

## **Australia 2026: A Tale of Two Australias**

**Marcus Bussey**  
**University of the Sunshine Coast**  
**Australia**

There are two Australias today. It is not easy to pinpoint when this all started but everyone saw the writing on the wall for the federal government when the water crisis of 2012 hit. This was an issue they had bungled from the beginning and if not for the energy and skill of local communities and indigenous-green groups the crisis could have been an absolute disaster. It was this issue that catalysed the awakening of local, communal, indigenous and green consciousness not as separate strands competing for airspace but as a coalescent counterpoint to what these groups jokingly called "Howard Central", or simply HC.

But before that, there were plenty of signs all around and you didn't need to read tea leaves to see something big was coming by the end of the first decade of the 21st century. The signs were plentiful: the growing discontent of local communities with the heavy handedness of big business<sup>1</sup> and the disconnect between HC and local concerns<sup>2</sup>; the self obsession of the major two parties with issues that seemed irrelevant to communities facing life and death situations, alienated the grass roots of both parties who found little vision or flexibility at federal or state levels<sup>3</sup>. Institutionalised religions too were stuck<sup>4</sup> and new flexible unaffiliated groups with springing up to develop new spiritual visions of relevance to the driving concerns of land and personal agency.

These conditions were leading to creative responses of small communities and local "coalitions of the willing" to the failure of traditional rural industries as a combined result of government policy and altered weather conditions. The internet too played its part, with many people linking up with mobs like Getup<sup>5</sup> and Crikey<sup>6</sup> and creating the intellectual and social capital to challenge the disregard of HC for local concerns. The Aboriginal "question" was resolving itself unexpectedly with a resurgence of traditional knowledge approaches to the water crisis in particular and the environmental and social collapse in general.

The result had been a powerful new coalition of Indigenous, Green and Communitarian groups who took control of local areas and networked with other areas to save the Murray-Darling from total disaster. The successes here lead to increased levels of networking beyond the original arena of concern with many areas of Australia signing up for help with degraded water resources and the problem of salination. This was bolstered by, and also sustained an increased sense of identity fostered by, a conscious identification with a raft of ideologies that wove together rich traditions drawing on indigenous, green and Proutist<sup>7</sup> narratives that empowered those on the ground with effective strategies for framing what they did and how they defined themselves. Resistance of course was everywhere.

Some cities and many farmers were unwilling to change social infrastructure and life styles to respond to the manifest collapse of water resources despite direct links being identified between animal husbandry practices, the meat industry and water wastage and green house gas production<sup>8</sup>. This pushed the divide further with areas clearly aligning with one or other position. The cracks were first apparent in local council approaches to water resource management, land management and local community issues. Two clear choices were quick to emerge. The paternalistic professionalism of the old guard faced down the engaged consultative processes adopted by consciously relocalised community councils<sup>9</sup>.

After 2012 things just sped up. As the new set of issues and drivers became apparent HC got even more entrenched in its heavy handed ways. Nuclear power was on the agenda. Not only did they refuse Kyoto, they also withdrew from the Bagdad protocols which linked environmental and social problems to military and economic force. The protocols sought to develop local, relevant and tolerant responses to traditional violent problem-solving strategies. People everywhere were tired of the sectarian and nationalist mania that had shaped over a century of political activity. They were all opting out.

Fundamentalisms of all kinds globally responded with remarkable consistency, attempting to deny local, diverse and sustainable social processes. The link between violence, predatory capitalism, centralised economics and military force was universally denied. The exemplar here were mining companies in Australia. They had got more militant too, faced with increasingly effective dissent and disruption, and hired their own "armies" to impose their will on local areas that promised rich pickings<sup>10</sup>. HC supported such moves in the name of economic flexibility but were in fact unable to control what was happening.

Water, weather and an inflationary bubble led to the Recession of 2010-2015. People still argue about the depression/recession distinction but it changed the rules all over Australia. In many areas federal and state governments were unable to deal with local issues with the result that regions emerged based on local area concerns and reinvented sustainable, steady state (as opposed to growth driven) economics. This devolution could only occur as a result of failed policy and vision at the state and national levels.

