money that goes towards jobs, that goes to the survival of journalism, especially in regional parts of Australia where we've seen hundreds of titles and newsrooms and jobs close. This has been a long brewing storm as well. This didn't happen overnight, the digital disruption, the fall in advertising revenues. And then when COVID hit, the media sector was left particularly exposed.

This was a very important recommendation from the DPI - Labor never disputed that. But I guess your question is, why was this prioritised? I think it was because this issue had been identified, even before the pandemic, as something that wasn't going to get any better. From the bleed of the advertising revenue, to just the pure competition principles and the power imbalance. In the absence of regulation, it doesn't correct itself and is just reinforced.

However, it's no silver bullet for a number of players in the media sector, such as small and regional publishers who don't have the bargaining clout of the mainstream media. And it's also our understanding that even some of the larger independent organizations still haven't struck deals with both Google and Facebook yet. So whether this ends up working in practice across the entire sector, in order to foster that diversity, that's something that remains to be seen. There's a statutory review of it within a year.

Unfortunately we've already seen jobs going in the mainstream media, newsrooms have closed and are still closing. I, for example, don't have any local papers in outer metropolitan Sydney. It's all online and I don't see new publications. Regionally it's worse, with news deserts emerging across Australia.

BC Tech sector stakeholders obviously had concerns with the Code. They expressed that this type of law reform, including the uncoordinated way in which it is introduced, will disincentivise investment in the Australian technology sector and harm jobs. How concerned is Labor about that prospect?

MR To be perfectly honest, I don't buy those arguments. Australia is a big market, we are big early adopters and we have always shown that to be the case. When firms look to invest in markets they consider a multitude of things, including ease of entry, ease of exit, regulatory certainty, innovation, etc. So making those arguments about a reform stifling investment are always really hard to make out. A firm acting rationally will always choose to go where there is a market, will always choose to go there and they accept the risk. As long as those other factors are there, they will invest.

When there was discussion of Google exiting the market, Paul Fletcher spoke about the availability of other search engines. Microsoft steps forward and says ‘we’ll invest’, you know, ‘if left to be the last search engine we’ll invest’. You should invest anyway, and you will invest anyway. Stop acting like you will only invest in this country, and that Australians only deserve the best, where you’re going to have a monopoly. Australians deserve the best in innovation. And in all rational circumstances we should get it because we have demonstrated that we are early adopters. We are well-recognised as having the environment for private-sector investment, and for having a market that welcomes innovation.

So I don’t buy a simplistic, binary argument, that even the government plays into: “we will always stand up for Australians against big tech”. Yes, we should always stand up for good, robust regulation and safety when it comes to big tech. But let’s not kid ourselves, even the tech sector knows that Australians and the Australian regulatory environment will always want them to invest. And ultimately, again, it comes down to the long term interests of end-users. We always want, and every Australian public office holder should want, Australian consumers to get the best of everything.

ON MEDIA DIVERSITY

Michelle and I discussed the amendments made to broadcasting legislation under Turnbull in 2017. Among other things, these reforms removed the “two-out-of-three” cross-media ownership rule. The Coalition boasted that the reforms would breathe fresh air into Australia’s media landscape and foster diversity. In reality these reforms have served to further cement Australia’s status as the most heavily concentrated media market of any advanced democracy.

BC Knowing the reputation that Coalition-led law reform has for not delivering when it comes to media diversity, was enough done by Labor to challenge the focus and extent of the News Media Bargaining Code, that also promised to support media diversity?

MR I think there’s two things there. Firstly, there is only so much that can be achieved from opposition. We are committed to media diversity, we are committed to properly funding our public broadcasters. You need to elect Labor governments in order to ensure that. We opposed, for example, the two-out-of-three repeal in 2017. But in the end, if you’re not in government, you’re not not calling the shots.

And the second thing is that a lot of discussion was had around whether the revenues flowing from

the Code would be put back into journalism. The ABC committed to do it, because it can. But we examined a number of proposals for the Code and the sheer complexity of being able to codify revenue allocation - not only is it something that’s really hard to do as the Opposition, it’s really hard to do in general from a legislative perspective.

There are limits to the amount of regulatory intervention that can guarantee expenditure. But we asked the relevant questions on the floor of Parliament regarding how these guarantees can be worked toward for the sake of media diversity. We utilized every opportunity in the Parliament, and in the Senate inquiry, and outside of Parliament too, to keep the Coalition accountable on this.

BC In the recent Senate Inquiry into media diversity, News Corp Executive Chairman Michael Miller said that the industry is “a picture of diversity, not monopoly”. He said that diversity is not just about ownership and insisted that the diversity of views, sources and mode of access in Australia was incredible. How do you respond to that?

MR I think media diversity has been viewed through the prism of ownership for a very long time. I think that Paul Keating’s ‘queen of screen or prince of print’ view of cross-media ownership remains sound. But let’s remember that this was before our current internet and technology age. Where you have voices in mainstream media, whether that is in radio, TV or print, they are often still the same voices that are prominent online. You only have to look at the top 10 news sites in Australia to see there is still a correlation between ownership and the variety of voices that are being accessed online.

I think what Michael Miller was saying, particularly in relation to the internet, was that you’ve got different journalists and an ability for anyone to be a journalist. But I think that does a disservice to the Fourth Estate in some respects. As a consumer of news as well, people’s opinions can be a dime a dozen, but I would prefer to have content that is from someone who has written it with a journalistic intent.

I think that we will have that kind of diversity that Michael Miller thinks we have now when smaller publishers are given a better chance to get bigger, or to be niche, but still economically viable and self-dependent. Which is why I think the Code is so important to enable that cohort to survive.

But I also think this Government has really let down the sector by not commissioning better modelling of what our media market should look like. The Government recently admitted, in an explanatory memorandum to one of their own pieces of legislation,

that there was market failure in rural and regional television. What work has been done to design new models for regional media, a new regulatory environment? Nothing. It’s purely looked at through the prism of ownership.

ON A ROYAL COMMISSION

BC Over 500,000 Australians called for a Royal Commission into media diversity, which could produce recommendations and solutions to the media diversity crisis. Is that something Labor would support?

MR It’s not Labor Party policy. And I think part of the issue here is that I don’t need a Royal Commission to tell me that Australia has one of the most concentrated media markets in the world in terms of ownership and control. And that is not going to change overnight, but I don’t need a Royal Commission to tell me that. And purely from a policy priority perspective, there are some pretty important things to be examined by Royal Commissions today.

I can appreciate that this has exercised the mind of Kevin Rudd as a private citizen and a former Prime Minister. He has every right to champion this. And I think the hundreds of thousands of Australians who have supported his petition have every right to demand that something be done on Australia’s high levels of media concentration. But what recommendations are going to come out of this, and how much are they going to differ from those of the countless inquiries we have already had on this topic.

Ultimately the way that we remedy this is through actually doing the hard work around not only ownership, but all the other regulatory markers as well. From tax reform, encouraging investment, to fostering public interest journalism by supporting journalists and new, viable business models. But to do that, you need to elect a Labor government.

It’s not just about diversity of ownership, it is about the voices too. I want to see more First Nations media, I want to see more ethnic media. The most common surname in my area isn’t Smith or Jones, it’s Singh. People need to see themselves on screen. This is why the SBS has been so successful - because they are actually walking the talk when it comes to diversity of voices.

