

Reclaiming a stronger democracy

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Have you ever asked yourself any of the following questions?

“Despite the fact that the majority of Australians support stronger climate action, why do all Australian governments, past and present, support Australia being one of the world’s biggest exporters of coal and fossil gas?”

“Why are so many homes uninsulated?”

“Why is there a huge shortage of affordable housing?”

“Why have several states passed laws to punish nonviolent demonstrations with huge fines and even prison?”

“Why are gambling advertisements permitted on television?”

“Why have there been so many wars around the globe since the end of World War II and why has Australia been involved in several of them in distant locations where there was no threat to us?”

State capture

Deep down we know that underlying the major threats to society and civilisation is the immense political power of vested interests, such as the fossil fuel, property¹, pharmaceutical, gambling and weapons industries. Their influence over governments, opposition parties, public service, mainstream media and other institutions of the nation-state is known as ‘state capture’.² It goes far beyond ordinary corruption where a Minister or public servant is bribed.

As state capture strongly influences, and in several cases, determines government policies, it undermines democracy. Under state capture, basic human rights and worker rights are stripped away; the right to protest and the right to strike are increasingly restricted; the availability of public education, public health, public housing and public transport is eroded; and Australia is dragged into more and more dangerous and destructive foreign wars by the military-industrial complex based in the United States.

State capture also goes beyond direct influence to the deliberate creation of a ‘culture’ of false or misleading public thinking, such as:

“Greenhouse gas emissions from fossil fuels exported by Australia are irrelevant.”

“Tax deductions for speculation in property cannot be reversed. Furthermore, the government cannot afford to subsidise large amounts of public housing”

“People and business must not be inconvenienced by public protests, even protests against existential threats to civilisation.”

“We need the gambling industry to provide revenue for state governments.”

“The United States will defend Australia against its neighbours if we join it in unnecessary, destructive, overseas wars.”

These notions foster an atmosphere of complacency and helplessness.

My first contact with the power of vested interests occurred several decades ago when I was a young CSIRO research scientist leading a project on wind power. At that time, CSIRO was a

¹ <https://johnmenadue.com/post/2025/10/game-set-and-match-to-the-property-industry-unless-we-change-everything/>

² <https://australiandemocracy.org.au/statecapture>

world leader in research on solar hot water and passive solar housing, and was doing internationally recognised work on bioenergy and wind power. In 1982, at a stroke of a pen with no explanation, the Executive that ran CSIRO shut down all the organisation's research on renewable energy across the country. Research scientists were redeployed and some of us were retrenched.

I was told by someone with a close connection to the Executive that the person driving this action was an Executive member with a close connection to the coal industry. Yet, in 1982, there was no threat to coal from renewables: there was no manufacturing industry for large wind turbines anywhere in the world and cheap solar electricity was just a dream. But King Coal would not even tolerate upstart baby princelings.

Vested interests seem so powerful, yet they are vulnerable to a well-informed, well-organised community campaign. The first step is to expose the anti-democratic methods by which vested interests gain and hold power.

We know what these methods are: political donations and election expenditure, revolving door jobs, concentrated media ownership, inadequately regulated lobbying, consultancies to government, and so-called 'think tanks' such as the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA) and the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) that receive undeserved prominence in the media.

The IPA, which is very wealthy, does not divulge its sources of funding, however it is documented that Hancock Prospecting, a mining company owned by Australia's richest woman, Gina Rinehart, has made separate donations to the IPA amounting to millions of dollars.³ ASPI is treated by the ABC as a source of objective information on foreign affairs and defence, although it is funded by the United States and Australian governments and the multinational weapons industry.⁴

The reliance of the Australian government on consultants to undertake work for the public service is proportionally greater than in any other country. Following the PwC tax leaks scandal⁵, where it was discovered that the firm had leaked sensitive Australian government information to other large corporations, issues of conflict of interest and transparency were exposed to the public. Governments of both major political parties have become increasingly dependent on four major consulting firms, some of which give large political donations. As a result, the independent capacity of the public service has been undermined.

Revolving door jobs are blatant. Retiring Ministers for Resources, from both major political parties, have walked into highly paid jobs with the resources industry. Retiring Ministers for Defence have stepped into jobs with the weapons industry. The potential for improperly influencing government policy is huge. The revolving door rotates in both directions, with political advisers to previous Ministers being appointed from such vested interests as the Mineral Council of Australia, one of the main lobby groups for fossil fuels.⁶

³ <https://www.thenewdaily.com.au/news/national/2018/07/24/ipa-membership-donors>

⁴ https://ad-aspi.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/2025-03/ASPI%20Funding%202023-24.pdf?VersionId=Gsxfp4y_oklpcSHqbirBC0VQKo3ni8ED

⁵ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-06-05/pwc-pricewaterhousecoopers-government-tax-leak-scandal-explained/102409528>

⁶ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S2214629621003649>

Nearly three quarters of the mainstream mass media in Australia is owned by one corporation, Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. It has been widely criticised, even by a member of the Murdoch family⁷, for its hostility to climate science, renewable energy and environmental protection in general, and for political bias.