Another interesting development that began to become a clear trend by 2020 was the emergence of "city states"; escalating the civil and political fragmentation of the past decade. The massive urban sprawl of the late 20thC had collapsed and many people had moved back to regional centres becoming "netizens" relying on telecommunications, which were one of the real stars of this time, and had increased in efficiency and sophistication under the guidance of a creative amalgam of business and local autonomous "byte" organisations.

Cities quickly responded to devolution and fragmentation by taking more control. The responses were of two types. The modernist city still survived but used heavy security forces to maintain order and had shrunk by up to 70%. Inhabitants were affiliated with HC, tourist fantasy getaways or transnational business concerns. Water was supplied by massive desalination plants and power was nuclear. There was also the green-cities coalition which had reclaimed the suburban landscape and fostered decen-

tralised communities, efficient and emergent power, waste recycling and fluid political and economic networks. The divide was pretty clear though the arrangements that supported each type were unstable and still clearly a work in progress.

The emergence of global pandemics had been much heralded in the early years of the century but had failed to eventuate, despite increased tropical conditions which had lead to the emergence of malaria as a mainland disease. This was largely the result of medical developments and bio-genetic engineering which, despite the concerns of conservation and religious groups, had struck "gold" with the emergence of a range of medical and environmental technologies which had nipped this problem in the bud.

The two Australias responded differently, thought differently and dreamt differently. Modernist Australia was fearful of the new world order and sought to hang on to what it had, while Localised Australia was hopeful but cautious. Both were "conservative", but the latter had lost its belief in progress and now placed its hope in steady-state local economics and creative community networks driven by the "netizen". The biggest challenges no doubt still lie ahead. The newest and most exciting of these is of a demographic nature. Since the disastrous cyclones of 2022 peoples from the south Pacific have come to Australia as refugees. Their numbers are being swollen by coastal people from Indonesia. By 2026 nearly 200000 people have arrived. They are currently confined to northern Western Australia, the Northern Territories and Northern Queensland but they are moving south, challenging the "Brisbane line". Are we facing a third Australia: a more hopeful and less divided place in which local-national identity is based on relationships between citizens, both old and new, and framed within the context of emergent responses to unprecedented environmental and social change?

To date two regions have responded decisively: refugees are banned from Tasmania and South Western WA, while south east Queensland with the exception of Brisbane and the Gold Coast (both Modernist sanctuaries) and Northern NSW are currently exploring ways to integrate refugees into the community. It is too early to call but one thing is certain – it's been the best of times and the worst of times and there is no end in sight.

## Correspondence

Marcus Bussey  
University of the Sunshine Coast  
Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences  
Box 879, Maleny,  
Queensland 4552, Australia  
Email: MBussey@usc.edu.au

## Notes

1. Witness the manipulation of petrol prices by oil corporations; the invasion of local communities by supermarket chains; the rush to corporatise water resources; etc...
2. Witness HC's and state government support of corporations when communities called

for their powers to be curtailed; decisions to build dams in local areas despite strident opposition from those communities; corruption of government agencies such as the Australian Wheat Board; etc...

3. Witness the total lack of imagination in developing language that can define new issues and offer insight into systemic problems; the constant focus on leadership as personality cult; the incessant factionalism of the ALP and the total lack of an alternative voice in the Liberal Party; etc...
4. Witness the inability to engage young people with issues relevant to them; the refusal to ordain women; lack of vision when facing issues of gay marriage, contraception, inter-faith tensions, etc...
5. See <<http://www.getup.org.au/>>.
6. See <<http://www.crikey.com.au/>>.
7. Socio-economic philosophy developed by Indian mystic-philosopher Pabhat Rainjan Sarkar. See <<http://www.proutcollege.org/>>.
8. See for instance <<http://www.veg.ca/issues/e-climate-change.html>> which show cases "Global Warming: The inconvenient truth about what we eat".
9. A good place to start in exploring this movement is <<http://www.globalrelocalization.org/>>.
10. Shell started this process in Nigeria in the late 1980s.