So yes ownership remains important, but when I say media diversity I’m also talking about geographic diversity, ethnic diversity, Indigenous inclusion, disability inclusion.

BC I take your point about a Royal Commission having the potential to rehash things previously

investigated. However, unlike other efforts, a Royal Commission with this kind of mandate could provide unparalleled insight into Murdoch’s media empire, one of the world’s most influential media conglomerates. Isn’t that a worthwhile endeavour?

MR Don’t get me wrong. I see exactly where Rudd is coming from. And I see exactly where your question is coming from. We saw this happen in the UK a couple of years ago. You actually need that structure, under the imprimatur of a Royal Commission. But my response to that question is that we need to always be outcomes focussed. And if that outcome is not going to produce diversity, isn’t going to produce extra investment, isn’t going to produce inclusiveness, I would rather spend the energy designing proper regulatory structures that achieve that.

Don’t get me wrong. All of these are very valid concerns. Me and my Party have been on the front pages of Murdoch titles since forever. One of the games that we play between us is: “Headlines We’ll Never See”. Imagine if Labor was in government when Ruby Princess happened, the headline: “Labor Death Ship Infects the Nation”. I personally feel like there isn’t enough being done by mainstream media to hold conservative governments to account. And there is a different standard of accountability. I don’t need a Royal Commission to tell me that there’s a different standard. This is happening. The question is, am I going to change the outcome through a Royal Commission.

By the way, how much bigger is Nine these days too? The two-out-of-three repeal meant that the Nine Entertainment Co happened, chaired by Peter Costello, you know? Run by people who are personal friends with the Minister, who fundraise for the Liberals on the set of a TV show. I’m happy to have a Royal Commission into that sort of fundraising. If you want to have a Royal Commission into the influence of the Fourth Estate on democracy, be my guest. I just don’t know how you craft those terms of reference.

And I also have thought about how any recommendations would work in practice. Some people might want to see forced divestiture. But if these are loss making, loss leading ventures does that just mean less news overall in some areas. We have to build diversity structurally as well. There’s structural issues, there’s new standards issues. There’s free speech issues, vacuums being created and then filled by ultra conservative voices. There’s the online and streaming services versus linear broadcasting issue. So, you know, for the eight years the Coalition have been avoiding proper media reform, that brings up issues around media standards, the differential regulation of broadcast print online, they haven’t gone there 🚫

MURDOCH AND THE MEGA CHALLENGES



From climate change to the rising influence of China and the falling of real wages, to the instability of our economic model and the media monopoly through which it is all reported, Kevin Rudd outlines the five mega-challenges facing us in the post-COVID era.

Kevin Rudd

For the first time in my life, I am deeply anxious about Australia's future. This is an unnerving feeling since I'm a natural optimist. But the reality is that Australia is now facing its deepest challenges since 1945. Instead of taking these challenges head on, our nation is remarkably complacent, distracted by phoney arguments and false premises.

The mega-challenges that stare us in the face are immense: our economic model is winding down, our continent is vulnerable to the ravages of climate change, the incomes of working Australians are under assault, the geopolitical balance in our region is tilting, and we face risk of rolling global pandemics.

We can no longer ride the coat-tails of past achievements, like John Howard rode the economic wave that followed the reforms of the Hawke-Keating era and like today's conservatives reap the benefits of Australia's world-beating response to the Global Financial Crisis and other structural reforms implemented between 2007 and 2013.

Good luck doesn't last forever. The time for action has come, or else we face the possibility of becoming a second-rate country by the middle of this century: a once-shining exemplar of progress that squandered its potential with sclerotic institutions, an exhausted economic model, and completely unprepared for the challenges we see barrelling towards us – let alone the ones that are unknowable.

In my new little book, *The Case for Courage*, I have argued our ability to step up and face these national challenges is hobbled by our inability to engage in serious and nuanced debates about our national destiny. We are paralysed by weakening democratic institutions on the one hand, and the reality that we have largely delegated the management of our national debates to a family of American billionaires who, at every stage, have relegated the national interest behind their own narrow commercial and political interests.

The terms of our national debate have been hijacked by the reality that around 70 per cent of our print media – the arm of the media that employs the most journalists and produces the most original journalism – is held by a single company, Murdoch's News Corporation.

It's long since passed that Murdoch's print monopoly delivered anything approaching reliable political coverage. It's far more likely that the *Daily Telegraph*, *Herald Sun* or *Courier-Mail* will plaster their front pages with the latest example of a "woke agenda gone mad" rather than the latest evidence of corruption, profligacy or mismanagement by the government in Canberra.

Murdoch's newspapers continue to set the agenda for our national debate and frame the way those issues are to be debated. Murdoch's newspaper content bleeds through to radio, television, news websites and even our national parliament; if Murdoch's



"Rupert Murdoch and pigeon" by Matt From London is licensed with CC BY 2.0.

**“THE BOTTOM LINE IS:
THE MEDIA DIET OF
MOST AUSTRALIANS IS
HEAVILY INFLUENCED
BY MURDOCH,
WHETHER THEY
REALISE IT OR NOT.”**

newspapers all splash the same story on their front pages, it's a good bet that it will be aired at Question Time that afternoon. The bottom line is: the media diet of most Australians is heavily influenced by Murdoch, whether they realise it or not.

Murdoch's print monopoly is also unique in its willingness to ruthlessly butcher the truth to advance Murdoch's own agendas. Don't get me wrong: all media companies fail to uphold ethical standards on occasion. But Murdoch has developed this into an art form as James Murdoch, once heir-apparent to the family business, has spectacularly attested in recent months.

RETURNING TO THE five mega-challenges I outlined above, we can see how this takes hold of our national debate.

For more than a decade, our national economic debate has been reduced to a phoney argument over debt and deficit – as though they are the only true measures of economic prosperity – rather than a discussion about identifying and nurturing the engines of future economic growth. The vacuousness of Murdoch's position is exposed by the fact that they are running silent on debt and deficit now that the Liberals are producing five-times the deficit and debt than we left behind in 2013.

Climate change has been reduced to a false debate about whether or not climate change is real, paired with a decade-long fear campaign about lost jobs and businesses, rather than a real debate about how we transition to the jobs and industries of the future. Almost 13 years ago, I warned as Prime Minister that Australia faced the likelihood of tariffs against our exports if we failed to rein in our emissions – that is now coming to pass under the European Union Border Adjustment Mechanism. Similar discussions are now happening in the United States.

On incomes, we see a campaign to kill compulsory superannuation by stealth because of right-wing paranoia over union-backed industry funds (which, by most measures, consistently outperform their commercial competitors). Instead of working out how to raise wages, Australian working families face the Hobson's choice between lower wages now or lower income in retirement. Never mind the debate about the fiscal consequences of increasing pressure on the aged pension, and never mind the question of using our massive pool of national savings to build

the infrastructure and new industries that will drive future growth.

On China, we see a McCarthyist campaign against anyone who dares to challenge the new orthodoxy that – rather than take quiet, decisive action to secure our core national interests – the most patriotic way to take on Beijing is to beat your chest on the front pages of Murdoch's newspapers. I've urged the government to talk less and do more; instead, we see Dutton and Morrison trying to outflank each other for political points ahead of their next leadership tussle – all egged on by Murdoch.

