

When normal returns, what do we want it to be?

By Cristy Clark

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Our daily lives have been thoroughly disrupted by COVID-19 and it has been easy to get caught up in anxiety-driven scrolling through the constantly updating coronavirus news feed: the daily climb of infections and death; the growing chain of collapsed businesses and surge in unemployment rates; and the ever evolving details of health directives and social distancing guidelines. It all gets pretty overwhelming.



But even during this period of disruption (and, indeed, even because of it) it is so important that we pay attention to the bigger picture. So much of what we do now will lay the groundwork for the kind of future we are able to build at end of this crisis. Moreover, this crisis is shining a bright light on the cracks in our current systems and it is tempting to settle for a quick fix, rather than doing the work of rebuilding our fragile systems from the ground up.

So, while we should welcome the socially progressive measures being adopted in response to this crisis — the [doubling of Newstart](#), the introduction of the '[Jobkeeper payment](#)', and the announcements of [free childcare](#) and a [moratorium on evictions](#) (details to come) — we should also remain critical.

Despite [claims to the contrary](#), it should be abundantly clear that none these policies herald the beginning of a socialist utopia in Australia. Not only are they time bound (and unjustifiably discriminatory in their application), they have been introduced to protect capital, not equality. And if you needed any more evidence of this overarching agenda (and wanted to bring this column subtly

back to the environment), just take a look at the environmentally destructive policies that are also being progressed under the cover of this crisis.

In NSW, for example, the state government recently approved [an extension of longwall coalmining under the Woronora reservoir](#), which supplies drinking water to parts of southern Sydney and the northern Illawarra. The decision was made without debate due to the suspension of Parliament, despite widespread community concern and the [documented risks](#) such mining poses to water quality.

Similarly, the Victorian State Government quietly [lifted its moratorium on drilling for onshore conventional gas reserves](#), in a time when moving away from greenhouse gas production should be an urgent priority. Meanwhile, the Great Barrier Reef is going through its [third mass bleaching event](#) in five years, and the Commonwealth and Queensland governments remain wedded to coal mining.

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Naomi Klein calls these kinds of policies '[disaster capitalism](#)', because they represent such an established (almost cliché) pattern of capitalists exploiting the cover of disasters to introduce (or entrench) extractive policies without sufficient scrutiny. What this analysis highlights is the importance of remaining alert to similar manoeuvres as this crisis develops and continues to distract us.

Another significant moment will come when we start to turn a corner and the focus shifts to recovery. The pressing need for economic recovery is likely to be used to justify the further deferral of climate action, which could result in a whole range of new (climate related) crises like the one we endured this past summer.

All of us would suffer if we let this happen, but it would affect younger generations the most. And this raises significant issues of intergenerational equity.

As a society, we have asked the younger generations to shoulder a significant burden to help protect the community — especially the more vulnerable older generations — from the threat of COVID-19. The health directives have shut down many industries that employ younger people. School closures will leave an indelible mark on our children's education and social development. Even the enforcement is likely to target younger people. And we expect their cooperation because we live in a community, and we are all responsible for taking care of each other.

It is immoral for us not to take a similar approach to climate change — a threat from which young people are particularly vulnerable, but which older generations are disproportionately responsible for creating and exacerbating.

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As [Arundhati Roy](#) points out, this pandemic represents a rupture in the fabric of our societies, and is likely to act as a portal between one world and the next. We will have to be very careful about where this portal takes us. If we want to step through into a better world, we need to be crystal clear about what that looks like and deeply committed to the values we will use to guide us.



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Main image: A field of bleached coral (Getty images/Brett Monroe Garner)

Taken from Eureka Street