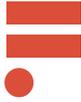


**Australian  
Fabians.**

# After Neoliberalism - Can Social Democracy be Saved?

Fabian pamphlet



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## About the Australian Fabians

For more than half a century, the Australian Fabians have been at the forefront of research and debate into progressive political ideas and public policy reform.

Australian political life is entering a new era. There is an urgent need for searching debate and new thinking.

### **The Australian Fabians aim to achieve:**

- Greater equality of power, wealth and opportunity.
- Broader promotion of collective actions and public service.
- An accountable, tolerant and active democracy.

### **The Australian Fabians:**

- Contribute to progressive political thinking by generating original ideas that reflect a higher order of thinking in order to meet the challenges of the times.
- Contribute to a progressive political culture by disseminating these ideas and getting them into the public domain.
- Are an active movement of people who identify with, are engaged in and who encourage progressive political debate around social justice, economic and political reform.
- Influence the ideas and policies of political parties, especially the Australian Labor Party.

## What makes the Australian Fabians distinctive?

The Australian Fabians are a democratically constituted membership organisation. We provide members with the opportunity to participate in public debate, direct access to our publications and events, and the opportunity to participate fully in the decisions and actions of the organisation.

The Australian Fabians are part of an international social and intellectual movement. The UK Fabian Society has been a central part of the democratic socialist, social democratic and Labour tradition throughout the 20th century in Great Britain.

The Australian Fabians have been active since 1947. The New Zealand Fabians has more recently become part of this tradition.

## **Because political ideas matter**

Over the years, the Australian Fabians have looked to the Australian Labor Party as a Party through which social democratic principles and values can be achieved. Our relationship with Australian Labor governments is that of a 'critical friend'. We are neither 'on-' nor 'off-message'. Some of what we do may be congruent with government thinking; some not.

Good government needs new ideas and public debate. The Australian Fabians ask difficult questions – and, if necessary, propose difficult answers. Our constitution and history demand this of us. Our independence of mind is fiercely guarded.

The Australian Fabians are an independent organisation. The Australian Fabians Inc. (also known as the Australian Fabian Society) is a Not-for-profit association incorporated in Victoria, Australia.

If you want to help make new thinking happen join the Australian Fabians. There is a membership form in this publication or join online at [fabians.org.au](http://fabians.org.au).

## Foreword

As Fabians we promote equality and advocate social democracy for a just and fair society. These values are now in danger.

Neoliberalism has been a totalising endeavour, internalising itself in policy language and reshaping society's understanding of itself as primarily market driven, atomised and individualistic.

By contrast, Polanyi's classic definition of social democracy (used by Tim Lyons in this volume) was 'the conscious subordination of the market to democracy'.

With the ideological battle apparently so comprehensively won by neoliberalism, it seems now largely the reverse is true. Market logic has been internalised by both the left and right of politics, and across the public more generally. As Anna Yeatman writes in this volume: 'neoliberalism implicates our entire way of being.'

It should be noted that both the market crashes of 1929 and 2008 immediately followed record peaks in inequality, after periods of unfettered market liberalism, a point emphasised by French economist Thomas Piketty. Following this, the inherent failings of neoliberalism have now bolstered the emergence of the alt-right and the 'strong man' leader.

In publishing this pamphlet we ask, under these conditions, can the social democratic project be revived, reclaimed and renewed?

The three articles in this volume make the case that we have no other alternative, if we seek to retain our values as a just and democratic society.

First, Anna Yeatman characterises neoliberalism as an "anti-political political philosophy", where politics is viewed as an interference in the sovereignty of the market. She sees neoliberalism as a historically specific replacement of human reason with unreflective competitive conduct as the basis for a market economy, that is believed to have a superior capacity for problem solving. It aims to dismantle the social democratic project.

She outlines how its implementation has distorted the public service, universities, human services and national infrastructure. She ends with a call to retrieve the guiding values and institutions of social democracy and the welfare state, to reshape the 21st century.

Tim Lyons then likewise argues that we are swamped by the hegemony of neoliberal values, almost to the exclusion of all others. His basic question is “what can we do about it?”

He asks why the progressive side of politics backed away from the exercise of power, whilst the right “had no such qualms”. Politics, he argues, needs to be revived with new collective expressions. We need a wider conception about what prosperity means.

He cautions regarding the destructive forces that AI and big data may pose when used as a form of micro-control over citizens. We can take back control, but new forms of social democracy will not look the same as the old.

John Quiggin, in the final article, argues that a new push towards socialism as ‘unapologetic social democracy’ is resurgent, especially among the young and those looking for an alternative to the prevailing uniformity of neoliberalism. While rebelling against the enrichment of the few, this socialism shows no desire to return to a centrally managed economy.

The work, he says, is in fleshing out real policy alternatives. Some of this work has begun, but we need to look both backwards “to the social democratic moment”, and forwards “to the prospects for a genuine sharing economy” utilising technological advances.

He develops a broad mix of ideas looking at an increase in public ownership and a renewed mixed economy, greater access to social goods such as information, and bold proposals such as the job guarantee. He ends by calling for a decisive break from the past through an explicit embrace of this new socialism.

All three essays end on a similar note - the call for a decisive reinvention of what it means to be a social democrat, by whatever name, redressing the deleterious effects of decades of neoliberal ascendancy.

The fight to promote equality and a social democratic alternative is the fight in which the Australian Fabians are engaged.

The articles in this pamphlet deliver a collective call to arms.

**Chris Blake**  
**Publications Convenor**  
**Victorian Fabians**  
**November 2018**

**Julia Thornton**  
**Chair**  
**Victorian Fabians**

# Is Neoliberalism Destroying Social Democracy?

Anna Yeatman

Anna Yeatman is a professorial research fellow in the Whitlam Institute, Western Sydney University.