And on pandemic management, we see politically driven campaigns against state Labor governments that did the heavy lifting to keep our country safe, while Morrison gets an easy ride over the catastrophic failures to: construct an effective national quarantine network, roll out safe and effective vaccines, and protect our most vulnerable Australians in federally regulated aged care.

Against this backdrop, where is the opposition expected to present a comprehensive alternative narrative for the nation's future? It would be nice if swing-voters in the nation's marginal seats were all readers of the *Australian Fabians Review* – and we live in hope – but the Labor Party must campaign twice as hard while the terms of engagement are set by a company which, by rights, should be registered by the Australian Electoral Commission as an affiliated entity of the Coalition.

Sadly, Labor MPs understand the deck is stacked against them. Some even accept it. Even across the parliament, Murdoch has instilled a culture of fear. Politicians know that if they speak out against Murdoch, he will spare no expense ensuring they are politically defenestrated. Politicians understand they must keep Murdoch and his henchmen happy – or at least avoid drawing their attention – if they don't want to be savaged on the newsstands of every supermarket, service station and newsagency in the country. Even journalists outside News Corporation are afraid of making themselves targets by reporting on the excesses of the Murdoch empire. They don't want to be attacked themselves, nor do many of them want to risk cutting off their future employment prospects in a collapsing industry dominated by a single player.

On top of the print media empire, you can now add a second rising behemoth to the Australian media landscape: Sky News.

70
%

of our print media is held by Murdoch's News Corporation.

100
MILLION

views per month for Sky News

1
BILLION

total views for Sky News



© Alexander Prokopenko / Shutterstock

The old joke about Murdoch’s Sky News used to be that nobody outside Canberra watched it. The new reality is that Sky News is the biggest current affairs channel on YouTube with more than one billion views – almost twice that of the ABC – and now a consistent following of 100 million views per month. Sky News is also adding to its dwindling base of cable television viewers subscribers is supplemented by Foxtel’s streaming apps, and video content embedded throughout the websites of its dominant newspaper mastheads. News Corporation has trademarked “Fox News International” as it prepares to launch another app, Newsflash. Offline, it is broadcast live throughout 30 regional markets in every state and territory on WIN Television, and will soon take over the airwaves at Southern Cross Television.

Following the business model pioneered by Fox News in the United States, Sky News is taking on an outsized role in shaping the internal politics of the Liberal and National parties. For evidence of this, consider Queensland Liberal MP Ted O’Brien’s reported explanation to Malcolm Turnbull as to why he felt compelled to go against his own values and support Peter Dutton’s coup attempt in 2019: “It’s as though my branch members are having a meeting with Alan Jones and Peta Credlin every night.”

The worldview Sky News presents to these viewers

is terrifying. The Bureau of Meteorology and NASA are nefariously manipulating temperature data to manufacture evidence of climate change; the Black Lives Matter movement has little to do with racial equality, but is a terrorist organisation under the command of Joe Biden’s Democrats; and the United Nations and World Economic Forum are attempting to abolish private property and introduce global socialism. Only last month, outgoing Liberal MP Nicolle Flint publicly endorsed as “common sense” a Sky News video promoting the theory that the CIA and Bill Gates Foundation may have contrived COVID-19 as a “weapon of mass hysteria” to impose a communistic new world order.

For evidence of how this smorgasbord of fantastic untruth and cultural grievance affects the audience, look no further than the flurry of comments posted beneath Sky News videos by their own subscribers. One recent story about the near-fatal shooting in the head of a young woman, Black Lives Matter activist Sasha Johnson, yielded almost 10,000 comments – almost exclusively expressing jubilation at her shooting or calling for further violence. Some comments – which Sky News refused to delete – supported ethnic cleansing and quoted the Australian mass-murderer behind the 2019 Christchurch massacres.

If Sky News continues to become more mainstream within the broader Australian right, just as Fox News’s conspiracies have become normalised among American Republicans, then the implications for our democracy as a whole are profound.

FIVE SHORT YEARS ago, few could have imagined that an armed mob would descend on Washington and sack the Capitol in the hopes of overturning a democratic election. Fox News not only fomented the deadly January 6 insurrection in Washington by amplifying baseless claims about the stolen election; it now rewrites the history of those events to pretend that it was a peaceful gathering of well-meaning patriots.

Whether or not Australia follows the American path depends greatly on the decisions we take now. The fact that we are forced to contemplate such a grim reality is a sign of how far down this road we’ve already come.

In my argument, the media diversity question is an important element of the puzzle because the lack of genuine accountability is corroding our other democratic institutions.

Shielded by the Murdoch protection racket, Scott Morrison feels emboldened to continue habitually and systematically lying to the Australian people, even about things that really don’t matter. He gags the most basic parliamentary debates and stonewalls any tough question from the media until the press gallery moves along exhausted. Almost two years after Scott Morrison pledged a national integrity commission, we are no closer to any genuine check on official corruption. And the Auditor-General is being starved of funds, despite corruption, mismanagement and waste all booming and Australia sliding down the global corruption index prepared by Transparency International.

Simultaneously, we see the independence of the Australian Public Service under threat. The ranks of

**“WHETHER OR NOT
AUSTRALIA FOLLOWS
THE AMERICAN PATH
DEPENDS GREATLY
ON THE DECISIONS
WE TAKE NOW.”**

**“DESPITE COUNTLESS
OTHER LESSER
INQUIRIES - NOBODY
HAS YET BEEN ABLE
TO CRACK THIS
PARTICULAR POLICY
PROBLEM OPEN AND
SOLVE IT.”**



the foreign service, government boards and tribunals are stacked with too many failed conservative politicians and not enough respected experts. The head of the public service, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet Secretary Phil Gaetjens, is himself a longtime Liberal Party operative. Our bureaucratic culture risks becoming even more obsessed with anticipating the whims of ministers, rather than focusing on providing frank, fearless and forward-looking advice in the national interest.

Australians now expect that scandal-plagued ministers will keep their jobs, even when they are caught handling fraudulent documents or refuse to cooperate with police enquiries. Former ministers find convenient loopholes that allow them to take up lucrative work that draws on their experience and contacts in government, despite an 18-month ban on lobbying in their former portfolios. For example, former Defence Minister Christopher Pyne – who now lobbies his former officials on behalf of foreign arms manufacturers – waited out his 18-month ban by lobbying the Liberal government of South Australia on behalf of property developers. Pyne was, of course, once among the most powerful Liberal factional players in South Australia. Andrew Robb, who as trade minister encouraged state and territory governments to sell their assets to foreign investors, took a job advising a Chinese company just months after Liberals leased the Port of Darwin to that same company. (The government would be better served to review that 99-year lease, which was allowed by Morrison as Treasurer, rather than obsessing about non-binding memorandums between the Victorian Government and the Belt and Road Initiative that have amounted to nothing concrete).

And one of our final democratic safeguards, the ABC, is under rolling siege by a government determined to sabotage its independence. After almost \$800 million of cuts, the national broadcaster's real budget is smaller now than it was in 1996. The

independent nomination process for ABC Board members – introduced by Labor to end the board being packed with partisan ideologues – is routinely ignored. And senior editors, cowed by relentless bullying over alleged left-wing bias, are now either paralysed with fear or deliberately swing to the right (believing, wrongly, that they can appease critics who cannot be appeased).

Australians deserve the strongest democratic institutions in the world. But action to repair them is paralysed by the influence of the Murdoch media monopoly, which continues to hijack the terms of our national conversation and steer it to the short-term commercial and political benefit of a select few.

