



# SEEK THE TRUTH AND SERVE HUMANITY the Beacon

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## The universal lie!

One thing the people will insist comes from this horrific viral pandemic debacle is that we must never again accept the ancient and false cry of all governments under the capitalist system: 'We can't afford it'. This universal lie is now dead in the water. The truth is that we can't afford not to afford it. We cannot afford to allow reversion to a 'Newstart' allowance that forces people to choose between feeding their children or paying their bills.

We can no longer agree to private-for-profit companies caring only for their shareholders owning our formerly public infrastructure. We can no longer pander to greedy developers hoping they will agree to provide low cost housing. We can no longer ignore the damage their greed is doing to the future of our planet. This pandemic must change how our society operates. Capitalism has failed the world.

Pandemics develop as a result of greed and power. Pandemics, such as this current one, have occurred more often since the commencement of capitalism. Seven of the ten worst pandemics in history happened from the 1850s to 2012. The coronavirus pandemic has so far infected 2,395,636 people in more than 50 countries around the world.

Capitalist greed has resulted in illegal wars, growing impoverishment of a large section of the community, the desecration of our forests and seas and land. It has resulted in the consistent pursuit of illegal wars that destroy the lives and infrastructure of millions of people. These are predatory wars whose basis is simply the extension of market powers and increased profits.

Capitalist greed has resulted in the imposition of dictators across the world whose role is to guarantee that the owners of capital maintain their control and they murder their own people to ensure this.

Capitalist greed is destroying our world environment, our rainforests, our reefs. It is fouling our waterways, and native animals are becoming extinct. In many countries, healthcare is a luxury not a right, with people living in unhealthy makeshift homes with little amenities. Poverty lies alongside massive and unearned wealth and politicians do not govern for the needs of the majority but to serve the few. The economy is god, and no, its wealth does not trickle down, it deluges up.

All of these actions for profit intensify the outbreak of diseases and pandemics and these will continue unless we look for an alternative to a system that has failed across the world and has been clearly demonstrated to have failed.

We need a society that fosters cooperation, compassion and inclusiveness. We need a society that recognises the essential role played by working people and therefore makes their basic needs a priority. We must insist that homelessness, poverty and unemployment become things of the past and that the environment, our health system and an adequate wage are not negotiable.

We will be emerging into a new world. We must make sure that the state of the economy after this pandemic is not used as an excuse for further austerity and that we introduce a strong manufacturing sector so that we are never again reliant on other nations.

We need to be sure that despite talk about 'there being no red or blue, just Australians', we remember that it was only a few weeks ago that these same politicians were refusing to increase Newstart, thus leaving many Australians on the scrapheap.

Finally, we must ensure that we develop a strong independent foreign policy that prohibits our involvement in adventuristic wars that are entered into simply for power and profit.

There will be further pandemics, and we need to ensure that we can meet whatever occurs without the suffering and crisis politics that we are currently enduring.

EDITORIAL



# In the middle of a pandemic, the Australian state is pummelling workers



Australian workers need an economic bailout to save them from a coronavirus-induced depression. Instead, Scott Morrison's right-wing government is using the state to attack unions and shovel money to corporations.

Before COVID-19, Australia was on the brink of recession. Now, as economic activity comes to a grinding halt across the world, the worst global recession in a generation or more is at our doorstep.

Australia's dependence on mining and services industries will shape the recession. The Global Financial Crisis already increased our dependence on mining and resources exports. Now, stimulus efforts abroad will further strengthen demand for commodities. But it would be mistaken to assume that this will lead to a commodities-led recovery.

As in other 'post-industrial' societies, free trade policies have ravaged Australian manufacturing, leaving us highly dependent on imports. When borders close and global production stutters, a country that cannot make what it needs is far more vulnerable.

