

## 13. What to do?

Many progressive Australians are asking:

- Who is going to own and control Australia: its citizens or international corporations?
- How can we avoid the corruption of democratic processes that has happened in other democracies, as is happening in the United States?
- What can I do that will make a difference?

### The challenge

We have seen that American economic structures and systems of regulation (or lack of regulation) have led to a situation where the richest 1 per cent of Americans own 50 per cent of United States investment assets and are accelerating their rate of wealth acquisition at a cost to the middle class and the poor.

Prior to 1986, the number of United States billionaires averaged around thirteen. But under Reagan, that doubled in 1986 to twenty-six, and then doubled again in 1987 to forty-nine. By 1990 there were ninety-nine. In the past 12 months, according to the *Forbes Rich List*, the number of United States billionaires has doubled from 400 to 800!<sup>1</sup> Reaganism is indeed alive and well.

A similar story is playing out in Russia, China, Malaysia and much of the world.

Many progressives are not only deeply disturbed by this growing trend to inequality but are even more disturbed by the excessive and growing influence of this ultra-rich group on American political processes.

Use of the term 'extreme Right' in this discussion refers to that very small group of the very rich who use their power to influence governments away from serving the public interest towards serving their private interests. It also includes their social engineers and their noise makers.

Australia is seeing a similar concentration of extreme wealth and its increasing influence on our government, and a corresponding loss of influence by ordinary Australians.

The greatest threat to modern democracies is the emergence of sophisticated lobby groups with big money behind them. It would be ironic if, after so many years of defending democratic capitalism from communism, the United States democracy had finally succumbed to extremists from the Right and corrupt American capitalism.

The right-wing extremists in Australia have access to large funds for investment in governments that can provide the policies they want. They have well-positioned lobbyists both inside and outside government, who maintain close ties to both Liberal and Labor parties.

Those among the ultra-rich who attack our democracy by investing in schemes to promote smaller and weaker governments, reduced government services and who profit from global wars on terrorism, the environment and the poor, are controlled by their greed. They profit from promoting extreme consumerism, and by attacking social and international cohesion.

On the other hand, it would be wrong to demonise the ultra-rich, as some are genuine philanthropists. They make huge investments in projects to save the environment and improve conditions for the poor and the sick. The two richest men in the world, Microsoft co-founder, Bill Gates and Warren Buffett, CEO of Berkshire Hathaway, with over US\$100 billion between them, plan to give away their money before they die to create a better world.

Given the economic muscle of the ultra-rich, the world needs them to be people of compassion, generosity and goodwill. However, if a number of these individuals persist in their attacks on our democracy,

there would be compelling reasons for reducing the problem in our own country through wealth and estate taxes and taxes on money crossing national borders.

### **The hope**

Today we hear frequent reference to the culture wars, the battle for ideas, the so-called battle between East and West, the battle between Islam and Christianity. Conceiving the world's troubles in terms of polar opposites can be reassuringly simple, but it is a distraction, it takes our attention away from the real battle facing every democracy.

Our analysis shows that in Australia today we face a battle between democratic capitalism and corrupt American-style capitalism. Private interests are buying up the government. The very same battle is being played out in nearly every democratic country. This is the real battle of ideas. Those who are winning this battle want to keep us distracted from reality by talking about the clash of civilisations, warning about the power of the Left and promoting consumerism.

There are, however, grounds for optimism. The radical Right, which has taken over conservative politics, has had to resort to crass propaganda and manipulation to win arguments and elections. Once widely exposed, this tactic becomes their weakness.

Progressives on the other hand want to create an open, transparent democracy that enables democratic processes to work without the corrupting effects of big money and media empires. Progressive values sit more comfortably with the majority of Australians, who reject authoritarianism and voter manipulation. Australians want to control the future of Australia themselves. The challenge for the progressives is to articulate these core Australian values in a more compelling way.

Another reason for optimism is to recognise that even with their brilliant thirty-year strategic plans, their top dollar investment in social engineering, their enormous election budgets, and their control of much of the media, the ultra-rich have only been able to win elections by a margin of one or two percentage points. And even to do this much they

depended on manipulation, which, with more adequate electoral laws, might be called corruption.

Almost a decade of conservative governments here and in the United States has shown what the conservatives really stand for; Howard and Bush have both shown themselves to be carrying deadly payloads of anti-democratic policies. Both give priority to their investors' demand for dividends over serving the people they were elected to serve.