What is to be done? Many in the political and media firmament were blindsided by our ability to collect more than 500,000 signatures last year for a Royal Commission to investigate abuses of media power and recommend policies to deliver a strong, diverse and reliable news media. It was the single biggest petition ever collected using the parliament's e-petition system, and was so hotly demanded that it repeatedly crashed the Parliament House website. We may never know how many Australians tried to sign the petition and were unable, or never heard about it because – surprise, surprise – the Murdoch media wouldn't publish a word about it until the petition closed (after which they embarked on a dishonest smear campaign to discredit it).

Our call for a Royal Commission is not an ambit claim. I am dead serious about it because – despite countless other lesser inquiries – nobody has yet been able to crack this particular policy problem open and solve it. Our traditional news industry is folding in on itself with the collapsing news rooms – especially in the regions – and the emergence of new monopolies such as Google and Facebook. Our very democracy is at stake.

If this isn't cause for a Royal Commission, I don't know what is. 

Manufacturing the Future

Australia's dependency on commodity exports leaves us dangerously vulnerable. But there is another way, writes Adam Scorgie.

ADAM SCORGIE

Economically, Australia is vulnerable. At its peak in the 1960s, Australian manufacturing had been the nation's largest employer. However, decades of neoliberal economic policies have hollowed out the nation's manufacturing capacity, damaging our future prosperity. Luke Gosling, the Member for Solomon, put it succinctly in June of last year: 'we woke up to the painful reality, decades too late, that we had traded off key assets of our sovereignty and self-reliance in an unthinking search for economic efficiencies and a balanced budget'. This essay argues that Australia's current economic dependence is intolerable and presents a valuable opportunity for the Labor Party to tap into the rising economic nationalism of the Australian people, which the COVID-19 pandemic had stirred. If it is anything like the past, this approach may allow the Labor Party to build a diverse electoral coalition. I argue that the Labor Party's proposals in this area are vastly superior to the Liberal's faux concern over Australia's sovereignty, but more must be done, and more details provided.

The sheer extent of our dependence is an embarrassment. Shamefully, according to the Australia

Institute's Centre for Future Work, Australia ranks the lowest of the OECD countries in terms of its manufacturing self-sufficiency. In fact, the Centre's report refers to Australia as an 'extreme outlier' compared to others in the OECD. It is disgraceful that Australia's sovereignty, which should be the highest priority of any ruling government, has been treated as a non-factor in government policy. Moreover, the Growth Lab at Harvard University, which specialises in analysing industrial development, has ranked Australia's economy as the ninety-third most complex economy in the world. Australia fell twenty-nine places since 2000. These facts exemplify what many experts have been saying for years: our economy is too reliant on unprocessed raw material exports. Because of this, our economy is undiversified and vulnerable. Professor Roy Green, a specialist in this area, put it more bluntly: 'we sustain our First World lifestyle with a Third World industrial structure'. This unacceptable situation will impact our future prosperity, and it is dangerous for our security.

A strong manufacturing sector is vital for national prosperity. We cannot overstate this fact. The recovery



“If we aim to increase our manufacturing as a percentage of GDP to just the OECD average, we will create an additional 1.7 million skilled and semi-skilled jobs.”

of the sector can help to create good, stable jobs. For instance, according to Grant Thornton (2020), if we aim to increase our manufacturing as a percentage of GDP to just the OECD average, we will create an additional 1.7 million skilled and semi-skilled jobs. Not only is the sector critical for future jobs, but it is also a crucial source of innovation for our nation's future. Unfortunately, the hemorrhaging of industrial capacity in many Western nations has had a detrimental impact on this front. A former CEO of Intel, Andrew Grove, complained about this in the American context:

“Our pursuit of our individual businesses, which often involves transferring manufacturing and a great deal of engineering out of the country, has hindered our ability to bring innovations to scale at home. Without scaling, we don't just lose jobs – we lose our hold on new technologies. Losing the ability to scale will ultimately damage our capacity to innovate.”

This is why reviving Australian manufacturing must be a central pillar for any reconstruction strategy. Without a concerted effort to do this, Australia's vulnerabilities will persist.

The Australian people want these vulnerabilities to be addressed and the rampant globalisation that has defined the preceding three decades to be

rethought. The rising nationalist economic sentiment within the public has become more conspicuous, catalysed by the pandemic. Revealingly, a Gallup poll commissioned last year showed that 89% of Australians wanted more products to be made locally, and 52% of Australians preferred Australian-made products. Our over-reliance on other countries, creating jobs, and supporting Australian business were all listed as significant reasons behind these sentiments. Not only did a YouGov survey commissioned by the Australian Workers Union (AWU) show similar results, but it also demonstrated that a large majority of Australians believed that COVID-19 should be a wake-up call to Australia's over-reliance on other nations – particularly China. Finally, 68% of Australians reported that COVID-19 has made them more likely to buy Australian-made products. Therefore, it is clear that the

89

%

of Australians
wanted more products
to be made locally.

52

%

of Australians
preferred Australian-
made products.

rising economic nationalism of the public, while not universal, has become at least electorally potent. This nationalism must be embraced, and policies must be proposed to revive Australia's industrial capacity and restore the nation's economic sovereignty.

It seems that the Liberal Government has noticed the electoral importance of reviving Australian industrial capacity and sovereignty, as they have moved to occupy this ground. However, this is all empty rhetoric with no substance. For example, in late 2020, the government allocated \$1.5 billion for the manufacturing sector to help shore up local production. However, in the overall scheme of the budget, it was a mere drop in the bucket. It was nothing compared to decades of decline – much of it under the watch of Liberal governments. Outside of this, the government committed to injecting \$1.3 billion over four years to help scale up manufacturing businesses. The four-year timeframe shows the government's short-sightedness and the lack of seriousness with which they treat this issue. Recently, the government announced plans to develop domestic defence manufacturing facilities to regain some of our lost ground. The fact that this project relies on the involvement of foreign-owned defence companies seems to have escaped the Liberal's notice. It seems likely that the government has no conception of what national sovereignty actually entails.

In comparison, the federal Labor Party's proposals are vastly superior in ambition and sense. The creation of a \$15 billion 'National Reconstruction Fund' for manufacturing, by itself, completely overshadows any Liberal proposal so far. This is a necessary and prudent investment. The Fund's priorities are broad, from improving domestic mineral processing capabilities to improving our local car, train and shipbuilding. The proposal to establish a national rail manufacturing plan promises to build Australian trains by local workers using local materials. Significantly, this proposal clearly understands that it will be challenging to build up Australia's industrial capacity to be competitive without stable demand for local products. Also of note is Labor's commitment to reinvigorate vocational training to address Australia's skill shortage. It seems that these proposals have come about due to heavy pressure from the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union (AMWU) and the Australian Workers' Union (AWU), which have both given these proposals their broad support.