Unemployment is expected to hit at least 15 per cent, the highest rate since 1932. Hospitality, arts, entertainment, tourism, and transport are the hardest hit. Already, long lines have formed outside Centrelink offices, as the system is overwhelmed by people applying for unemployment benefits. Before the crisis, the number of people unemployed or who had given up looking for non-existent jobs numbered

1.8 million. If the predictions are accurate, their ranks will swell to above 3 million.

The first tranche of Prime Minister Scott Morrison's economic package ensured benefits flowed to business. Now, according to analysis carried out by the Centre for Future Work, 70 per cent of the second announcement will go directly to business, mostly to keep credit and business lending flowing.

Only 30 per cent will go to workers through much-needed increases to social security payments. For workers still on the employer's books, Morrison has offered a weak 'wage subsidy' that is really a tax diversion payment to business. This means there are no stipulations to prevent layoffs on handouts to business. Employers can feasibly take the subsidy and fire workers after pocketing the benefit. Low-wage workers will be most at risk.

Unions are calling on Morrison to provide a stronger wage subsidy of at least 80 per cent of a workers' income to keep workers in jobs – matching Boris Johnson's announcement – and two weeks paid special leave for all workers dealing with sickness or income disruptions due to COVID-19.

This is just the tip of the iceberg. Already, the impending economic collapse has scrapped decades of free-market fundamentalism. Calls for drastic emergency measures are almost universal. The problem is, however, in the hands of the bosses and the Coalition; these measures may well hurt workers and result in an even more unequal economy.

## BOSSSES LINE UP EARLY AGAINST WORKERS

Wage theft, especially in hospitality, the finance sector, and retail, was endemic before this crisis, costing workers billions. Now, as retail workers cop abuse while keeping supermarkets stocked, the big retailers are calling for wage freezes and a block to the minimum wage increase scheduled to deliver slight relief for millions.

There's a pattern here. Agribusiness and supermarkets have consistently mistreated and underpaid the workers who produce and distribute our food for years. Nearly all the 100,000 workers in agriculture are temporary migrant labourers, working on a casual basis in often deplorable, hyper-exploited conditions.

Workers at the bottom of the agribusiness supply chain, which is rife with contracting, have seen millions stolen from them on the assumption that they're invisible. Now, agricultural companies see the pandemic solely as a threat to their cheap labour gravy train. Instead of improving conditions to attract newly unemployed workers, they are warning of imminent 'labour shortages'.

Most concerning of all, it is likely that the far-reaching anti-worker agenda promoted by powerful business lobbies, like the Business Council of Australia, the Australian Industry Group, and the Australian Mines and Metals Association, will intensify.

What they demand is nothing short of dictatorial power to unilaterally determine the terms and conditions of jobs. After years of co-option and class collaboration, business now sees an opportunity to bring back WorkChoices. They want to be able to lock wages for very long periods of time in capital-intensive industries like mining. They want to obliterate unions by introducing draconian restrictions and expanding non-union collective agreements in which bosses can present a deal to workers over the heads of their representatives, with no requirement to bargain and no right to strike.

Businesses that pocket billions when times are good invariably cry poor when the going gets tough, begging for public bailouts on the pretext of saving jobs. Government is usually in on the con. Morrison's first major economic intervention gave billions to businesses, with no requirements on how – or even if – they spend it. Seven hundred and fifteen million dollars went to airlines. Qantas (led by one of Australia's highest-paid CEOs, Alan Joyce) gave its part back to shareholders while firing 20,000 people – an incredible two-thirds of its workforce.

If this sounds like a grossly unjust and ruinous way for society to respond to a collective crisis, that's because it is. Unless we reorganise society to limit private control over economics and politics, government-initiated recovery efforts will almost always be siphoned away from workers. The worse the crisis, the more urgent this task becomes.

## NATIONALISATION CAN BE A POISON CHALICE

COVID-19 is expanding the horizon for state-led economic intervention at a blistering pace. The idea of nationalising failing businesses and even industries



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– until recently the exclusive domain of socialists – is now discussed by the Right. For this very reason, the Left must be vigilant and critical.

