



How Covid's Shining A Light On The Societal Divide Between The Talkers And The Doers

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When one gets onto an early morning train in Melbourne, there are two things that stand out almost immediately. The first is all the high-vis clothing. The second is the lack of face masks.

I'm a knowledge worker living in the inner-city, and on my usual commute I don't see too many people in high-vis. I do see plenty of other people like me, those who comprise the "work-from-home laptop class", in the words of Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce. We've been largely confined to our living rooms during the COVID pandemic, donning tracksuit pants and dropping in and out of Zoom meetings. When I hop on the train at around 8am, I see plenty of suits but not many faces. Just wild eyes, throwing death-stares if I venture too close.

But sometimes I have reason to be on a much earlier train with the construction workers heading into the city, and when I am it's a different story. There are plenty of exposed, though tired-looking faces.

It struck me that there was a very clear divide. Blue collar workers don't wear masks on the train.



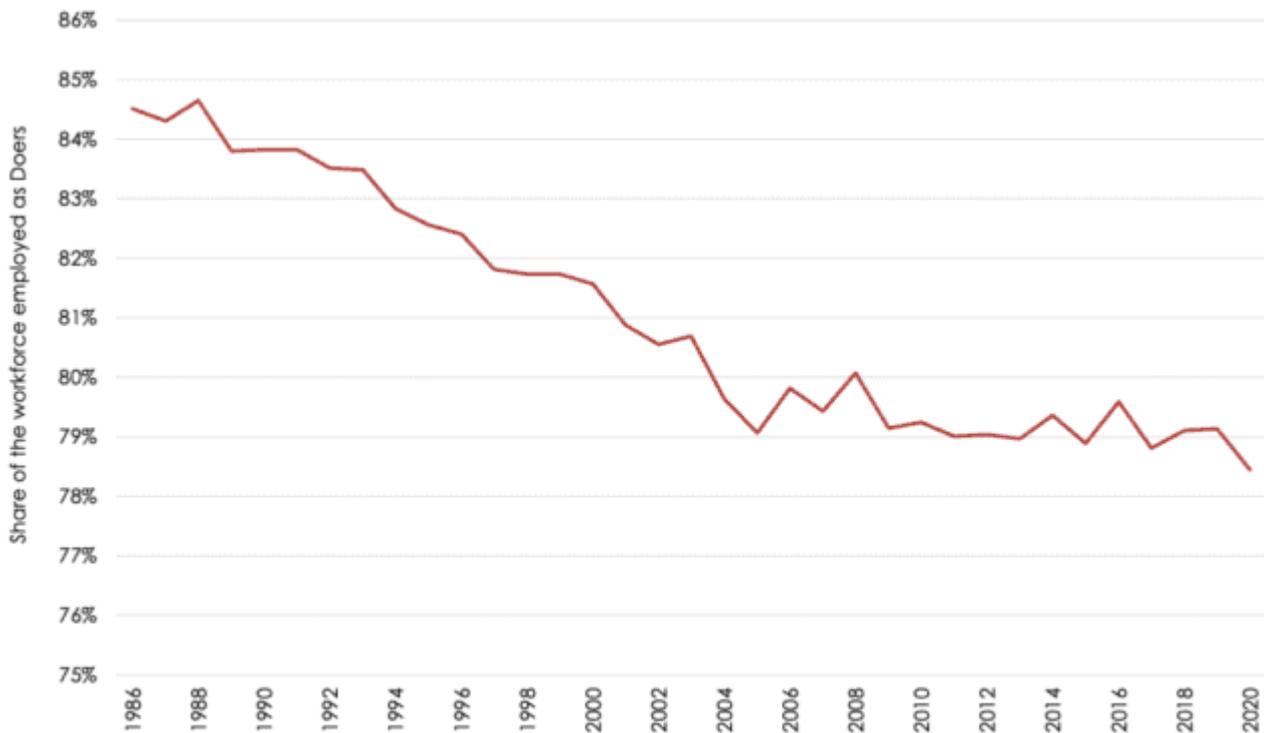
White collar workers do.

This divide makes sense, when you think about it, because blue collar workers have a deep understanding of risk. Tradespeople work at great heights, with heavy machinery and power tools, and at any moment a brick or piece of wood could fall and seriously harm them. They have an intimate connection with material reality and understand that to live means to accept and manage risk, not to avoid it entirely.

It is telling that a cluster of COVID-19 cases linked to an abattoir in Melbourne's west emerged last year when a worker was admitted to hospital after severing his thumb while at work. It's unlikely the man would have ever known he had the virus if he had not cut off his thumb and been admitted to hospital.

The vast majority of Australians work in roles where they are directly involved in producing or distributing goods and services. They are nurses, teachers, truck drivers, coal miners, carpenters, and electricians. They are 'Doers', as I classify them in a new research report for the Institute of Public Affairs, and comprise about 78% of the workforce. Many of them, just like the tradespeople and abattoir workers, face tangible risks every day.