There remain many Australians who are not for sale. The problem is that those who wish to steal our country from under our noses are very smart; their mercenaries appear as friends, their arguments are framed to excite, and their blandishments designed to seduce.

Only the efforts of many will create a worthwhile future for our children and our children's children. But each of us needs to understand the game, and we each need a plan.

### **Active democracy**

There is considerable evidence to show that rich, powerful and ruthless private equity groups are targeting Australia. The private structure of these groups means they can avoid public scrutiny and regulation. Australia has few defences against their capacity to exploit our human and physical resources. We have few defences against any powerful organisation that seeks to import corrupt American capitalism to replace our previously successful model of democratic government.

Australian democracy has been constructed with toil and pain over generations. Why do so many of our generation seem willing to surrender the hard-won gains of our forbears? Where are our defences? Who is leading the defence of Australia? The defence is being led by a number of politicians, some in Labor, the Greens and the Australian Democrats and some independents. And outside of politics there are community leaders, academics and journalists. However, the United States experience<sup>2</sup> tells us that this will not be enough.

The big lesson from the past thirty years of right-wing success is the value of political organisations that exist outside of political parties. For example, right-wing think tanks managed to get very disparate groups of economic fundamentalists, neo-conservatives, traditional conservatives, evangelical Christians and more, to bury their differences and work together. We should note that it was not the United States Republican Party that ran the campaign for lower taxes for the rich; it was run by a separate organisation—Americans for Tax Reform—with tremendous success. And we have seen that Reagan and his government were not left to manufacture a right-wing revolution on their own. The Heritage Foundation had already done the hard policy and strategy work and handed him the ‘How to’ manual, so he could get straight to work.<sup>3</sup>

It is unrealistic to expect the Labor Party to single-handedly take on the Murdoch press and its mercenaries, big money, talkback radio, the social engineers, corrupt American-style capitalism as well as Howard and the Liberal Party. The reality of democracy today is that a single political party cannot succeed on its own. The success of the Right makes this abundantly clear. It is a powerful lesson for progressives who occupy the political centre, one that they ignore at their peril.

Australia has several small progressive think tanks. The Australia Institute<sup>4</sup>, led by Clive Hamilton, has had some success in confronting Howard’s excesses, and in providing an alternative analysis of issues. Organisations such as this are essential to the task of defending Australia’s democracy; but they need greater support and we need more of them.

The history of active democracy in Australia seems to have reached a low point in recent years. Many Australians limit their democratic participation to voting every few years, and little more. Have we as a nation become lazy and disengaged from social and political participation? Have we become consumers of the democratic processes, preferring to be spectators than participants?

It is instructive to compare Australia and the United States in terms of active democracy. In the States, for instance, the daily DemocracyNow news podcast<sup>5</sup> sheds light on the large number of activist groups fighting against war, corporate takeover of the public interest, and corruption on many levels. It appears that democratic voices of the people are much more active in the United States than in Australia, possibly because they are under greater direct threat from corrupt American capitalism. Or perhaps we Australians have been so spoilt that, unaware of the demands of democracy, we now have the leader we deserve.

If we are to successfully defend Australia from corrupt American-style capitalism, many more Australians need to play a part. One purpose of the current discussion is to attract more Australians, whatever their political allegiances, to become more active in creating our democratic future.

Many people know exactly what they want to do. Many are already active. Some are still wondering: what can I do? The following section is for those who want to do something and are looking for ideas.

### **Where to start**

The place to start is with ourselves. We each need to ask, ‘Am I ready for action?’

Many Australians will find that their economic and family circumstances leave them totally drained. Those who are overworked and exhausted will have little time or energy for action.

Clive Hamilton’s book, *Affluenza*,<sup>6</sup> describes how many Australians are caught up with this dreadful disease where, to a greater or lesser extent, they have been convinced that consumption is the key to happiness. They get caught in a spiral as they work longer and harder to feed a growing consumption habit. For such people, it might be time to drop some of the addictions and give themselves the most wonderful gift: time.

For some, the question will be whether they really prefer a life of indulgent consumption to a life of active involvement with issues and with other people of passion in the battle to build Australia for the next generation.

The first step for many is to create a lifestyle that will support the time and energy needed for more active participation in shaping our world.