Nationalisation is not progressive in itself. In the neoliberal era, it has most often been used to socialise the losses of failed private actors holding critical assets, services, and infrastructure. Companies have an interest in nationalisation right now because they assume that they'll meet few barriers to retaking control and ownership once the dust settles.

Worse, nationalisation can be seriously dangerous when undertaken by anti-worker governments. For instance, Thatcher nationalised the coal mines to reduce subsidies and suffocate her most militant opponents in the labour movement.

Even if public administrations were willing to pursue nationalisation, they may not have the capacity to run newly acquired industries. Decades of neoliberal small-government policies have reduced public administrations to shells of their post-war former capacity. Many specialists with experience managing large state acquisitions are either dead or have fled. They were replaced by thousands of corrupt handshakes between senior public servants and the 'Big Four' consultancies; they have no incentive to requisition assets, let alone the skill or desire to coordinate them in the interests of the many.

The only guaranteed pathway to pro-worker nationalisation is to build union strength and density in key industries, as part of a strategic plan that



connects workers' interests across industry and with society as a whole.

Morrison knows this. So, there is a serious danger he will use the cover of crisis and 'strong and stable government' to pass his so-called Ensuring Integrity Bill. This law would allow government to de-register unions, appoint their own administrators, and seize unions' resources. It would all but eliminate any possibility of nationalisations working in our favour.

The Left must proceed with caution. Calls to nationalise everything are useless unless accompanied by serious efforts to put workers and their unions first.

Rich business profits and the fiscal capacities of government mean that it is entirely possible to reform the economy on workers' terms. But for this to happen, investment decisions must be open to scrutiny and challenge by workers. In turn, this means we need to expand rank-and-file organisation and regenerate union structures. This is how we can build workers' power to a point where we can exert democratic control over the direction of the economy.

## COLLECTIVE BARGAINING OR BUST

Unions, collective bargaining laws, and collective agreements are our bread and butter. The only way to challenge the logic of profit is for workers to exert their collective power over production. This isn't just true on a macro level. Greater control in the workplace both strengthens and is strengthened by collective bargaining. This makes contestation with capital possible. It even raises the possibility that workers can take over and run businesses themselves, should bosses decide they're unprofitable.

Collective agreements are the fruit of historic battles – but they're only strong where organisation holds firm. Strong agreements better prepare us for battle by securing membership and rights to organise. During crisis they can prevent the wholesale exit of employers because all employers can be held to an agreement simultaneously.

But collective agreement coverage and union density are at record lows now. Millions of insecure workers are very weakly tethered to employers who wield nearly unchecked power. The tools that once gave the workers' movement the power to push back against job losses or attacks are badly corroded and, at times, destroyed.

None of the billions that government is now funnelling into businesses and the welfare system changes this. In fact, the package will be explicitly designed to ensure that the fundamental power imbalances in our economy remain.

That is why it's so important to build a sectoral bargaining system that allows workers to negotiate with multiple employers in a sector at once. This is how we can fight neoliberal strategies that fragment operations, like franchising and contracting out jobs. They have ripped minimum protections from underneath millions of workers not by direct confrontation, but by outflanking, by making more jobs more insecure. With the stroke of a pen, one workplace can become one dozen.

The highly decentralised, enterprise-level system not only fails to extend bargaining rights to the majority of workers, it is a barrier to the large-scale cross-industry and sector coordination that is desperately needed to address the crisis.

The only way we can match this is by fighting for a new institutional mechanism that re-aggregates all workers (permanent and insecure alike) in a sector or industry and gives them the power to demand fixed wages for the same jobs, better protections, and more control over how work is performed. Workers should decide on the size and shape of those bargaining units. As the United Workers Union, which organises across the whole food supply chain from farm to warehouse to restaurant has shown, it's possible to build this now.