**Neoliberalism has been institutionally ascendant for almost 40 years.**

It is an historical project that was designed to destroy social democracy.

It has been successful in fundamentally eroding if not destroying the social democratic project of the welfare state, which in Australia began in the late 19th century.

Neoliberalism is best understood as a counter-revolution in relation to the 20th century social liberal and welfare state - it is anti-equality, anti-democracy, anti-unions (see Steiner 2009), and anti-social solidarity or collective responsibility for welfare.

Neoliberalism began to develop in the 1920s and 1930s, it was organized as a powerful international network in the form of the Mont Pelèrin Society in 1947, and it continued to develop and acquire powerful bases of influence in universities, think tanks, and elite networks. The Institute of Public Affairs in Australia (led by John Roskam a member of the MPS) like the Heritage Foundation in the USA have become major players in framing debate about the public policy agenda and influencing governments.

The aim of neoliberalism is to change the nature of how society is institutionally and normatively ordered. This change in the nature of collective ordering is from one that is public in orientation to one that is private in orientation. We can say simply that neoliberalism privatises society.

Neoliberalism uses the authority of the state and the power of the institutions of government to create society in the image of the competitive market order.

Thus neoliberalism implicates our entire way of being. It is not just a set of discrete policies that can be changed at the next election.

If we are to reclaim social democracy we have to call the neoliberal institutional order into question and rebuild a social democratic institutional order.

## **What is neoliberalism?**

Neoliberalism is an anti-political political philosophy. It assumes the appearance of economics but it is actually an entire philosophy oriented to the question of what is a human being and how human society should be organized (see Mirowski 2013). As Margaret Thatcher put it in 1981: 'Economics are the method, but the object is to change the heart and soul.'

Neoliberal philosophy assumes the appearance of economics because its central premise is that human conduct is oriented to the competitive pursuit of private interest - therefore the most appropriate arena for human conduct is a competitive market economy.

Hayek is the leading neoliberal philosopher. He argues that the market economy is a giant information processor. Its information processing capacity far exceeds that of any human mind (individual or collective). It is the price mechanism that mediates information flows in the market economy.

This proposition is radical, and corrosive of all traditional and rational substantive modes of valuing. The proposition is that value is established when people are prepared to pay for something offered in the context of a competitive market economy. Thus value is reduced to subjective consumer preference - here we can see why the communications profession has become so powerful, and why Philip Mirowski (2017) links neoliberalism to fake news.

In the neoliberal framework there is no such thing as publicly interested or disinterested conduct. Neoliberals reject the Enlightenment idea of a disinterested rationalism as this underwrites the principle of self-determination (see Mirowski 2017). They reject the democratic Enlightenment ideal of public conversation based on understanding of reasons or justifications for views, positions and recommendations for action (see Pippin on this ideal as expressed by Hegel). On the premise that people value what they are willing to pay for, they argue that the value of knowledge and research is established in the marketplace. Philip Mirowski (2017) comments: 'when truth came to be

defined as “whatever sells”, then it ceases to exert any independent regulatory force in epistemology.’

Neoliberals distrust what they call producer interest - they argue that producers (this includes all professional groups and associations) engage in uncompetitive behaviour if they are permitted to do so (they will capture institutions, convert such capture into rent seeking and so on). The only way to ensure that producers are efficient is to make sure that they are subject to market competition.

The distrust of producer interest is in the name of consumer sovereignty. The argument is that if producers are forced by the dynamics of competition to be more efficient, and more innovative, this benefits the consumer. Neoliberals reconcile their championship of consumer sovereignty with the power of the large corporation by arguing that competition ensures that it cannot establish monopoly (see Van Horn 2009). This enables them to also justify privileged access of the corporation or its representatives to government policy making (so that government thinking is market-relevant).

Neoliberalism is an anti-political political philosophy because it attacks what it sees as political interference with the freedom of private property and its expression within the competitive market order. This is the reason why neoliberalism sidelines democracy in favour of a pro-market executive style of government.

## **How has neoliberalism impacted on institutional design and the approach to public policy?**

Let us look at four areas:

### **1. The Public Service**

Conceptually neoliberalism cannot embrace the idea of public office, or the ethic of public office where the public official is trained in the art of government and offers disinterested and professional advice to the government of the day. Neoliberalism places the very idea of public service under erasure. It does this in the following ways:

- a. On the view of elections as a competitive political marketplace where voters get to assert their preference, the winner of the election is accorded executive authority in relation to the conduct of government. Specifically the relationship between the government of the day (GOD) and the public service is understood in terms of agency theory, the right of the principal to command the agent. This trashes the professional independence of the public service, and it justifies the politicisation of the top level of the public service and its discipline by means of fixed-term performance contracts;
- b. Given the understanding that government activity is inherently uncompetitive, as much as possible of government activity is marketized and contracted out to private agents. This transforms the work of government: public servants are no longer program managers interacting with representatives and members of the public in the design, delivery and evaluation of public programs. As Osmond Chiu (2017) comments: 'The APS has become less directly involved in service delivery and more geared towards policy, regulatory and contract management.'
- c. The ethos of public service is replaced by one of market design, market management, and market rules. This is why in Australia the Productivity Commission has the premier role in the development of public policy and its evaluation.
- d. The activity of government is redesigned on business lines, and there is 'a blurring of the lines of difference between public and private sectors', with encouragement given to the shifting of personnel between public and private sectors (Chiu 2017).
- e. The professional vocation of public service is replaced by a technocratic concept of project work. Instead of long-term service that builds relationships with communities, grows program continuity, institutional memory and policy expertise, context-indifferent management skills in relation to short-term project-based teams prevail (Chiu 2017).