### **Get connected**

The decision to get active opens up unlimited possibilities. Search your local community and the Internet for those who share your concerns. If you prefer to play as a member of a team, find a team to join. If you are an entrepreneur, identify innovative projects that will make a difference. If you are a leader, start a group.

Find the issues that align with your values and concerns.

Think of joining a political party, or identify a local independent representative that inspires you, and offer to support them.

Ideally, each of us might consider being connected both through the Internet and locally. Both types of connection are valuable and can feed each other.

Former US vice president turned environmental activist, Al Gore, is clear: politicians need grassroots activism if they are to create changes.<sup>7</sup> Almost by definition, politicians cannot lead change in a democracy unless there is a visible constituency for the cause. Inspired politicians need inspired communities. A silent majority is of little use while it remains silent. The progressive majority needs to become more visible. Time to make our voices heard!

### **Get educated**

Getting connected and choosing where you will focus your energy are learning experiences in themselves. However, unless you are planning to be a back-office or support person, you need to be well

informed on issues. This means doing Internet searches, reading books, political magazines, such as *The Monthly*,<sup>8</sup> *The New Matilda*,<sup>9</sup> listening to podcasts of independent current affairs, such as those from DemocracyNow,<sup>10</sup> and the ABC, and having discussions and possibly attending workshops and courses. The virtue of adult education is that you are in control and you can take it where you want it to go. You might seek advice from someone whose opinions you respect such as a local politician, teacher, university lecturer, activist, journalist or a community centre.

You might consider joining a progressive organisation such as the Australia Institute or a national environmental or human rights group. It is certainly worth visiting their websites and learning about what they have to offer. Links to valuable resources can be found in the Notes section at the end of this book, which are also available on the web.<sup>11</sup>

If you are a team player, think how you might engage others in your learning, either locally or on the Internet. Search for blogs on your topics; start blogging! If your contribution is as a writer, practise writing your ideas.

If your contribution is to be by word of mouth, practise speaking about your ideas. Consider opportunities where you might be able to get practice at public speaking and/or group discussion.

Many activists find that their involvement requires learning new skills, such as dealing creatively with conflict. Learning how to communicate one's position effectively while respecting and negotiating differences can be challenging!

For other activities you might consider, check the DemocracyWatch website's 'Take Action' page.<sup>12</sup>

## **Projects**

The potential number of projects is limited only by our imaginations. The key is to find projects that you can do well and that will make a difference. Here is a quick list to stimulate your creativity.

### ***Build social capital***

Social capital is the attitude, spirit and willingness of people to engage in collective, civic activities. Join with your local or work community and find ways of contributing to the common good. Whatever our future, we need to trust each other and build sustainable communities.

### ***Shame the noise makers***

Examine the DemocracyWatch website. Consider setting up a similar ‘watch’ website to monitor something important. For example, websites could be set up to monitor some of the shock jocks and noise makers, since it is clear that neither their proprietor nor their professional association is willing to hold them to account.

There is no reason that an appropriate group could not start, for example, a PiersAckermanWatch or a GerardHendersonWatch site.

To be credible, such websites need to be highly ethical, setting a higher standard of behaviour than their targets. They would need to rigorously apply the journalists’ code of ethics.<sup>13</sup> The simple purpose would be to make the noise makers publicly accountable for their misdeeds.

### ***Shame or convert the social engineers***

A well-resourced group could set up ‘Watch’ websites on the Institute of Public Affairs. This key political player seems to have escaped scrutiny by the Electoral Commission and the general public. For the sake of a healthy democracy, this needs to change. Don’t be shy about naming their vices. Call them on their greed. Challenge them to rise above it. Identify and publicise their covert front groups, such as The Australian Environment Foundation.<sup>14</sup> Such exposure could create excellent publicity opportunities.

More important than shaming the social engineers is their conversion. Why not join the IPA and rub shoulders with the rich and

powerful, get to know them and champion more progressive economics and politics?

***Work with the ultra-rich***

If you are a multi-millionaire, you are well placed to start an association of the ultra-rich for social and democratic progress. Those ultra-rich who are driven by greed and attack our democracy and our environment need to be challenged by their peers and engaged in a more generous role in the world.