Sectoral bargaining systems – which feature in Nordic countries, where collective agreements cover upwards of 90 per cent of workers, and where union strength is not far behind – would open up a world of radical organising potential here. For example, this could add muscle to calls for a sorely needed wage guarantee.

## IF YOU DON'T FIGHT, YOU LOSE

We are heading into a period of profound and scarring economic shock. But it would be wrong to imagine the pandemic will wipe the slate clean. Long after being lowered into the grave, neoliberalism will continue to frame government responses to this crisis. This is true even in the context of large public investment in health, education, and infrastructure to lead our reconstruction.

This, along with the climate crisis, will open a space to reorganise the global economy, from what we produce, to where and how we do it. The question of who profits from production will also open.

But in order to ensure that the coming changes are for the better, unions and left forces must build the power we need to plan for new ways of coordinating and leading our economy. Without this, as the history of the 1930s shows, state intervention may very well lead to far worse crises and far greater defeats for the workers' movement.

# WE ACKNOWLEDGE

Traditional owners of the Kulin Nation, past Warriors, Elders past and present.



# US gunning for trouble

The spectre of the coronavirus pandemic in the US has darkened decidedly, with President Trump warning of a harrowing next few weeks from a surging disease death toll. Into the malevolent mix are reports of American citizens buying up firearms as if there is no tomorrow.

In recent weeks, gun sales have hit record highs amid public fears of a breakdown in law and order. Most of the sales were among first-time buyers, according to reports. During March, before the government-ordered shutdown of businesses due to the coronavirus epidemic, mandatory FBI background checks showed a huge spike suggesting gun sales had gone through the roof.

Some 3.7 million checks were carried out in that month alone, corresponding to individuals purchasing firearms.

Bear in mind too that each individual can buy several guns under the same application. Bear in mind too that the US is already the leading nation for citizens owning firearms, with an estimated 390 million pieces in circulation, equivalent to more than one weapon for every citizen. Bear in mind too that the US is the world's leader in deaths from mass shootings.

That's in 'normal' times, never mind the highly anxious present development over COVID-19.

Every year, official figures show some 11,000 Americans are killed in homicides with firearms. Nearly double that figure die in suicides involving guns, putting the annual death toll from gun violence at well over 30,000. The US death toll from the COVID-19 disease is heading towards 10,000 as the number of fatalities escalates. Official estimates are warning of COVID-19 mortality in the US reaching as high as 200,000.

But what could add to the deadly impact of the pandemic is the prevalence of guns and the growing fear of social chaos. This is what Trump may have been hinting at when he said last month that the longer the economic shutdown goes on the more casualties will result. In recent days, the president has voiced concern that the US economy cannot go on indefinitely 'paying people not to work'.

Trump doesn't want the economy to tank because with that so will his re-election hopes flounder. More than that, however, Trump and the corporate class know that the capitalist economy is like a bicycle. Once it stops moving it will fall over. So, the imperative is to get businesses re-opened and workers back on the job.

What if millions of workers don't want to go back to the front line knowing that their lives may be at risk from a pandemic that has not been contained?



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The near-mutinous episode on the *USS Theodore Roosevelt* aircraft carrier speaks of a simmering mood against the authorities. When the Pentagon bosses sacked Captain Brett Crozier for sounding the alarm about infections among his 4,000 crew, the crew cheered their commander as a hero for putting their health and safety above orders from the admirals.

Elsewhere, the critical shortage of protective equipment for essential workers such as healthcare personnel shows that the US authorities have not done nearly enough to ensure public safety. If workers are forced back to their jobs by authorities who are seen as callous and uncaring – motivated only by private profit – then that will surely breed further massive resentment and anger.

How will people feed their families if government welfare checks dry up, as Trump has hinted they will dry up owing to fiscal pressure?