The great strength of Labor's proposals is that they address the problem more holistically. This is only possible because Labor's ideological underpinning and historical tradition of economic nationalism allows it to understand the problem for what it is: a creature of unfettered capitalism and neoliberal globalisation. Labor must remember its history and its

past success when it embraces economic nationalism, because national solidarity is crucial to restraining the unfettered global capitalism we have seen. Gough Whitlam emerged victorious in 1972 and ended twenty-three years of Liberal Government, after tapping into and galvanising the public's economic nationalism of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Like today, Australia's dependent position on foreign capital had catalysed nationalistic sentiment. A central element of this nationalism was the perception that Australia was merely a quarry for wealthier nations, which has not changed. In a scathing speech while Deputy Leader of the Labor Party in 1966, Whitlam condemned the Liberals, saying that they should 'hang their heads in shame' for handing Australian mineral wealth to foreign countries who process them for profit. He said that foreigners 'do Australia the honour of employing them to dig up their own wealth to be exported overseas'.

While the world of the 1970s is different to today's, and while the same electoral strategies Whitlam employed may not work for Labor now, this historical episode contains an important lesson: the cross-cutting nature of nationalist economic policies and its ability to unite diverse societal groups, such as workers, unions, business owners, and manufacturers. We must not forget this.

Despite Labor's superior proposals, more must be done, and more details must be provided. As John McKay argues in his Australian Fabians monograph, for Australia to be successful, 'industrial policy needs to incorporate the entire economy – indeed the entire society – and certainly not just manufacturing industry'. It may be necessary to look at the success of other nations in this field, particularly Southeast Asia. One successful policy from Taiwan that could help is the idea of shared production facilities. As Dan Breznitz and David Adler describe, these production facilities are co-sponsored by the state. They are where multiple start-ups and entrepreneurs can perfect and experiment with the newest production technology. Establishing a production facility for start-up manufacturers is an expensive obstacle, and this initial cost is one reason these businesses offshore their production. Shared production facilities help to prevent this from happening.

The Labor Party must seize this moment of economic nationalism. The re-emergence and re-assertion of the nation-state in the era of coronavirus is one of the silver linings of this ordeal, as it is only through the prism of national politics that a social democracy can be built 🇦🇺

Editor's note: Adam was a winner of the John Curtin Research Centre/Victorian Trades Hall Young Writers Prize for 2020.

IN PROFILE

Marion Scrymgour

Introducing Marion Scrymgour, preselected as Labor's candidate for the Northern Territory seat of Lingiari, following the retirement of long-term member Warren Snowdon. Writing exclusively for the *Fabian*, Ms Scrymgour sets out her pitch for the seat, and what voters can expect of her if she is elected. As readers of our first edition will note, Ms Scrymgour is standing for election in a seat which stood to be abolished, and which fellow *Fabians* contributor, Senator Malarndirri McCarthy, successfully campaigned to save in our last issue.



I AM A born and bred Territorian with family in all corners of the Territory. With Tiwi heritage from my mother's country and Amajere from my father, I am a passionate advocate for the issues affecting Aboriginal people.

Throughout my working life I have always been committed to fairness in public services, caring for the environment and making sure Territorians have access to good health, education and jobs, and that the Territory gets its fair share of Federal resources. I also understand that the Territory cannot succeed without strong small business and a resource sector to boost jobs.

I was the first Indigenous woman to be elected to the Northern Territory Parliament and became the Labor Party Deputy Chief Minister of the Northern Territory in November 2007, a position I held until February 2009. In that role, I was the highest-ranked Indigenous woman in government in Australia's history.

Since retiring from Territory politics in 2012 I returned to Wurlli Wurlinjang Aboriginal Corporation as its CEO. I was later elected Chairperson of the Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance in the Northern Territory. In March 2019 I was appointed CEO of the Northern Land Council and became the first woman CEO of any land council in the Northern Territory.

In March this year I was preselected as the Labor candidate for the seat of Lingiari at the upcoming Federal election.

It is a privilege to be preselected for the seat of Lingiari. The current member Mr Warren Snowdon has served the Territory with distinction for over thirty years and if I am successful, I will work hard to continue Warren's legacy of championing the causes of all Territorians in the federal Parliament.

The electorate of Lingiari is one of the largest in Australia covering 1,348.158 square kilometres, which equates to 99% of the Territory and includes the Christmas and Cocos Keeling Islands in the Indian Ocean Territories off the West Australian coastline. The Territory is a place I am well accustomed to and I have fought many battles for its people in politics and as a CEO in Non-Government Organisations.

I AM RETURNING to politics, as I still believe there is much more to do for all families and children of the Territory. I am passionate about the environment, Aboriginal affairs, health, education and ensuring Lingiari voices are heard at the highest level of federal politics.

I have been referred to as an outspoken woman on many issues that concern Territorians and I will continue to be outspoken-ensuring the Territory gets a fair deal from the Federal Government.

As a First Nations leader I fully support the Uluru Statement from the Heart, which advocates for the establishment of a First Nations Voice to be enshrined in the Constitution. It is time to listen and work together as a nation to provide a practical pathway forward for all Territorians. It is clear that the current government has failed in addressing these issues and we need to work together to provide better outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

I am no stranger to practical, long-term activist efforts. In the ongoing campaign to ensure workers' rights are upheld and strengthened, I have worked with unions across the Territory. The CPSU's Women's Action Network campaign is one that I am particularly fond of; protecting women in the workplace, and ensuring they have a strong and clear voice in all issues that affect them, is critical to a fair and equitable future.

As a local Aboriginal woman I am strongly

committed to achieving climate justice and arresting the march of catastrophic climate change. I understand that a failure to act on climate change would bring about an unprecedented biodiversity disaster for the Territory, and the world.

Better health care and quality education is a high priority for me, and I am particularly concerned about the recent cuts the federal government has made to our Medicare system. Medicare is a Labor initiative, and is rightly regarded as one of the best health systems in the world. The recent cuts will affect the families that need our health care systems the most. We must ensure that our fundamental rights to be made well when we are sick are not eroded further.

I am very thankful to all the frontline service workers across the Territory who have done an exceptional job in containing and keeping out COVID-19. We all know the devastating impact this would have in our local, rural and remote communities if the spread was not contained. We cannot thank these staff and frontline workers enough.

I am a strong and committed unionist. The labour movement is so important, and we must stand up and be heard if we want change for the better. We must improve working conditions for employees and ensure workplace health and safety standards are met, as we want all our workers to have fair wages and to return home safe at the end of their shift.

Between June 2013 and June 2019, under the Coalition, the Northern Territory has lost a shocking 701 Commonwealth public service jobs; this represented 26.7% all Federal public service jobs in the Territory. Most of these cuts are to agencies that directly provide services to First Nations people such as the NDIA, Services Australia and the Australian Electoral Commission who should be ensuring enrolment, so that everyone has the right to vote.

The loss of public sector jobs not only affects agencies and individuals, it is well-established that the loss of jobs has a multiplier effect on the wider economy.

Removing secure Commonwealth public service jobs from the Territory economy directly impacts on local business, and anyone trying to get ahead in the NT.

The federal government should be focusing on growing jobs in regional areas. Policy makers need to be on the ground and consulting where their decisions affect people's lives. Instead, they savagely cut the services we rely on, all while saying they care about rural and remote Australia.

IF ELECTED to serve the people of Lingiari at the next election, I will be the loudest voice in our parliament, calling out this lie 🚫

Big Australia

Why the Morrison Government
should not take us back.

KELVIN THOMSON

The great Gough Whitlam said when he was Prime Minister that he didn't think Australia's population would grow much in future, nor did he think it should. As recently as the year 2000, Howard Government Immigration Minister Phillip Ruddock expressed the same view.