If one thinks that the experience, capacity and morale of the public service is a central condition of good government, then the impact of neoliberalism on the public services of the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments is a serious worry. It is notable that there has been an absolute decline in the

numbers of the APS while there has been an increase in population: 'The most recent figures from the APSC in December 2015 has a headcount of 151,873, ten thousand less in twenty five years. Over the same period, Australia's estimated resident population grew by 38.5 per cent (Chiu, 2017).'

## **2. The Universities**

Neoliberalism suggests that the only things worth valuing are those that sell. This justifies the creation of a competitive market in university education where student choice becomes the driver of how funding operates as a combination of public subsidy and student fees. This shift involves a progressive reduction of per capita public funding with a parallel shift of increased reliance on private funding (student fees). The impact of the marketization of university education on its content and quality is insufficiently recognized and discussed. It has certainly impacted on the nature and structuring of academic work with significantly increased and ongoing casualization of the academic workforce, a decrease in the professional autonomy of academics, and the destruction of academic collegial governance.

The marketization of the university also justifies the shift away from public funding of disinterested 'public interest' research in the direction of a form of public-private partnership in research funding. 'Translational research' is the name given to a funding approach that brings commercial partners such as Big Pharma into collaboration with universities to accelerate the application of scientific research. Mark Robinson (2017) proposes that translational science and medicine involves corporations shifting from in-house research capacity to externalizing this capacity with reliance on university research partners. This trend means the commercialization of science, which will impact on how universities are ranked, how academic promotion operates, and what knowledge disciplines are valued. It is this trend that explains the overhaul of the CSIRO under its current CEO.

Finally, in being invited to become entrepreneurs, some academics will take the opportunity to enrich themselves in becoming consultants to corporate clients. Eddie Nik-Khah and Robert van Horne tell the story of how the Chicago Neoliberal School established Lexecon in 1977 to offer advice to law firms representing corporate clients facing antitrust action or negative regulatory

judgments. The aim of these neoliberal thinkers was to transform the regulatory order so that it did not interfere with corporate pursuit of profit. Lexecon became a powerful vehicle of corporate patronage for the Chicago Neoliberal School. Lexecon provided an avenue for collaboration between the academy and the corporation, a powerful tool for rewriting regulation, as well as a career route for researchers to tack between the academy, consulting, think tanks, private equity and all the way back again (Nik-Khah and van Horne, 2017, 24).

### **3. Human Services**

The human services refer to the public services that developed as distinct aspects of the welfare state: health, education, housing, disability, aged care, migrant settlement services, early childhood services, and so on. In many cases these services were delivered by not-for-profit community agencies working in close collaboration with government as the public funder and manager of the relevant program. The ethos of these welfare state services was one of service to the public - these were services that citizens should have access to as a matter of right because such access constitutes what T. H. Marshall called the baseline of civilized living that enables each individual to enjoy the status of a citizen or free being. The values that framed such service provision were access, equity, efficiency, and citizen participation ('voice').

Now in Australia these services have been placed within the neoliberal institutional framework of competition policy. The Productivity Commission has been given the task of implementing the recent Competition Policy Review. Services will have to compete for consumer choice (or its proxy) within a competitive market setting. We already have experience of what this means (the employment services market being the first cab off this rank some time ago):

- a. Services compete on price which means there is an in-built incentive to reduce staff costs (the labour force is increasingly casualised, training and supervision drop out of the picture, and there is an expansion of management and marketing positions that are paid far more than direct service positions);
- b. The ethos of business management displaces the civil and community-oriented ethos of NFPs;

- c. The NFPs have to corporatize and commercialize their operation in order to become effective market competitors and For-Profit agencies including multinational corporations enter the service market;
- d. Smaller, community-embedded services do not have the business infrastructure and scale to compete - they either go under or are swallowed up by large corporate agencies;
- e. The complex dialogical relationship between service workers and clients that guarantees a whole person responsive service (see Yeatman 2009) is displaced by an inflexible service menu that is driven by unit costs accounting, communication system algorithms, and a hands-off managerialist form of bureaucracy.

The disaster of the marketization of VET should be an abject lesson for all, but the model of service marketization continues to prevail, with its advocates thinking all they need do is tweak the regulatory structures.

#### **4. National Infrastructure**

There are many who argue that with interest rates at an historic low it makes sense for government to borrow and invest in national infrastructure development of the kind that the 21st century needs, infrastructure that it could own and turn into a public asset. Public infrastructure spending could boost growth, investment, employment and skills training, as well as harness the CSIRO and university research for innovation.

It is not difficult to think of the infrastructure we need - a national energy grid conceived as a publicly managed and owned post-carbon system (see Quiggin 2016); an up to date national broadband network conceived as an accessible and essential public service; a national water conservation system; the development of a modern 21st century rail network that articulates this continent; and the elaboration of the Indigenous ranger program into a series of environmental stewardship roles and jobs.

However for any of this to occur the neoliberal animus against public ownership and enterprise would have to go, and the entrenched interest of for-profit private sector infrastructure firms in getting access to public funding would have to be countered. We would need a reinvigorated idea of a mixed economy where

public enterprise with its distinctive virtues is balanced by private enterprise with its distinctive virtues.

## **My emphasis has been on the neoliberal success in overturning the institutional coordinates of the 20th century social democratic welfare state.**

The neoliberals were ambitious - their project required nothing less than the overturning of the social democratic order.

Contemporary social democrats have to be ambitious too - we have to overturn the neoliberal institutional order.