Some 10 million Americans have lost their jobs so far due to the COVID-19 pandemic with total job losses possibly soaring to 47 million. Oh yeah, Washington can find trillions for military spending every year, but when it comes to supporting workers and their families during a time of crisis, well then suddenly there must be fiscal prudence. Such twisted priorities tell people that, as far their governing class is concerned, they are expendable.

It's not hard to imagine hungry and desperate people forcing their way into closed shops and stores to raid for food, medicines and other essential supplies if it comes down to a survival situation. The ethics of feeding one's children takes precedence over legal formalities of paying at a checkout – particularly when there is no checkout operating.

Seems too like it's not just the US citizenry who are expecting trouble ahead. The US government has mobilised over 21,000 troops belonging to the National Guard to be deployed across states in the event of social disorder.

The US is not a good place to be right now. A pandemic worsened by government mishandling of the crisis, massive social insecurity among impoverished workers, and enough guns and ammo out there to wage a war. When Trump warns that the worse is yet to come, he may not even realise just how bad that is.

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## **CHURCH BANKING DETAILS**

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# Working together to save our 'Pale Blue Dot'

Many of you would be familiar with the term '**Pale Blue Dot**'. It is the name given to the iconic photograph taken from Voyager 1 of the Earth from 6 billion kilometres away – the farthest photo of Earth ever taken. It was taken 30 years ago on 14 February 1990 at the request of astronomer Carl Sagan. It showed our planet as it truly is, a tiny outpost of life in an incomprehensibly vast cosmos. He said:

Consider again that dot. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joys and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilisation, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every "superstar", every "supreme leader", every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there – on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.

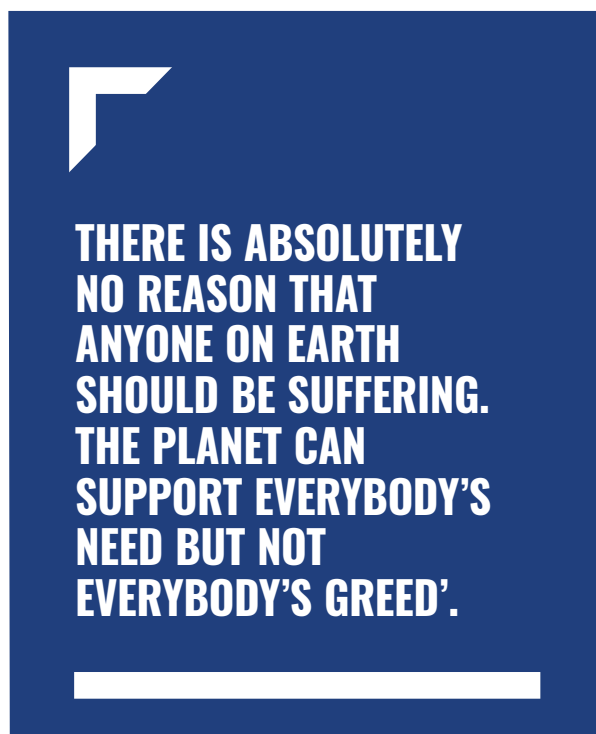
Our relatively small star, the sun, and associated planets, sit on the outer spiral arm of the Milky Way galaxy that contains billions upon billions of stars – the next humble step is the realisation that the Milky Way is but an average-size galaxy among, again, billions upon billions of known galaxies.

Sagan emphasises how far human knowledge (also known as science) has progressed. It's not that long ago that people like Copernicus and Galileo Galilei paid the ultimate price for suggesting that our Earth (the pale blue dot) was not the centre of the universe.

I was viewing a documentary not long ago of Carl Sagan addressing a large gathering of scientists covering a multitude of disciplines: astrophysics, meteorology, biology, etc. The subject was climate change, with Sagan presenting the latest multidisciplinary findings. I was familiar with much of what he said – the calculated temperature rises, the role of fossil fuels, the parts per million CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere, etc. He stated that over the past few decades, the vast and varied scientific knowledge had converged and reached the same conclusion about climate change.