In a speech about population, Phillip Ruddock said that demographic forces would cause Australia's population to grow more slowly towards the mid-century, when it would reach around 24 million or a little more. "At that point or soon afterwards it will virtually stabilise in size and age".

He went on to say that the first 80,000 net migrants per year contribute to reducing the ageing of the population, but that "net migration above that level brings us rapidly diminishing returns". He noted that "current trends in net overseas migration suggest that, over the long run, net migration may average out at around 80,000 per annum". He said that from an environmental perspective, all countries must eventually seek to stabilise their populations, and that it was our good fortune that this was possible within our lifetimes. He also said that population growth was not needed for per capita GDP growth, and that an ageing population would be accompanied by increased investment in education and research, and rising real incomes.

When Phillip Ruddock predicted in 2000 that Australia's population would slowly grow to 24 million by 2050 and stabilise after that, he didn't see himself coming. A few years later he ratcheted up our annual net migration from 100,000 to well over 200,000, where it has basically stayed ever since. His attraction to the 80,000 figure disappeared without trace. In 1998 the Australian Bureau of Statistics forecast that by 2051 our population would grow to 24.9 million. We reached that number in 2018 – 33 years early.

The consequences of this rapid population growth have been dramatic and far-reaching. Underemployment has risen, job security has declined, and wages have stagnated. Our cities have become congested and housing has become unaffordable. Young people have been fitted up with an axis of financial evil – job insecurity, housing unaffordability, and student debt.

The environment has also suffered greatly. When I got interested in protecting the environment around 1970, I thought we would learn from the mistakes of the past and do a much better job of protecting this unique and beautiful land. Wrong.

In Australia, and right around the world, the past 50 years have been the most devastating for the environment in human history. Habitat destruction, species extinctions, climate change, ocean pollution,

“When Phillip Ruddock predicted in 2000 that Australia’s population would slowly grow to 24 million by 2050 and stabilise after that, he didn’t see himself coming.”

waste – all worse than ever before. There are twice as many people as there were back in 1970, but on average the population of everything else has been cut in half. As well as making Australia uninhabitable for other species, we have made it less habitable for ourselves. Tree canopy cover and public and private open space have diminished.

The cost of infrastructure has ballooned. Instead of economies of scale, we now have diseconomies of scale – tunnels and bridges are much more expensive than laying tarmac over the ground. Land in the CBDs has become so expensive it is a disincentive to businesses thinking about whether to locate their operations in Australia or abroad. Governments are so flat out dealing with the infrastructure task that they no longer have the money or the head space to genuinely tackle our pressing social ills – homelessness, mental health, drugs, Indigenous disadvantage, habitat destruction. They are reduced to skating over the surface; too busy managing the problems of growth to focus on the things that could unite us as a nation and give us all a stake in our community.

Rapid population growth has also led us down the road to high rise. High rise is less sustainable than detached houses with front yards and backyards, with space for solar panels and rainwater tanks and tree canopy and growing food. People who believe that

just because they can’t see their environmental footprint, that they don’t have one, are delusional.

BUT THE CORONAVIRUS pandemic has opened up a window of opportunity to get off this treadmill. First, it has shown us that it is not safe to be dense. Not only is high rise not sustainable, in a pandemic it is a health risk. The pandemic spread fastest in the crowded cities. It spread in apartment lifts, through air conditioning systems, on public transport. The denser the city, the faster the spread. The twentieth century global phenomenon of urbanisation and megacities was revealed to be a trap. One of our senior health officials called high rise buildings “vertical cruise ships.” People started working from home, because it was safer. We’d been exhorted by the property industry to become “more like Manhattan.” But in Manhattan someone was dying from Coronavirus every two minutes.

Secondly, the pandemic saw an end to the massive inflow of international students and temporary migrant workers. Our population growth decreased to its slowest rate in a hundred years. There was much hand wringing about how the economy was going to collapse as a result. Did the sky fall in? Did our economy crash like a spent firework? No. Unemployment



is back to pre-pandemic levels. Underemployment is the lowest it has been in 7 years. The youth participation rate is rising. Young people are getting a go.

The Reserve Bank May Quarterly Statement on Monetary Policy says that the pause in Australia's migration program will lead to higher living standards for Australians. It says that as a result of the halt to incoming migration, "GDP is expected to be on a higher trajectory, supported by a higher per capita household income and a strong contribution from public demand." The Bank says that "a sustained period of economic recovery could lead to wages pressures emerging more quickly if new labour supply remains constrained."

Employers are not happy about this, and are screaming for the "re-opening of the borders", and complaining that they can't find workers. This is usually an unfinished sentence. The complete sentence is "I can't find workers at the wages and conditions I am offering". Employers having to offer higher wages, or on the job training, in order to attract workers, would be a good thing. The flatlining of wages caused by Australia's rapid population growth has seen falling living standards for many, including many of our less well off. And indeed the Reserve Bank itself has said that low wage growth is a barrier to post pandemic recovery.

The Reserve Bank's Statement is consistent with the findings that the migration pause is good for workers and wages. From Commonwealth Bank Senior Analyst Gareth Aird, to Leith Van Onselen of Macrobusiness, and from academics both left (Professor Ross Garnaut) and right (Professor Judith Sloan).

It is also consistent with years of economic data which show that small, slowly growing populations have higher living standards than large, rapidly growing populations. The wealthiest, healthiest and happiest countries all have populations of less than 10 million.

Most Australians instinctively understand all this to be true. When asked about it, they have never supported "Big Australia". That has not deterred political and business leaders, or media and other commentators. They tend to belong to one or more of three camps.

The first is engaged in special pleading on behalf of particular industries or businesses that profit from population growth. They exaggerate the importance of their particular industry. Economics 101, reinforced by the pandemic, is that if people aren't spending money on overseas holidays they are spending it on caravans. If they aren't spending money in restaurants and cafes, they are spending it on groceries at Coles and Woolworths. We need a strong social security safety

net to help individuals who are adversely affected by economic and social change, but government policy aimed at propping up particular businesses or industries is crony capitalism.

The second camp expresses concern about population and workforce ageing. This scare campaign, with its bleak vision of an ever-diminishing workforce holding up an ever-growing proportion of retirees, is without foundation. Our labour market participation is rising, not falling. More women are entering the workforce. More retirees are ageing more healthily, and working longer. Yes, we have more retirees, but we have a smaller cohort of under 18s, who are also dependants. Ageing is a sign of success, both individually and collectively. Other countries with an ageing workforce are doing fine. Don't worry about ageing, be happy! The scare campaign also devalues older people, which is a poor reward for their continuing contribution to our society both financially and as volunteers, mentors, and unpaid family carers.

The third camp believes in "open borders". They think that any and all opposition to migration is racist, or xenophobic, or "dangerous". Presumably this makes Gough Whitlam, Bob Hawke, and Paul Keating, who all ran much smaller migration programs than the one we have had for the past 15 years, bigots. One wonders how big the program would have to get before the "open borders" brigade considered it too big.

Global polling a few years ago found that upwards of 600 million people would move to another country if they could. Given how revolutionary the impact of such movement would be, "open borders" is every bit as extremist a position as the communism which the Fabian Society of the early twentieth century had to confront. "Open borders" is ecological nonsense – with the global population increasing by over 80 million every year, it is a recipe for habitat destruction, species extinctions and climate change on a devastating scale. It is also political nonsense. Voters around the world have shown they will vote for the likes of Donald Trump, Nigel Farage, Marine Le Pen, Tony Abbott and Pauline Hanson before they would accept it.