To do this we have to recognize and communicate not just its failures (increasing inequality, low productivity, little innovation, no capacity to address urgent collective action problems), but, perhaps more importantly, its profoundly anti-democratic nature. Neoliberalism can be viewed as a modern feudalism that centres power on private property, and that rejects the idea of holding private property politically accountable.

If we are to be something other than neoliberal lite (reliance on the market economy plus redistribution), we have to revisit the late 19th century and 20th century welfare state project - and to retrieve its guiding values and its institutions.

The *values* are well conveyed in 'the three great aims' that Gough Whitlam enunciated in 1972:

- To promote equality;
- To involve the people of Australia in the decision-making processes of our land; and
- To liberate the talents and uplift the horizons of the Australian people.

*The institutions are:*

- *Sovereignty or the state* understood 'as the name we give to the absolute authority of the political relations established between a people and its

governing institutions (Loughlin 2016, 43) - this is the institutional principle of the primacy of the political in the ordering of relationships and conduct;

- *The labour constitution*: the democratization of the relationship between capital and labour (see Dukes 2014), which means the institutional validation of the role of unions in representing and organising workers, and the public regulation of the conditions and remuneration of work;
- *Social Democratic macro economic management* including the guiding aim of 'full employment';
- A '*mixed economy*' of public and private provision;
- *Public welfare services* that enable people to equally enjoy the status of citizenship and to share a common citizen experience;
- A *progressive taxation* system.

Neoliberalism is failing human society on all levels. It is bringing our entire institutional order into disrepute and this is eroding that most precious ingredient of human relationships, trust. This is a dangerous development. Social democracy was and is the alternative to market liberalism - it is time to reclaim it and the ethical and rational institutional ordering of human relationships for which it stands.

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## Is a Collective Future still Possible?

Tim Lyons

Tim Lyons is a Research Fellow at Per Capita, and Director of Reveille Strategy, a consultancy that works with Unions and other membership organisations to build new forms of power for workers and communities. He is a former Assistant Secretary of the ACTU.

It is tempting to deal with the question ‘Is Neoliberalism Killing Social Democracy?’ by simply saying ‘it already has’.

Millions of words have been spent cataloguing the decline of social democratic ideas, policy achievements, political parties and bedrock institutions (unions being the most important). Whether the illness was caused by something which can be usefully or accurately summarised as “neoliberalism” seems to me less interesting than asking what might be done to improve things.

For one, a more complex set of causes (including internal causes) seems intuitively more likely. To extend the illness analogy, perhaps it’s a case of co-morbidity: after all we adopted the language, some of the personnel and a tool-belt of bloodless “sensible-centrist” technocracy all on our own. In any event, I tend to dislike the term neoliberal as deployed in political discussions.<sup>1</sup> It is used to encompass such a broad range of “things people on the left don’t like”, that it lacks any precision and therefore any meaningful analytical utility. It’s useful enough as a club, but clubs are mainly useful for rhetorical purposes.

(Incidentally, for much the same bucket of reasons I also dislike the term “progressive”, which implies a unity of purpose among people with fundamentally different visions for society in a way that is not just wrong, but dangerous. To “paper over the cracks” is, after all, a pejorative. And yes, perhaps it’s partly because of my own complicated relationship to the underlying questions – I was once called a “leftard” and a “neoliberal” by different people for the same tweet about climate policy.)

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<sup>1</sup> Deployed following careful and clear definition, and in the absence of a more precise alternative, it has utility in some contexts, as Prof Yeatman’s contribution demonstrates.

With (as an example please use your own) the French Presidency now officially down to Finance v Fascist, rather than dwell on causation per se, the more useful and urgent task is to debate the praxis and the program necessary to respond to where our society and the world is now and is headed.

The good news is that what remains of the core architecture of western social democracy remains widely popular with the public: witness Trump voters terrorizing GOPers at Town Halls about Congressional threats to Social Security (the crowning achievement of American liberalism) or the fact that single-payer Government healthcare is politically sacrosanct almost wherever it exists. The further good news is that people are generally very good at identifying the things they don't like about what "neoliberalism" has done, even some of the ones that vote for people like Le Pen, Trump and Hanson<sup>2</sup>, and almost all of the poorer people who decline to bother to vote for candidates like Hillary Clinton: broken communities, underemployment in insecure jobs, bad or non-existent services.

Dealing with the future of social democracy does involve responding to many of the things people complain about when they use the term "neoliberalism" - an individualized, atomized and financialised society, where markets dominate and are more often rigged by governments than regulated by them, a society with rising inequality and privatised risk.

## **What I will do now is begin<sup>3</sup> to answer the question: is a collective future still possible?**

Being what I like to think of as a cynical optimist, my answer is yes. But only if we accept that, because it will have to deal with different problems in a different society, it necessarily (in its policy prescriptions) will not look much like traditional social democracy. And even then, a collective future is possible only if we deal properly with questions of power, civil society, politics, policy, and technology.

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<sup>2</sup> Many others are economically comfortable and just plain racist.

<sup>3</sup> This is not an exhaustive account of the issues I consider important.

First, we must cheerfully (re)embrace that this is all about power. I routinely go back to Polanyi's classic definition of the social democratic project: the conscious subordination of the market to democracy (Polanyi 1944).

We are without the time to unpack that statement entirely, and so I focus on one word: subordination. This is a word about power. The project is about democratic institutions (of the state and civil society) acquiring, using and maintaining a power over what would otherwise be the over-whelming power of market actors.