It dawned on me that Sagan had died about 25 years ago – the documentary was 30 years old (1990). I hadn't realised that the scientific consensus was at least 40–50 years old. Sagan had much to say about climate change, our place in the world, the role of science, etc., but there is one point that I find particularly pertinent today. He said: 'There is absolutely no reason that anyone on Earth should be suffering. The planet can support everybody's need but not everybody's greed'.

I think it's obvious that we're not talking about individual greed here, but rather greed of a systemic nature: the Royal Commission into Misconduct in the Banking, Superannuation and Financial Services Industry; the 'sports rorts' affair; the close relationship between the fossil fuel industry and politicians (the revolving door), who gain from privatisation, etc. These and many other related issues have been detailed from this lectern and in our journal *Beacon*. The greed of individuals is facilitated as it were by a system that is inherently based on greed.



If we look specifically at the new enquiry into the catastrophic bushfires, we see not a close look at the cause, but rather an attempt to look only at the effects and the possible mitigation of those effects. Simple old me, I would have thought that cause and effect are inseparable, certainly in a scientific perspective, but also in a common sense, everyday way. Sometimes cartoons can convey a message in a very succinct way. One such cartoon that I saw recently showed a scientist standing in front of a sign that read 'Research concludes: We are destroying Earth' – standing nearby are two politicians with their suitcase overflowing with money. Their comment: 'Could you kindly rephrase that in equivocal, inaccurate, vague, self-serving and roundabout terms that we can all understand'. So, as they always do, our Government is setting up an enquiry, royal commission or whatever, with 'terms of reference'

that are sufficiently narrow and fit in, as close as possible, with their overall aims.

Kay Lee from the AIM Network pointed out that in 2015, the Government published a 'National Climate Resilience and Adaptation Strategy', which identified the major risks for Australia being namely:

- Increased frequency and intensity of flood damage to housing, roads and other infrastructure.
- Increased illness, death and infrastructure damages during heat waves.
- Constraints on water resources in Southern Australia.
- Significant reduction in agricultural production in the Murray-Darling Basin and far south-eastern and south-western Australia if scenarios of severe drying are realised.
- Increasing risks to coastal infrastructure and low-lying ecosystems from continued sea-level rise.
- Increased damages to ecosystems and human settlements, infrastructure, economic losses and risks to human life from bushfires in most of Southern Australia.
- Significant change in the ecological community composition and structure of coral reef systems.
- Loss of mountain ecosystems and some native species.

## AN EERIE PREDICTION

In that same article, it detailed what Deloitte Access Economics reported to a business roundtable in 2017:

- There is growing potential for cumulative or concurrent, large-scale national hazards to occur.
- Over the past 10 years, disasters have cost the Australian economy around \$18 billion per year.
- This is expected to reach \$39 billion per year by 2050. This forecast does not account for the effects of a changing climate, which are expected to magnify these costs.
- The intangible costs of disasters, including increased family violence, mental health impacts, chronic disease, alcohol and drug use, short and long-term unemployment, changes to school academic outcomes, and crime are at the least equal to, if not greater than, tangible costs.

The report went on to say that climate-related risks must be taken into account. They concluded by saying that climate change would be a key financial metric over the next 3–5 years and that action must be taken to position Australia for the future.

So, the Government commissions reports that are ignored. But they are getting better at ensuring that such reports, in whatever form, produce the desired results – inconclusive distraction at best and a cover-up at worst.

