



Pandemic's Great Divide

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The west's 'Doers' aren't happy with their Covid-era treatment, and it shows in council election results

Comparing the results of the local government elections between the outer western suburbs and the inner-city tells the story of a divided state and nation.

In July of this year, almost a month into the Greater Sydney lockdown, the Mayor of Fairfield, Frank Carbone, pointed out that restrictions were having a disproportionate impact on working class people, and that the economy would fall apart if they were prevented from working.

“If you don't allow people from Fairfield, Liverpool and Bankstown to go to work then supermarkets all around Sydney will be closing down,” he said. “You need drivers you need logistics, a lot of



these people come from Western Sydney. We are the engine room.”

The results of the 4 December elections are still being finalised, but the counts show Mayor Carbone has been comfortably returned to his position with a 23 per cent swing towards him, locking in almost three-quarters of the mayoral vote. That is a political upheaval, with nearly one-in-four voters shifting from the Labor Party to a mayor who spoke out against severe and extended lockdown measures.

Interestingly, a similar proportion of voters in the federal electorates of Banks, Lindsay, and Macquarie recently polled by Redbridge indicated that they would vote for the anti-lockdown and anti-mandate United Australia Party.

Contrast this with Waverley council, which takes in wealthy coastal suburbs like Bondi and Dover Heights. Almost all the workers there could be found in their home office set up in the fifth bedroom sitting in on Zoom meetings cosied up in their uggies and pyjamas. The Mayor of Waverley, Paula Masselos, deployed menacing council rangers and Covid marshals to assist the police in ensuring compliance with draconian restrictions.

In September this year, when gatherings of five fully-vaccinated people outdoors were allowed, Mayor Masselos said that it was “absolutely frustrating” that people were taking advantage of this at Bondi Beach and that it was “disappointing” the police weren’t able to issue any fines.

The local government results, reported on the ABC website, says that the 2021 party result was “unchanged” from 2017. The residents of Waverley are happy to maintain the status quo, and there was no upheaval like in Fairfield.

Fairfield and Waverley are emblematic of the broader divide Australia has seen as a result of lockdowns. This can be understood as a divide between the Talkers, the work-from-home laptop class who are insulated from risk in their everyday lives, and the Doers, the tradies, construction workers, and nurses, for example, who live and work in the real world and need to contend with and manage risk all the time.

Australian Bureau of Statistics data demonstrates this.

In Fairfield, about 10 percent of people over 15 years old have a bachelor degree. In Waverley that’s closer to one in three.

In Fairfield almost one in every two workers are employed as technicians and trade workers, machinery operators and drivers, or labourers. In Waverley, that figure is a mere one in ten.

One explanation for Australia’s heavy-handed response to the pandemic, including the now-abandoned elimination strategy, could be the disproportionate political power held by the risk-averse Talkers.

The Talking class can be found at the commanding heights of our parliaments, bureaucracies, big



businesses, unions and media organisations.

They were the ones advocating for lockdowns right from the start, and they continued to advocate for harsh restrictions throughout 2021.

The reason for this is clear: their work life is relatively unaffected. It is the working classes, the lower skilled and lower-paid, and small business owners and the self-employed who have borne the greatest economic costs of lockdowns.

It was the single mums with three kids locked in two bedroom apartments as they tried to hold down a job and at the same time homeschool their kids who were most affected.

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Talkers are also more likely to see Covid as posing a bigger risk than it actually does because they don't understand the nature of risk.

They are generally safe from a brick falling off a wall or a car off a jack in their office, unlike tradies or mechanics.

This is a fundamental class divide that has been revealed and accelerated by the lockdowns. Some workers are embedded in material reality and understand that to live and work means to accept and balance risks. Others sit at computers and have a warped image of the world beyond their air-conditioned offices.

The results in Fairfield show that many Doers are frustrated with the way they have been disregarded during Covid; forced out of a job and crammed into relatively smaller apartments and houses with their entire family while the laptop class insisted they were "all in this together" from their Dover Heights mansions.

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