It seems to me that somewhere along the way social democracy became embarrassed that its project requires the acquisition and use of power for democratic and egalitarian ends. This involves challenging powerful forces and acting against their interests. They fight back. Too many on our side seem to regard this whole process with distaste, as if politics was just about the best ideas. Others have called this something like "West-Wing Syndrome" after the TV show, but I prefer "Evidence-Based Policy Disorder". But it is never enough to be right and if the smartest guy in the room has no connection to power he's just an annoying smart-arse.

Our permanent and occasional opponents have no such qualms. Capital has the profit motive to keep it disciplined, focused and ruthless. Political conservatives and reactionaries have a fundamentally different pathology of power, which is clear enough from their actions towards adversaries when in government and the fact much of their program has the cadence of an Old Testament prophet; a language of judgment, punishment and reward only for the good. As Corey Robin put it, the "animating purpose" of conservatism was to be "a mode counter-revolutionary practice" that defends existing hierarchy and non-democratic power (Robin 2011).

**In Australia, the Coalition makes no concession whatever to our policy positions, or to the legitimacy of our institutions (like unions or even industry super funds) or to our personnel (routinely purging even the most distant fellow traveller).**

It's like the Prisoner's Dilemma but only one side is still co-operating.

Second, social democrats need to understand that rather than being able to rely on the support of strong pre-existing civil society institutions and the customary loyalty of something close to a plurality (if not a majority) of voters, one of its goals must now be to help create the space for people to organise into new forms of collective that speak to their interests and lives now. As I've written about elsewhere (Lyons 2016), solidarity and collective action are a learned habit that people, and whole societies can lose – rebuilding it will be hard but is vital. The political party then will be one element of a network that has power in aggregate, that lets people help themselves, not the controlling mother ship form, capable of issuing commands that bend society to its will.

Three examples. The present institutional form of unionism is not its only possible form. Its current form was a function of economic activity as it was arranged 120 years ago and remains in that form now partly as a legacy of statute law. Likewise, state ownership or the private joint-stock company are not the only way to organise economic affairs (and neither really dominated until the 20th Century). What is the space social democracy can create to allow co-operatives or other forms of economic actor to be formed and prosper? Why is our corporate tax system structured so as to favour debt (provided by banks) over equity for example?

This overlaps with the way we do politics. Just as we haven't seeded, built and supported new forms of collective organisations and participation, we have limited our political engagement with the community to occasional shallow mobilisations rather than deep organising. A confronting new book on US labor (McAlevey 2017) analyses three possible approaches to social change: advocacy (based on having the best ideas), mobilising (utilising generally the same part of a base to periodically take actions on issues or to campaign) and organising (which involves building a permanent and much wider movement for change).

In Australia we are pretty good at the first (well-argued papers are legion, I've written some of them myself), we occasionally pull off the second (in opposition to something, never to move forward) and don't even really try the third. We need to understand and embrace the role all three play.

Which brings me to public policy. There is something of a running joke among younger left-leaning policy wonks in Australia that when any given policy problem is realised, within a few moments someone will suggest a solution involving income contingent loans.<sup>4</sup> This will probably be followed promptly by someone raising vouchers and a contestable market.

The joke demonstrates the extent to which our policy class has internalised the logic of markets and reach for it as the solution regardless of whether it's appropriate. Nowhere is this starker than in the design of the NDIS: an individualized voucher system where disabled people buy services in a contestable market supervised by Government. A system that is falling apart even as they are still building it. A system that, I confidently but very sadly predict, will be the subject of a Royal Commission in not too many years that will hear evidence of waste, profiteering, abuse of vulnerable people, and appalling labour market outcomes for the workforce involved.

Similarly, I am deeply unconvinced by the push, supported by an increasing number of people on the left, for a Universal Basic Income. It is of course, originally a right libertarian prescription, which would allow for the state to be dismantled, as all would have an income sufficient to access what they need in a market. It is not a proposal supported on the other side on the basis that it's "as well as" the welfare state but rather it's explicitly intended to be "instead of". UBI also makes no sense using a power analysis – imagine a world where we had enough power to re-structure the tax system to collect the revenue (billions of dollars in additional taxes on capital and very high marginal rates of personal income tax at the top end) to fund a UBI. Is it really the case that what you would do with the money is cut everybody a cheque?

Longing for the days when the levers of national government were enormously powerful is pointless. Tinkering around the edges and cleaning up after some of the mess capitalism makes will not do either. But not doing stupid things that make the situation worse, or which merely illustrate a policy impotence in the face of modern challenges, is also a necessary thing to achieve.

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<sup>4</sup>Perhaps we can call this Chapman's Law, after the creator of HECS.

But we must also, as I've argued elsewhere, take a wider conception about what prosperity means that is not post-material, but puts things like the liveability of cities, public space, and yes, even that old industrial claim of an entitlement to private time to do with as we wish, at the centre of an agenda.

So to information technology, which I fear has fundamentally anti-democratic consequences unless we learn how to respond. I speak here, to use efficient if imprecise buzzwords, of big data, machine learning and AI.

This is not a mere privacy concern, although there are obvious issues there. That the principle examples of an Australian progressive (sic) response to these issues has been in relation to narrow or largely imaginary privacy issues (an absurd push to get people to scab on the census and a largely meaningless series of stunts by The Greens on meta-data retention) is sadly indicative of how far behind left politics is in understanding, much less responding to, what the issues are. Rather, I refer to the fact that technology is producing unprecedented ability for governments and corporations to develop highly detailed and ever-more accurate models of individual motivations, behaviour, preferences and the trajectory of a person's life. To use a smartphone is to subject yourself to continuous psychometric profiling – you create an intimate portrait of yourself (Grassegger and Krogerus 2017).