The government, supported by the opposition, has weaponised public concerns about political donations by passing legislation that damages the ability of independents and small parties to raise funds. Disregarding democratic process, it refused to refer the bill to a parliamentary committee for proper scrutiny.⁸

The dominant economic system, which is based on exploiting the environment and most people, reinforces state capture. Leading economists of this system also form a politically influential vested interest themselves. This system treats the environment as a source of resources and a waste dump, although it is actually our life support system and an entity of intrinsic value.

Dominant economics assumes that endless growth on a finite planet is feasible and desirable. As a result, seven out of nine safe planetary boundaries have already been crossed, including climate change, loss of biodiversity and freshwater, land degradation, ocean acidification, and damage to biogeochemical flows such as the phosphorus and nitrogen cycles.⁹

Supporters of the dominant economic ideology, neoliberalism, proclaim that wealth trickles down from the rich to the poor, despite empirical evidence contradicting that myth¹⁰. They demand small government and low taxes, and that major socioeconomic decisions, which should be political decisions, be handed over to the 'free' Market. However, they know that the Market is not free but controlled by large corporations and rich individuals for private profit.¹¹

Challenging state capture

The strategy proposed to overcome state capture and restore democracy has two components: Resistance and Vision.¹² Resistance comprises exposure of the methods of state capture and a widespread community campaign to weaken them. Vision comprises the discussion and implementation of a broad pathway to a better, more sustainable future.

Resistance to state capture is growing among community groups. In 2022 the Australian Democracy Network published an excellent review of state capture and is currently campaigning to protect the right to protest. It also supports the Stronger Charities Alliance, an alliance of around 170 charities, which was formed in 2017 in response to several bills that would have silenced charities on issues of national importance.¹³

⁷ <https://www.newsweek.com/james-murdoch-criticizes-fox-news-corp-climate-change-australia-fires-coverage-1482097>

⁸ <https://theconversation.com/parliament-has-passed-landmark-election-donation-laws-they-may-be-a-stitch-up-but-they-also-improve-australias-democracy-249588>

⁹ <https://www.pik-potsdam.de/en/news/latest-news/seven-of-nine-planetary-boundaries-now-breached-2013-ocean-acidification-joins-the-danger-zone>

¹⁰ <https://academic.oup.com/ser/article/20/2/539/6500315?login=false>

¹¹ <https://academic.oup.com/book/26374?login=false>

¹² <https://www.sciepublish.com/article/pii/460>

¹³ <https://australiandemocracy.org.au/our-work>

Dr Monique Ryan, the Independent MP for the Division of Kooyong, Victoria, is introducing a private member's bill to federal parliament to increase transparency in lobbying and to control revolving door jobs between retiring MPs and vested interests.¹⁴ The Sydney Retired Unionists Group is organising a petition to control revolving door jobs and lobbying. The current issue of *Quarterly Essay* is entitled “Woodside Vs the Planet: How a company captured a country”, by Marian Wilkinson.

Clearly, the time is ripe for an organised campaign by community-based non-government organisations (NGOs) against the methods of state capture. Because individual groups are not sufficiently politically powerful to wean the major political parties away from the pernicious influence of vested interests, an alliance between NGOs is needed to campaign against the methods of state capture and for genuine democracy in government decision-making.

Some of the methods – revolving door jobs and concentrated media ownership – were controlled in the past, but gradually the laws and regulations have been ignored or discarded. Given enough pressure from the community, they can be reinstated.

The proposed joint campaign would supplement the continuing, specific, individual campaigns on climate, biodiversity, poverty, housing, human rights and peace. Success would benefit the work of all NGOs and would benefit all Australians, except possibly the very rich.

The Vision arm of the strategy has been under development for several decades. A key component is to replace the failed economic ideology of neoliberalism with a system whose principal goals are ecological sustainability, social justice and peace. It would facilitate the transition to a steady-state economy with a basic level of prosperity for all. It would include the provision by government of universal basic services and a job guarantee for all who want to work. It would facilitate much greater involvement by the community in decision-making. It would guarantee equal human rights to all.

What you can do

You, the reader of *Renew Magazine*, could raise the issue of state capture in NGOs to which you belong and suggest they collaborate in an alliance of NGOs to campaign against the methods of state capture. You could raise the issue on social media, lobby your MP and write letters to the editor and articles. Anything to strengthen cooperation between environmental, social justice, human rights, peace, public health and trade union NGOs would be very helpful.

Already there are close links between some environmental and social justice groups under the banner of climate justice, which recognises that the poor will suffer most, indeed are already suffering, from the impacts of climate change, which result mainly from the lifestyles of the rich. The richest half of the world's population (which includes most readers of this article) are responsible for 92% of global greenhouse gas emissions.¹⁵

But individual action to change one's lifestyle, although necessary, is not sufficient. Collectively, we must change the system.

¹⁴ <https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/radionational-breakfast/lobbying-reform-back-on-the-agenda-/105937050>

¹⁵ <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/climate-equality-a-planet-for-the-99-621551/>

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