'Scotty, from marketing' tells us in almost rapturous terms (pun intended) that his interest in the fossil fuel industry is based on his concern for his fellow





Australians working in that industry. I think we'd all agree that in any transition to clean energy, current employees must be protected and their future guaranteed (transition funding). Let us just say that the 'concern' is at best very selective. The dismantling of Australian industry, the automotive area being just one example, doesn't even register on the 'concern scale'. Nor does the effect of climate change on the tourism industry seem to register, even given the fact that this industry employs 2–3 times more people than the fossil fuel industry in Queensland alone. By the way, the number of people employed in the fossil fuel industry is around 33,000, close to the same number as fast food chain, Kentucky Fried Chicken. These numbers are likely to decrease, as fossil fuel companies are automating at a very fast rate.

You may remember a few years ago when the Adani mine was first proposed. The 'public' employment figures were quoted at around 12,000; however, the internal documents aimed, I assume, at investors, spoke of a little over 1200 – a not insignificant difference and obviously dependent on the audience.

As an aside, speaking of Scott Morrison, the mainstream media portrayed him as the 'daggy dad' during the election campaign. His new image now, following the corona outbreak, seems to be a superhero type, working to save us from the virus.

Now a few thoughts on how we can do our best, working together, to save our little 'Pale Blue Dot'. Firstly, we must unite with our friends in the religious and secular communities around issues of common interest. Climate change is, in my view, symptomatic of an economic system, capitalism, that is inherently based on greed which, in the end, results in the greatest good for the smallest number.

Climate change is but one of the symptoms of this system – war, poverty, inequality and associated issues also require our attention. We often see

a reference to the saying that we must act on climate as there is no Planet B. One of the banners at a recent climate rally stated – 'OUR FUTURE – NUCLEAR WAR, CLIMATE CHANGE – PLANET B IS LOOKING GOOD'. I think I agree with Carl Sagan that another planet to inhabit is a long way off – if ever.

I stated in a previous address that the role of the mainstream media, as a force for lies and deceit, cannot be ignored (and not just on the issue of climate change). The attack continues on any organisation, public or private, that does not fit in with the agenda of the extreme right.

There are very detailed examples published in the *Beacon* of the relationship between government and big business. We have spoken of and published detailed examples of this relationship. Take another look at the 'stacking' of the AAP (Administrative Appeals Tribunal) with 51 former LNP parliamentarians, former party candidates and staffers since 2013.

Look at who's making money from the so-called welfare card; it happens to be Larry Anthony, the national party head in Queensland. The current *Saturday Paper* reports that the monetary value of clearly identified rorts exceeds \$500M – the Bridget McKenzie sports rort is beginning to look like a drop in the proverbial bucket.

Our own move to the extreme right in Australia is not unique, but rather an international phenomenon. We must be devoted in reacting to the effects of the system, but never lose sight of the underlying cause. So, there we are back to where we started: by working together as a community and tackling both cause and effect we are in there with a chance to save our 'Pale Blue Dot'.





# Is this pandemic a consequence of our destructiveness?

The Age of Crises has already begun to reshape thinking about our modern society and its relationship with the environment.

This age has brought about a conjunction between critical analysis of the direction of capitalism, the world of indigenous cultures and Islamic thinking.

In March this year, indigenous leaders from around the world gathered in New York City, for a panel on indigenous rights, deforestation and related health endemics.

Coordinator of the Mesoamerican Alliance of Peoples and Forests [AMPB], Sucre Romero, said: 'The coronavirus reminds us that the balance of the Earth is in danger, and we need to maintain our delicate balance of diversity ... More than 25 per cent of medicine comes from forests. If we lose our forests, we lose our medicines, too.'

'The coronavirus is telling the world what Indigenous Peoples have been saying for thousands of years – if we do not help protect biodiversity and nature, we will face this and even worse threats' [24 March 2020 Emilee Gilpin Managing Director, First Nations Forward, National Observer].

This stance of indigenous peoples echoes Ahmet Keeler in *Rethinking Islam and the West: A New Narrative for the Age of Crises*.

'Deep thought is being invested in trying to understand what is happening and to find a better way of living sustainably on earth. Many are recognising the wisdom contained within pre-modern cultures, and are seeking to preserve,

practice and promote traditional husbandry, health and knowledge systems.'