Deleuze talked about the emergence of a “control society” where we are governed by invisible rules like our web browser history, electronic medical records and credit scores. In many parts of the US, police are dispatched to citizens houses (usually people of colour) to warn them that a computer model says they are likely to commit crime. Any number of pop-science books with titles like *“Weapons of Math Destruction”* (O’Neil 2016) warn of what mischief opaque or totally secret algorithms can cause to individuals and communities, including by hiding discrimination that would be unlawful if done openly (such as denying people services).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Get it? As in “WMDs”.

A remarkable recent book on what computer science calls virtualization, said that “the cloud, as an idea, has exceeded its technological platform and become a metaphor of the way society organises and understands itself.” The data in “The Cloud” redistributes existing and creates new forms of power, for both corporations and governments, but with the “topography of power” related to networks as much as sovereign borders (Hu 2015).

Beyond credit scores, the realm of finance (which I have not had the space to discuss) is important here. There is a tapestry of tech and money woven tightly together blanketing our lives. Sometimes this is joint ventures, sometimes it's tech firms becoming almost shadow banks (with all the attendant risk and none of the prudential oversight). We know this from our own experiences of Apple Pay or PayPal and the rest. In China, Tencent WeiXin, Baidu and Alibaba<sup>6</sup> are all at the centre of digitising consumer and small business banking and finance. Meanwhile, even where tech is a potential threat to them, global banks are moving to try and standardise (i.e. monopolise, as they did with EFTPOS and credit card systems) the use of block chain technology, which might otherwise make redundant their role in managing counterparty risk.

I have some practical experience using a range of this new technology in a political context, having worked on projects that utilised detailed demographic models to target sub-groups of workers (and voters). Among other things, this enables messages to be sent or tailored content to be served to highly specific groups and even geo-targeting, by isolating as recipients only people that match the model receiving a signal from a specific mobile phone tower. The results are encouraging. Sadly of course, anything we have, they have more of, because they have more money, and money buys strategic capacity. And not just corporations. To illustrate, essentially the same rig we used on that Australian pilot is being used by US pro-life groups to target the mobile phones of women of relevant ages near abortion clinics (Coutts 2016).

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<sup>6</sup> Often described in the West, with enough accuracy for this purpose, as “Chinese Facebook”, “Chinese Google” and “Chinese Amazon”.

There is some debate about the extent to which using big data modelling to serve targeted messages to individuals, even if they explicitly contradicted messages to others, was a big part of Trump's win (Green and Issenberg 2016). It is clear that there is an emerging capacity for what you might call "Bespoke Demagoguery" - where each individual is served a diet of content from candidates individually tailored to their prejudices and preferences. At some point this becomes the antithesis of a democratic, collective process. It is fundamentally different to stressing different policies to different voters. Even before the possibilities of "fake news" and voter suppression are considered, this removes any sense of politics being about a collective process and a national (or local for that matter) project. It's only a "national conversation" if there are versions of the one conversation, otherwise it's a "nation of conversations."

At a policy level, the micro-modelling of individuals has the potential to destroy the last of our social solidarity, the sense that we are all in it together and collectively managing risk and cost. You are prone to hear cartoonish libertarians complain about "paying for other people's healthcare" for example. The new technology brings their preferred dystopia potentially closer. To take an example, some people of health and means can self-insure against risk, or at the very least pay a tiny premium of some kind for catastrophe insurance. Similarly, the risk of unemployment is not the same for all us. The time will shortly be with us where a serious political push, based on "you are paying for others and you don't have to", will be made to dismantle the architecture of collective risk management and privatise it. The same will be used to block any attempt at managing newer or emerging risks (like extreme longevity or widespread technological unemployment). To return to my UBI scepticism for a moment, you can see the libertarian ideal of everyone buying what they need in an individualised market, tailored precisely to their needs and without any role for our commonwealth, but with diabolical consequences for those of us unlucky enough to need collective risk management. Will your UBI stretch to cover a cancer diagnosis?

**It is not overstating the case to say that a principal locus of our activity to “consciously subordinate the market to democracy” must be the algorithms.**

A collective future is both necessary and possible. What we don't like about neoliberalism can be beaten back. But only if we accept that it will not look like the old one. And it will only come if we embrace power, if we widen our conception of collective organisation, abandon tinkering and failed policy solutions, combine mobilizing with real organising, and if we deal with technology.

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## **Socialism with a spine: the only 21st century alternative?**

John Quiggin

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Socialism is back, much to the chagrin of those who declared it dead and buried at the “end of history” in the 1990s (Glaser 2014). When the New Republic, long the house organ of American neoliberalism, runs an article on ‘The Socialism America Needs Now’ (Judis 2017), it’s clear that something has fundamentally changed.

The soft neoliberalism represented by Tony Blair, Bill Clinton and Paul Keating has exhausted its appeal, and not just in the English-speaking world. Throughout Europe, new movements of the left have emerged to challenge or displace social democratic parties discredited by the austerity politics of the last decade.

Support for socialism is particularly strong among those under 30, whose economic experience has been dominated by the global financial crisis (GFC) and the subsequent decade of economic stagnation and rising inequality. The most striking example is the recent UK election where Jeremy Corbyn received over 60% of the votes of those aged 18-25 (Holder, Barr and Kommenda 2017). Similarly in the US, Bernie Sanders drew his most enthusiastic support from the young (Blake 2016).

For most of the current political class whose ideas were formed in the last decades of the 20th century, the superiority of markets over governments is an assumption so deeply ingrained that it is not even recognised as an assumption. Rather, it is part of the “common sense” that “everyone knows”. Whatever the problem, their answer is the same: lower taxes, privatisation and market-oriented “reform”.