WE HAVE A once in a generation opportunity to reset the migration button, and return the international student and temporary visa programs to their late 20th Century levels. This would provide opportunities for young people, who have been deprived of the job security that I and my generation enjoyed.

And most importantly, it might help us Close the Gap. In 2008, indigenous employment was about 48% and non-indigenous employment was 75%. That is, three quarters of non-indigenous adults were

“We have a once in a generation opportunity to reset the migration button, and return the international student and temporary visa programs to their late 20th Century levels.”

employed, but only half of Indigenous Australians. The Council of Australian Governments set a Closing the Gap target of halving this disparity in 10 years. But 10 years later, in 2018, non-indigenous employment remained around 75%, while Indigenous employment had barely moved – 49%, or still one in half. This is our chance to do something really meaningful to Close the Gap.

The Morrison Government talks the talk of wage growth and getting unemployment down. But there is every chance it will succumb to big business pleading and seek to re-establish our 'population Ponzi scheme' as soon as it possibly can.

At this point the Left of politics should get off what has been a politically and environmentally disastrous train. It should demand that we put the health

of Australians first. It should demand that we prioritise Australian jobs and Australian workers, through measures such as genuine labour market testing. It should demand that we get rid of provisions in trade deals that undermine our democratic sovereignty. It should demand that we put tree canopy cover and a genuine say for residents in planning decisions ahead of property developer greed.

Finally, it should demand that that governments stop expending all their time, energy, and money on managing the problems of population growth, and focus on things that could unite us as a nation, and give us all a stake in our community – tackling problems like homelessness, mental health, Indigenous disadvantage, drug addiction, and habitat destruction 🚫

BOOK REVIEW

New ideas, old ideas, and the Right’s ‘culture of ideas’

DECLAN DAVIS

Against the backdrop of a world in crisis due to COVID-19, an assumed mid-to-late 2021 federal election, and a postponed ALP National Conference, *The Write Stuff: Voices of Unity on Labor’s Future* (December 2020, Connor Court Publishing) and *Upturn: A Better Normal After COVID-19* (November 2020, NewSouth Publishing) seek to fill the ‘ideas gap’ by bringing together a range of contributors to discuss policy challenges and proposals for the future.

Each book has a similar structure, with a short introduction from the editors (Nick Dyrenfurth and Misha Zelinsky for *The Write Stuff*, Tanya Plibersek for *Upturn*), followed by essays from roughly thirty contributors (MPs, union leaders, journalists, business leaders) on a range of topics. Only two contributors feature in both books: Wayne Swan and Jim Chalmers. Other than their structure, these books are quite different.

**THE WRITE STUFF:
VOICES OF UNITY ON LABOR’S FUTURE**

‘*The Write Stuff* starts from the position that, despite sensationalist media coverage, organised factions are not the ALP’s major weakness. The decline of ideas and values is the true problem. This is because of the erosion of a distinctive, guiding philosophy and set of core beliefs binding what is known as the Labor Right.’ (p. 5)

The Write Stuff is a starkly political document of the Labor Right. It unapologetically asserts that ‘Unity

[the Right faction’s preferred moniker] has been the life force behind Labor’s historic achievements and the incubator of its best and most electorally successful ideas and leaders.’ (p. 6) The implication is that the key to federal success for the Labor Party is revitalisation of a ‘culture of ideas’ on the Right. It is within this context that the contributors (all aligned to some degree with the Right) have shared essays on policy areas most relevant to federal politics. Dyrenfurth and Zelinsky articulate their overall thesis in the introduction. Their thesis can roughly be put as:

1. THE PROBLEM

The decline of the Right’s culture of ideas and ability to produce transformational leaders is correlated with federal Labor’s decline.

2. THE SOLUTION

The Right must win the battle of ideas so that Labor can reverse that decline and therefore become successful at the federal level again.

3. THE SUBTEXT

The ALP should be led by a member of the Right, and there is no need to probe any deeper into other issues that might be causes of federal Labor’s recent electoral failures.

‘There exists a clear correlation with the decline of the Unity’s once vibrant culture of ideas, a stultifying ideological conformity, its ability to produce significant, transformational leaders, and federal Labor’s decline.’ (p. 3)



It is worth noting that the editors do not pin blame on the Left faction or others, but instead call directly on the Right to get its act together.

Without interrogating the claim that ‘Unity has been the lifeforce behind Labor’s historic achievements’ (an exercise left for the reader), it is a bold claim that victory for federal Labor rests fundamentally on a revival of ideas on the Right. If only things were that simple. The thesis itself feels contrived, seeking to justify the book’s existence and give it weight (which feels unnecessary given the great range of contributors Dyrenfurth and Zelinsky have brought together).

Readers of this journal will note that the lack of a culture of ideas on the Right was not called out by Craig Emerson and Jay Weatherill in their review of the 2019 election defeat. Emmerson and Weatherill summarily found that Labor lost that election primarily due to a lack of campaign strategy, a cluttered policy platform and an unpopular leader. If the Labor party is to win the next federal election, we ignore these findings at our peril.

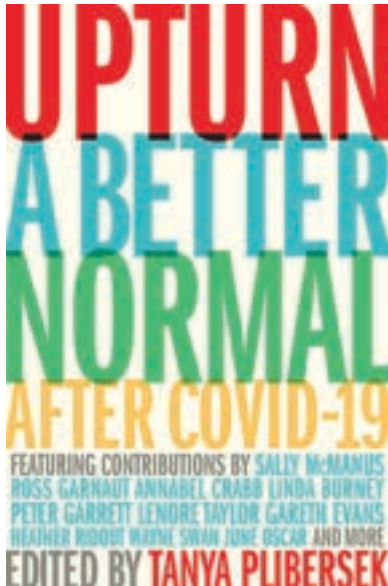
While time is well spent on the battle for ideas, time would be much better spent developing a coherent campaign strategy and streamlined messaging.

If we set aside the broader factional jockeying and look at the essays themselves, the question becomes ‘has this book succeeded in incubating the best ideas for the future?’ On the whole, most of the ideas presented are ideas we have heard before in some form, which is not all that surprising given the topics covered spring from well-worn policy debates. If the goal is to reignite a culture of ideas in order to help Labor win power, it is notably silent on climate change, a vexed political issue that surely should be at the heart of any such battle of ideas within the Labor party. Some contributors make mention of it (Anthony Chisholm, Wayne Swan, Zelinsky) but no one grapples with it. Given the electoral complexity of this issue, you might have expected to see this topic front and centre. Perhaps the omission is deliberate, and suggests that Labor shouldn’t be speaking about climate change at all...

UPTURN: A BETTER NORMAL AFTER COVID-19

‘Australia needs strong, inclusive, environmentally sustainable economic growth. Good wages support confidence and demand in our economy. A well-paid, secure middle-class is not the distant end-goal of economic growth: it is the precondition of it. We should aim for full employment.’ (p. 3)

Upturn is much less a blueprint to power and more



an imagining of what the world could look like after COVID-19. It brings together a broad range of contributors (members of Left and Right factions of the ALP, journalists, businesspeople, and scientists) to articulate how we should change things for the better and not simply ‘snap back.’ *Upturn* replaces a thesis statement with a point of departure: how do we capture the ethos that emerged at the start of COVID-19 that ‘we are all in this together’ and use it to ‘build back stronger’.