Like Romero, he points to the loss of balance in our world: 'Our Age of Crises can be seen as a result of the loss of balance that has taken place in our modern way of life; the balance between the material and the spiritual, and between ourselves and the environment in which we live.'

The loss of balance in the mad crusade to conquer nature and subjugate it to mankind is having terrible consequences that have already put a third of the planet in lockdown and social isolation.

A number of researchers today think that it is actually humanity's destruction of biodiversity that creates the conditions for new viruses and diseases such as COVID-19.

## SPILOVER

In fact, a new discipline, planetary health, is emerging that focuses on the increasingly visible connections between the wellbeing of humans, other living things and entire ecosystems.

David Quammen's 2012 book, *Spillover: Animal Infections and the Next Human Pandemic*, served as a warning.

'Animal microbes are on the loose. Historically, some 60 per cent of the infections that plague humankind, from influenza to HIV and bubonic plague, originated in the bodies of other animals' [19 October 2012 Breeding Ground, Sonia Shah NYT ].

Mr Quammen writes of the NBOs – the Next Big Ones. ‘Will the Next Big One come out of a rain forest or a market in southern China?’ he asks. Will the Next Big One kill 30 million or 40 million people? He makes you dread that sneeze at the back of the bus.

‘When the trees fall, and the native animals are slaughtered, the native germs fly like dust from a demolished warehouse.’ Or, as he puts it more simply elsewhere, ‘Shake a tree, and things fall out’ [2 October 2012 Dwight Garner, *They Are So Beastly These Ticks and Plagues* NYT].

### CLIMATE CHANGE AND DISEASE

Alongside this destruction of the natural environment is the rapid acceleration of climate change, bringing its own cluster of potential disasters.

The frozen lands of the northern hemisphere, in Russia particularly, are warming up. The temperature in the Arctic Circle is rising quickly, about three times faster than in the rest of the world.

The permafrost is melting and it is releasing the unknown.

‘Permafrost is a very good preserver of microbes and viruses, because it is cold, there is no oxygen, and it is dark,’ says evolutionary biologist Jean-Michel Claverie

at Aix-Marseille University in France. ‘Pathogenic viruses that can infect humans or animals might be preserved in old permafrost layers, including some that have caused global epidemics in the past.’

In a 2011 study, Boris Revich and Marina Podolnaya wrote: ‘As a consequence of permafrost melting, the vectors of deadly infections of the 18th and 19th centuries may come back, especially near the cemeteries where the victims of these infections were buried’ [4 May 2017 Jasmin Fox-Skelly BBC Earth].

Crises accumulate with the advance of global warming, the migration of cyclones from the tropics, spreading areas of drought and floods, the increasing inhospitable interiors of continents and rising sea levels as the polar ice melts.

Alongside this, the destruction of forests, the cultivation of land unsuited to that purpose and the destruction and consuming of animals that carry pathogens into the human population, exterminate the very biodiversity upon which we have relied.

The most recent pandemic of COVID-19, which may only be the first of many such horrifying attacks upon humanity, serves as a warning of what will accompany our upsetting of the balance of diversity.

It is a warning that we would do well to heed.



# from our readers



#### DEAR EDITOR

So useful as a source of information to engage in conversations. Information – not in the media – such as the article on the West’s terrible destruction of Libya.

**C Whatmough, NSW**

#### DEAR BEACON EDITORS

So sorry I forgot to renew my subscription for 2019. Enclosed is \$40 for 2019 and 2020.

Your journal is a voice in the wilderness of our neoliberal world. A very necessary voice and one I hope continues forever.

**E Chambers, Vic**

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**In the middle of a pandemic, the Australian state is pummelling workers**

**US gunning for trouble**

**Working together to save our 'Pale Blue Dot'**

**Is this pandemic a consequence of our destructiveness?**

**Letters to the Editor**

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