***Set up a local climate change group (or any other sort of group)***

People have simply placed notices around their neighbourhoods to call a meeting on climate change and progressed from there. The group might start with self-education and then mount a project (see <http://www.see-change.org.au/>). Invite guest speakers, such as one of the Al Gore-trained climate change trainers or someone from a national non-government organisation (some have speakers awaiting your invitation). If you are concerned about the destruction of our scientifically based quarantine system, get organised! Broaden your base; make your group attractive to the wider community.

***Write***

Local newspapers are often hungry for good material. Practise your journalism skills and try to get published. Perhaps a group of local writers might aim for a regular column. You might network with other community journalists and swap ideas. If you are a good journalist, write for bigger and bigger audiences. Don't just write for those who already agree with you.

***Become a speaker***

There are many community groups such as Rotary and Probus clubs that have regular spots for speakers. These are not political platforms but provide great opportunities for the gifted speaker to provide

information and education. If you are willing to travel, and gain a good reputation for yourself, there are tremendous opportunities.

### ***Investigate***

There are websites that provide information to the activist and general community, places such as <[www.democracywatch.com.au](http://www.democracywatch.com.au)>, <[www.democracy4sale.org](http://www.democracy4sale.org)> and <[www.sourcewatch.org](http://www.sourcewatch.org)>. If you have good investigative skills or wish to blow the whistle, you may be able to contribute to these.

### ***Create a web community on an important issue***

When a group of health professionals and parents wanted to improve children's health and reduce obesity by improving the food available to children and their physical environments, they started a website called The Parents Jury.<sup>15</sup> If you want to change government policy on the promotion of unhealthy foods, why not join and strengthen this movement?

If you and your group feel strongly about an issue, consider whether the creation of a web community might be a good strategy to build your group, raise the profile of the issue and develop a constituency for some real change.

### ***Run community events***

What opportunities might you create in your local community? Perhaps you could run a climate change evening with a guest speaker and discussion. Demonstrate sustainable technology at your local field day or annual show. Organise to display and explain sustainable homes. Invite knowledgeable people to speak to your local community on hot issues. Join or volunteer for a business promoting sustainable lifestyles. Join (or start) the local committee for the annual sustainable house day. Run a series of seminars on the impact of the Australian–United States Free Trade Agreement on your local community. Invite speakers from

those involved with activist websites such as DemocracyWatch or the Democratic Audit of Australia. Bring your community to life!

### ***Organise***

Union, religious and community leaders can bring together disadvantaged groups, such as the working poor and refugees, to facilitate their learning about the causes of their difficulties, so that they can better understand what can be done and then organise their political voice.

### ***Learn about and use non-violent strategies***

Mahatma Gandhi is widely recognised as the father of non-violent political change. Study non-violence (e.g., [www.nonviolence.org.au](http://www.nonviolence.org.au)) and search out training courses. Non-violent techniques can require considerable personal sacrifices but can be highly effective when normal democratic processes have broken down.

### ***Break the silence***

If you belong to one of the thousands of community groups that are being bribed by the Howard government into remaining silent and not speaking on behalf of its stakeholders, find a way of speaking out. Identify alliances and form a constituency for speaking up. You might go public with your challenge to your current leaders who are being bought off. You might have to form a breakaway group that can survive without government funding. Think strategically.

If you wish to blow the whistle on a government or a corporation, consider your future by firstly getting legal advice, identifying your future needs. Study whistleblowing in Australia (e.g., on the WWW). Australian governments have an appalling record in the treatment of whistleblowers. You will need to be strong and to have strong private and community support. You should not have to do this on your own. Form alliances and a support group. Consider an advocate who might do this for you.

Identify organisations and well-resourced Australians who share your disgust with the way you are being intimidated who might wish to support you. If you get their commitments up front you can move with greater confidence.

### ***Support whistleblowers***

If you know a whistleblower or potential whistleblower, understand their needs and offer them real support. In a society where personal intimidation is becoming the norm, whistleblowers are lonely isolated heroes who risk finishing up impoverished or in jail. If someone is facing jail for speaking about vile abuses of the public interest, set up a strong community organisation to provide real support for their family. Identify those willing to provide financial support to balance their losses. Link them with those who can provide wise counsel and legal advice. Assist them gain access to appropriate media. Let them know with certainty that they are well supported.

### ***Full public disclosure of those who fund political parties***

Become an expert in democracy issues, study Australia's democratic audit at <<http://democratic.audit.anu.edu.au/>>. Find ways to contribute.