Unsurprisingly, people are looking for an alternative, and many are looking back at the postwar decades of widely shared prosperity. Some have turned to the

tribalist politics of nostalgia (Make America Great Again, We Want Our Country Back), exemplified in Australia by Pauline Hanson's One Nation party.

But it is already evident that this is a dead end. The disastrous mess being made by Donald Trump's Republicans and Theresa May's Tories is the inevitable result of a politics based on what academic Lionel Trilling described, in the foreword to his essay collection *The Liberal Imagination* (1950), as "irritable mental gestures which seek to resemble ideas".

The dominant advocates of free markets have long derided any kind of government intervention as "socialism". This has been taken to a ludicrous extent recently, the studiously moderate Bill Shorten being described by senior government ministers as a "red socialist" who will turn Australia into the next Cuba (Bagshaw 2017).

But what do today's resurgent socialists mean by socialism? It's easier to see what they dislike than to describe a socialist policy agenda. Most obviously, socialism implies an unqualified rejection of the system of financial capitalism (variously called neoliberalism, market liberalism or, in Australia, economic rationalism) that emerged from the economic chaos of the 70s.

Neoliberalism has massively enriched the 1%, and particularly the financial sector, while delivering nothing but economic insecurity and stagnant living standards to the great majority of the population. This is obvious in the United States, but the same patterns are emerging in market economies throughout the world.

More significantly, contemporary socialism repudiates the vaguely humanised capitalism marketed as the third way (Mellbye 2017). It's a break with those social democrats and liberals who embraced, or capitulated to, the politics of austerity in the wake of the GFC, such as the New Labour of Blair and Brown, PASOK in Greece and the Dutch Labour party, and, most importantly of all, the Clinton Democrats in the United States.

On the other hand, there's no detectable enthusiasm for a centrally planned economy like that of the former Soviet Union or Mao's China. Communism is a distant and discredited memory, even for those old enough to recall the days when it seemed like a possible alternative.

**As it is used today, the term socialism does not reflect a well-worked ideology. Rather it conveys an attitude that could be described as “unapologetic social democracy” or, in the US context, “liberalism with a spine”.**

It's expressed in support for proposals that break with the cautious incrementalism of the past, and are in some cases frankly utopian: universal basic income, free post-school education, large increases in minimum wages, and so on.

That's important, but a real alternative needs more than attitude and a grab-bag of policy ideas. After decades in which the focus has been on critiquing neoliberalism, the task of thinking about positive alternatives is urgent, but efforts in this direction are only just beginning.

Discussion of economic policy in socialist terms is confined to a handful of small publications, such as *Jacobin*, a US magazine edited by Bhaskar Sunkara, with notable contributors including Seth Ackerman, Peter Frase and Noam Chomsky.

Equally significant has been the resurgence of the left in mainstream economics, represented by Paul Krugman, Thomas Piketty and Joseph Stiglitz. While not explicitly socialist (Krugman's blog is called *The Conscience of a Liberal*) these economists have focused attention on issues of inequality and unemployment, and on progressive policy responses.

These are, however, only first steps. To develop a serious socialist alternative, we need both to look backwards to the social democratic moment of the 50s and 60s, and forwards to the prospects for a genuine sharing economy based on the internet and other technological advances.

The middle of the 20th century was a unique period of sustained economic growth and broadly shared prosperity in developed market economies. The crucial feature underpinning this success was full employment, guaranteed by Keynesian macroeconomic management. In an economy with full employment, workers are no longer dependent on the goodwill of individual employers or the confidence of business as a whole. If one job does not suit, there is always another.

In these circumstances, the distribution of market income between wages and profits, and among wage-earners, tends naturally towards greater equality. Conversely, as we've seen since the 70s, when governments are driven by the need to please financial markets, ever-growing inequality is the inevitable result. The most striking evidence is the rising share of income going to the top 1%, as documented by Piketty and others.

The success of Keynesian stimulus in the immediate aftermath of the GFC and the disastrous outcomes from the shift to austerity after 2010 show that Keynesian economic management is as vital as ever. Going beyond crisis management, socialist governments would reinstate the commitment to full employment, and solidify it through policies such as a jobs guarantee (McDuff 2017), ensuring the availability of a full-time job for anyone who has been unemployed for some minimum period.

However, the technological and social changes that have taken place over the past 60 years mean that the traditional notion of full employment, focused on full-time jobs for male breadwinners, is no longer adequate.

## **We need a more flexible approach, accommodating the more diverse patterns of life and work of the 21st century.**

In this context, the idea of a universal basic income set at a level comparable to the age pension has considerable appeal. The ultimate goal would be to provide an unconditional payment lower than the return from working but sufficient to sustain decent living standards. An interim step, proposed by the late Tony Atkinson in his final book, *Inequality: What Can Be Done?*, would be a participation income (Bussu 2015) available to people who undertook voluntary work to benefit the community.

The combination of a job guarantee and a universal basic income would free workers from dependence on employers. But this would only be feasible if society could ensure adequate production of crucial goods and services, without dependence on the wishes of big business.

The first step in this regard is to revive a term that was widely used and is still relevant to describe the economy of the mid-20th century: the mixed economy. This phrase refers to an economy with major roles for both public and market provision of goods and services. Typically, the public sector provided infrastructure such as electricity, water and road networks, and human services such as health and education. Most of our existing assets in these fields were built up under public ownership. The market sector provided consumer goods, and the wholesale and retail trade networks needed to distribute them, along with a wide range of services.

The push for privatisation, beginning with the Thatcher government in the 80s, was based on the premise that private ownership and market competition would outperform public-sector provision. The process of privatisation and marketisation was far from complete by the time of the GFC, and large areas of public provision continued.