Chart 2: The decline of the Doers



Source: IPA, ABS.

Note: 1986 is the beginning of the dataset from which the measure of Talkers and Doers is derived.

Why is it, then, that a nation of Doers, who understand that life inherently involves risk, have lived like hermits over the past 18 months? One explanation lies in the disproportionate political power held by the other 22% of the workforce, those I categorise as ‘Talkers’. As I explain in my report, *The Two Australias: The Talkers versus the Doers*, Talkers are those who are not directly involved in the production of goods and services, or those who literally talk for a living. They are the mid-level managers, the HR-types, the politicians, bureaucrats, and journalists. And yes, the economists and public policy wonks.

The idea of Talkers and Doers is not necessarily a new one. When Joe Hockey was Treasurer, he talked about ‘lifters’ and ‘leaners’ and how they influence our economy. Hockey borrowed these terms from Robert Menzies who, in his famous ‘Forgotten People’ speech, used them in the context of culture and what kind of country we are and want to be. Tony Abbott, like others, has spoken about the ‘chattering class’ and the ‘doing class’.

The aim of my report is to classify which workers exactly fit into each camp, and to explore the changes in the share of the workforce occupied by each over time and what this means for our culture and economy. I explain that there are three reasons why we should be concerned that the workforce has been shifted towards Talkers: because we need to produce tradable goods and services to generate wealth, because there are political consequences of undermining Doers, and because the rise of the Talking class has reduced our productivity since the year 2000.

The Hockey-inspired economic consequences of the rise of the Talkers are interesting, but the Menzies-inspired cultural consequences are perhaps more consequential and provide a useful framework for understanding Australia’s approach to COVID-19.

Talkers do not face many physical risks in their working lives. Or as my father, a mechanic of some 40 years, likes to say when he shakes my hand, I have ‘office hands’. To many Talkers, contracting COVID-19 posed a serious threat because they are generally safe from physical risks – there aren’t too many falling bricks in an office – but an invisible virus could get them in their cubicle.

The virus elimination strategy is the one favoured by many Talkers because they have a much lower risk tolerance than Doers. And in recent years these risk-averse Talkers have gained dominance over our culture and economy. They have organised as a class, and a very effective one at that, given the nature of their professional positions in our society; they dominate the commanding heights of our parliaments, bureaucracies, big businesses and unions, and mainstream media organisations.

In his recent book *Head Hand Heart: The Struggle for Dignity and Status in the 21st Century*, the British author David Goodhart argues that a ‘cognitive class’ has come to dominate Western societies and destabilise our politics. Goodhart notes that the “hegemony of cognitive class political interests” are responsible for this, and the same could be said of the hegemony of Talking class political interests.

It's not just that the Talking class didn't mind lockdowns because they were better able to set up a home office, and their jobs and incomes were less impacted than were those of the Doers. They actively argued in favour of lockdown measures. This was most evident with journalists in the early stages of the pandemic. On 13 March, one journalist asked the Prime Minister and Chief Health Officer, "You see things like schools closing down in lockdown, like we have seen in Italy. When is the time when that would need to be done [in Australia]?" At a press conference two weeks later, clearly not happy with the severity of restrictions, another journalist told the PM that "more comprehensive restrictions would result in a shorter disruption and fewer deaths."

The American author and motorcycle mechanic Matthew Crawford recently wrote in *Unherd* about this push from those who favoured lockdowns and the divides it has exposed in Western countries. "On the one side, small business owners who opposed lockdowns and, on the other, professionals who enjoyed greater job security, were able to work from home, and typically took a maximalist position on hygiene politics."

There are always going to be both Talkers and Doers in any workforce, and as I note in the report, there is nothing inherently good or bad about being either. But it is worth paying attention to the mix of the two. The rise of the Talking class has meant the rise of Talking class interests, and in many instances these interests are contrary to those of the vast majority of Australians who are Doers.

Doers are more willing to accept that risks are a part of life. Talkers, less so. And over the past 18 months we have seen how effectively Talkers can force everyone else to live according to their values, in this case their "maximalist position on hygiene politics". One key concern that arises from my research is that, if this was the case with the response to COVID-19, it will be the case with other issues. Australians have repeatedly voted against radical climate policies, for example, yet our Talking class edge us ever closer towards these very policies and will undoubtedly continue to do so.

The rise of the Talking class has enabled a small section of the Australian workforce to disrupt the economy, culture, and public policy settings to entrench its position and perpetuate its class interests at the expense of mainstream Australians. This raises concerns about the integrity of Australia's representative democracy and is a serious threat to the Australian way of life.

It's time to have a talk about the Talkers.

Original Link:

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