Join, or start, a group or a website to generate grassroots support for a proper independent high-level review of Australian Electoral Commission legislation, such as by a Royal Commission, and the drafting of new legislation.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Get political***

Don't just meet your local member. If you are part of a significant grassroots movement, negotiate with him or her to establish a partnership. One of the most effective ways to achieve change can be to work closely with a politician. You strengthen their voice in parliament if you provide a strong constituency on an issue; and having a voice in parliament strengthens your position. By working together with a politician, you can set up a virtuous circle for change.

### ***Start lobbying***

If you have a strong group of supporters, go and talk to those in power. They will listen to those who have a strong constituency and have good ideas. Work out the best ways to influence them to take action.

### ***Get funding***

Activists need entrepreneurs and financial engineers who can find sources of funding for projects and organisations. Create money streams for the progressive think tanks or political candidates. Look for ways to design campaigns that are self-funding.

### ***Donate***

Most of us can afford a few dollars. Some of us can afford hundreds or even thousands of dollars. If you find an organisation that is giving expression to your values, consider donating.

### ***Reforming our political parties***

The book, *Crashing the Gate, How American Politics is About to Change*,<sup>17</sup> provides a wealth of information on how activism is changing. For example, it tells how small donations from tens of thousands of Internet bloggers were able to move the United States Democratic Party from its dependence on a small number of very big donors. This is resulting in a return to grassroots democracy and is reducing corporate control of the Party. Read *Crashing the Gate* and be inspired! Both the Liberal and the Labor parties have very weak membership bases. Liberal Party branches in some states are being taken over by the ultra-right. Are there ways of broadening representation and returning to greater grassroots control?

### ***Bring the troops home***

Our involvement in Iraq seems to be accepted as a given. However, Iraq is an ongoing crime. We should not have gone there in the first

place. There will be a crisis whenever we leave, so why prolong the agony? Think of innovative ways to keep this issue in front of the government and the Australian people until our fighting troops are brought home.

### ***Strengthen the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty***

Join, or start, a group or website to goad our government into using its position as one of the world's largest sources of uranium to challenge the weaknesses in the current treaty, and to propose improvements.

### ***Adult and community education***

Adult educators can design short courses or workshops and provide them through the local adult and community education provider. Design a workshop yourself or invite trainers from our national organisations to run a workshop in your community, and then promote it.

### ***Cognitive scientists, marketing personnel, journalists, religious leaders***

Why have Australia's progressives surrendered the values discourse to the conservatives? Why have we allowed extremists, such as Howard's Mark Textor to frame the public discourse? Progressives need to re-enter the values debate and understand how to use reframing and identify when it is being used negatively.

Learn how to use persuasive language to promote progressive values. Learn how to control the agenda through reframing. Visit [www.rockridgeinstitute.org](http://www.rockridgeinstitute.org) and download (or buy) *Thinking Points* and learn how to get on the front foot by reframing public issues.

### ***Economic independence for Indigenous Australians***

Join, or start, a group or website to lobby for new policy or projects that enable remote Indigenous communities to become self-sufficient and economically independent.

### ***A new economics***

Australia and the world desperately need a new economics that places a value on social, democratic and environmental realities. Join with other economists to promote a new paradigm. The abundant evidence of market failure provides countless opportunities to attack and reframe economic fundamentalism.

### ***Border protection***

Those in the agricultural sector and other sectors who will be hurt by the Australia–United States Free Trade Agreement can educate themselves on the issues and work with their industry bodies to create a constituency for repeal of the agreement.

### ***Promote this book***

If you think this book can create support for the things you value, promote it. Donate copies to people who might be interested. Recommend it to those on your email list. Put a link on your website. Write a review. Perhaps your greatest contribution would be to make sure that bookshops and newsagents in your area stock and display the book. Check the BLOG on our website for further ideas.

### **Conclusion**

Do you have really low expectations of Australian politicians? Do you feel somehow vindicated when you are proved right? Have you given up trying?

John Howard and George Bush have demonstrated what happens when the people get lazy and surrender. Our surrender has allowed

them to jeopardise our future and that of our children. The cost is too high.

Australia's future is in our hands. There are millions of Australians who, when given the choice, prefer democratic capitalism to corrupt American-style capitalism, any day. We cannot allow electoral manipulation by the small number of extremists and big money to rob us of our heritage.

Each of us has to make a decision. Do we want to watch from the sidelines, or do we want to contribute?