Upturn is serious about policy discussion, with each essay extensively referenced, providing readers with an opportunity to go deeper on topics that interest them. On top of that, most chapters have a clear list of priorities and actions that clearly signpost about what should change, and how. Greg Combet’s chapter on superannuation does a particularly good job of making a complex topic understandable while providing extra depth for people with more advanced knowledge.

NOTWITHSTANDING SOME QUESTIONS about the thesis statement of *The Write Stuff*, both books make a contribution to serious policy discussion in a format which allows for extended thought versus the usual soundbites people are used to hearing. Both books have elevated lesser-known contributors, which is an important step to get new voices, new perspectives, and new ideas into the debate. These are the sorts of books which will go out of date quickly, so if either of them excite you, it would be better to read them sooner rather than later =



FICTION

Hospitable



PAUL SANDRINGHAM

Mister Mathew Bready were a good and charming man and I do not care to hear what anyone may say contrariwise.

I confessed to the priest last Saturday morning that I do not only mourn my husband. I am also sometimes glad to be rid of him and I shall not be less glad to rid myself of this black mourning which I must wear until the year is done. My husband being dead now these two months gone, I must be careful what I think and say, answered Father Spinks. And now I must do my penance four weeks, of which not one is yet finished, or the church will not have me and if the church does not have me then God cannot, for the church will keep me from Him. Father Spinks told me so his self.

But what the church does not know the church cannot scold, and I shall take my chances with God because I must think those things that have been in my head these months and will not leave.

Right image:
© Kon Karampelas / Pexels

Illustration:
Drawing of Bushranger
Matthew Brady
© Thomas Bock – State
Library of New South Wales.

My husband did not care for Mister Bready although he did not know him. ‘Them bushrangers,’ said he the night he died, ‘is lucky enough when they get caught and hanged before they get eaten as they deserve.’

Oh! and did I scold him for speaking so with not a pinch of respect for the poor souls as were killed and eaten by that beast Jefferies.

Mister Bready did not care about my husband and nor did he care to know him.

I do not always confess things to the priest quick and it is as well, this I have now learned. When Mister Mathew Bready first came to visit I did not know what was right nor what was wrong. There stands a man in the door of our farmhouse and my man were not there, and this man did look so poor and haggard and tired and he asks me for a cup of tea and some minutes upon my oldest stool, which would be, he says, a grace to his bones to sit upon for that stool has borne me also. Well and did I laugh and I am sure that I were just as red in the face had I not been red from laughing. Never had a man spoken to me of the like and never had I seen a man looked less like to say it.

He got his cup of tea, did Mister Bready. And the while he graced his bones on my old stool he told me his name and asked if I knew who he were. ‘There is not a settler nor hardly a black in this Van Diemen’s Land does not know who Mathew Bready is, but I do not know that you are he,’ said I. I cannot say now if I hoped more strongly that he were or that he were not him, but it makes little hange now for it were him.

The next day being Sunday and my husband being in Hobart with his brother who were dying, old Connor Poke and his Elsie came with the dray to take me to the church for mass. I was not sure what should I do and dare I take the bread from the priest, for I had not confessed nor had I even thought to speak to the constable, although my Mathew Bready had not forbid it me.

Father Spinks is not a nice man but then he does not have to be a nice man, for he is not allowed to woo a bride nor are the free men of this colony like to listen to a nice man’s words. But he is as good a priest as I have known and on this Sunday he spoke straight at me. It is Father Spinks’s way to tell the church the chief sentence of the lesson in English before he says a little of what we should do about it. Other priests I have seen do not do this, and for the simple people and even the gentlefolk who cannot speak their Latin, it is not very plain. So there, I have now said one good thing of Father Spinks.

And having been brought to mass by Connor Poke and his Elsie, and not knowing what I should do, I was made certain by Father Spinks and his bible that I had done no wrong as yet.

‘Neglect not,’ said he, ‘to be hospitable to strangers, for thereby have some been hospitable to angels unbeknown to themselves.’ I do not know what else he said, for my mind was now busied with the thought that God his self could say of Mathew Bready that he be an angel unbeknown to me, and I hope I did not laugh at this thought. But so I knelt before Father Spinks and ate the bread which he had blessed, for I had nothing new to confess.

My husband returned to our farm and waked me in our bed as the sky were still black and the stars still white. He had ridden half the night to tell me that his brother was now dead and we must be getting us ready to go together to Hobart Town for his burial, and could I ask old Connor for his dray to go down as there were no time now to get the broken wheel on our own dray mended. It were the start of the summer and they would not wait with the burial more than a day, or two at the outside.

I walked to Connor’s farm at dawn and Connor said he would bring me home in the dray and he could walk home his self, we did not need to lose any time on account of him. Then a short time later he says to my husband that

we must be careful on the road to Hobart and not stop for helping strangers, as that bolter Bready has been seen and heard of in the hills around about. So my husband says we must bring Connor back to Elsie direct with the dray or she may worry her self on account of him and on account of Bready.

We were gone some five days, for my husband was to sell his brother’s tavern and dispose, he said in the words of the government official, of his effects.

‘I did not know that dispose meant to put them on our dray quick before the distiller comes to take them as payment for rum,’ said I saucily and very near got myself cuffed.

‘We are not like that man Bready,’ says my husband to me then.

‘These effects were my brother’s and now they are mine. It were not I that did not pay for rum. Why should the distiller take my effects?’

Mathew Bready were a good and charming man, but in every house in the colony, I would say, the talk all the summer were of Bolter Bready and how bad a man he were, though not a beast like Jefferies. Every settler knew what would be good for Bready, but not every farmer’s wife were privileged to be hospitable to an angel unbeknown.

He stood quite many times in my door this early summer, always when my husband were not about, and he spoke such clever and knowing things and he never once did cuff me for my saucy words. He told me why he had been sent out and why he could not serve his seven years, and he asked me did I think good or evil of him and did I think he should stop it all, and I cannot say what I thought or think but he was a better man than many men as were his betters.

My brother by law were dead some weeks before my husband started to cough, and I do not know why but it were another fortnight before I understood that he were dying like his brother had died.

Connor and Elsie were here the night he died, being as they knew it would not be long now. And Connor said again that Bready were thought to be in the hills and it were said that he be a clever man as could make a woman smile and a man frown. It may be safer, says Connor, that I sell the farm and live with him and with his Elsie after – and then he says no more and leaves the room.

To make my husband happy once more I told him my secret, and I hoped that he would not want to know the days and the weeks. It is enough, I told myself, for him to know that though he may not see the winter, I shall bear a child that bears his name in the spring.

‘Them bushrangers is lucky enough when they get caught and hanged before they get eaten as they deserve,’ is his answer, and I scold him and then he coughs some more and then he is dead and Father Spinks comes in and I cry because my husband is dead but I know I shall not let another man cuff me again nor tell me what I must think.

Father Spinks and his church can tell me I must not think such thoughts as I do but I will not listen and I will not confess any more. I will take my chances with God. It is two months now that my husband is dead and I must wear this mourning for a year. And now the month of May has just begun and they were to hang the father of my unborn child this morning in Hobart Town, and he were a good and charming man and I do not care to hear 𐄂



FABIAN 

The Australian Fabians Review

fabians.org.au