The privatisation movement has produced some successes. Although it was built up under public ownership, Qantas has prospered as a private firm. There's no obvious need for a national flag carrier in a competitive airline market.

These successes have been more than outweighed by disastrous failures. Recent, but by no means exceptional, Australian examples include the disaster of for-profit vocational education and the comprehensive failure of the national electricity market.

The most common outcome of privatisation has been somewhere in between the handful of successes and spectacular failures such as those mentioned. In essence, public monopolies have been replaced by regulated private monopolies and oligopolies. Investors and top managers have done well out of this process, while workers and consumers have lost.

The public has long since lost faith in the promise of privatisation and is in fact supportive of re-nationalisation (Smith 2017). Yet, as with the labour market, we can't simply revive the mid-20th century economy.

First, technological change has radically changed the structure of the economy and society. The central role in the industrial economy of the mid-20th century

was played by manufacturing, which took the resources produced by mining and agriculture and transformed them into goods to be distributed through transport, wholesale and retail trade systems to consumers.

By contrast, the 21st century economy is dominated by services including health, education and telecommunications, which require different forms of economic organisation.

Second, the mid-20th century was a period when economic activity (work for governments or businesses, undertaken for pay or profit in factories, shops and offices) was sharply distinguished from non-economic activity (housework, voluntary activity and non-government organisations).

These sharp distinctions are no longer tenable. Thanks to mobile phones and the internet, much paid work is done at home. More importantly, the economic value of the internet as a whole depends entirely on its content, much of which (Facebook and blog posts, Twitter, personal and group websites and so on) is produced by users rather than for economic return.

To reimagine a 21st century socialist economy we need to consider a much broader mix of forms of economic activity than those of the 20th century mixed economy. These include:

- big business
- small business
- government businesses
- public non-market provision
- not-for-profits and NGOs
- household production

Under financial capitalism, the standard way of providing goods and services is through big business: large corporations, with an associated network of subsidiaries and dependent contractors. Big business has grown at the expense of the public sector through privatisation and at the expense of independent small businesses through increased market concentration.

At the same time, labour market reforms have reduced the bargaining power of workers and increased that of employers. The combined effects have included increasingly concentrated wealth and power, wage stagnation and slow economic growth. Even the OECD has recognised this (Quiggin 2017).

A socialist program would allocate much less economic activity to big business, and more to other forms of organisation. In deciding what kind of economic activity belongs where, a range of considerations are relevant. These include the scale of the activity, the extent to which it is possible and appropriate to charge market prices, the scope for competition and the relative importance of economic and non-economic motives.

**In part this would imply reversing the neoliberal program of privatisation and marketisation. Large-scale capital intensive activities with limited scope for competition, such as the provision of infrastructure, would be returned to public ownership.**

We are already seeing the beginnings of this process, with a notable example in the South Australian government's investment in electricity generation. The Turnbull government denounced South Australia's policies as those of a "socialist paradise", sure to lead to economic disaster (Holderhead 2017).

In very short order, however, Turnbull was announcing his own interventions, with the expansion of Snowy Hydro (Karp 2017a) and restrictions on gas exports (Karp 2017b). We have even seen the suggestion that the commonwealth might buy the Liddell power station (recently privatised by its state counterparts) to extend its operating life (Massola and Hasham 2017). This is a nonsensical idea, but it illustrates the extent to which the taboo on government intervention has lost its power.

Similarly, we are seeing some attempts to reconstruct the public TAFE system after the fiasco of for-profit vocational training and the Fee-Help system. The Victorian government in particular has taken some positive steps (Herbert 2017).

A socialist program in the 21st century needs to involve much more than a reversal of neoliberalism. The internet and the information economy have broken the link between productive activity and market returns. Information is a pure public good, which can be shared again and again with no additional costs.

So the production of information (ranging from scientific research to Instagram pictures) has potentially huge social value. On the other hand, the market value of internet activity depends, almost entirely, on the ease with which it can be packaged up with commercial advertising – meaning access is artificially constrained.

The fact that information is naturally a public good creates a huge potential for economic and social benefits of which we have realised only a small fraction. The combination of strong intellectual property laws and reliance on advertising to finance internet content mean that our access to information is artificially constrained. Governments could address this problem, providing vastly increased access to resources of all kinds, from artistic and cultural content to designs to be used in 3-D printers.

But the policies of neoliberal austerity have pushed us in the opposite direction, cutting budgets and pushing public institutions of all kinds towards more reliance on user pricing and advertising.

There is also much more room for voluntary and non-government activity. The neoliberal state, through contracting, competitive tendering and the audit culture, has sought to turn voluntary work and non-government organisations into low-cost providers of government services. In the process, much of the creative potential of civil society has been lost. Expanding the scope for voluntary social initiatives would fit naturally with a socialist program, and this is already beginning with the rise of social enterprises (Meade 2013).

The idea of a socialist economy with unconditional access to basic incomes and greatly expanded provision of free services might seem utopian. But in the aftermath of neoliberal failure, utopian vision is what is needed. To re-engage people with democratic politics, we need to move beyond culture wars and arguments over marginal adjustments to tax rates and budget allocations, necessary as these may be in the short term.

**Socialists have always seen short-term political struggles as part of a long-term project of transforming society for the better.**

It is this fact which explains why conservatives have always used the term “socialist” as a bogeyman. It’s also why the term has retained its appeal through decades of neoliberal retrenchment. Social democratic and liberal parties, compromised by their acquiescence in, or embrace of, neoliberalism, need to make a decisive break with the recent past. An explicit embrace of socialism would make that break clear.

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