



David Moody

*NEOLIBERALISM, HARM, AND THE
COVID-19 CRISIS*

David John Masson Moody

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Thesis summary

This thesis will examine the extent to which neoliberalism left the Australian population vulnerable to harm during the COVID-19 Crisis from 2020 until 2021. In its examination, the thesis will attempt to prove that the Australian neoliberal public policy agenda was responsible for inequitable and avoidable harm to the Australian population throughout the Crisis. To make its argument, this thesis uses a mixed methods approach comprising a literature review and a comparative analysis of the COVID-19 policy responses in Australia and Vietnam.

A literature review will be conducted with three primary objectives in mind. The first is to consolidate an understanding of 'harm' as it is discussed in the literature and as it pertains to the topic. The second objective is refining an understanding of neoliberalism as it is variously defined in the literature and identifying it as it has manifested in the Australian policy agenda. Finally, the literature review will establish the political context of Vietnam as it is understood in the literature. Vietnam, a nation that espouses market socialism, represents a political context that directly opposes neoliberalism. Therefore, the Vietnamese response to COVID-19 is a pertinent case study to use in a comparative analysis, wherein the policy responses from two different political contexts can be measured according to their efficacy in mitigating the vulnerability to harm of their respective populations.

A comparative analysis is used to discern the causal relationship between the philosophy that governs a policy agenda and socio-economic welfare in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. The quantitative analysis compares and contrasts economic indicators from secondary sources within the literature and publicly accessible government and non-government (NGO) online databases. In particular, this analysis will cross-examine household income and income inequality statistics from before and after the instigation of the COVID-19 crisis in both Australia and Vietnam. This thesis hypothesises that a decrease in household income differential from one year to the next represents a governmental failure to mitigate vulnerability to harm in its constituency. Therefore, by ascertaining and comparing household income figures from Australia and Vietnam from before and after the COVID-19 Crisis, this thesis intends to determine the efficacy of the welfare policies in each context in alleviating the negative ramifications of the COVID-19 crisis. Income inequality data will be used to supplement the aforementioned hypothesis. This thesis argues that a negative correlation between GDP and household income and income inequality indicates an inequitable relief from the harm of a recession. Therefore, income inequality data helps determine an understanding of the efficacy of the welfare policies in the target contexts that is representative and not disproportionately affected by outliers in household income statistics.

I, David John Masson Moody, certify that this thesis: 1. does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university 2. and the research within will not be submitted for any other future degree or diploma without the permission of Flinders University; and 3. to the best of my knowledge and belief, does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

1. Introduction:

How were you impacted by COVID-19? In Australia, the COVID-19 Crisis forced the population into isolation, the economy into recession, and bewildered an unprepared government that floundered in its attempts to douse spot fires across different sectors in the country. Was such a fallout inevitable, or could it have been avoided? And if so, exactly what are the variables upon which the welfare of a nation hinge in the face of a crisis like the COVID-19 Crisis? This thesis will endeavour to demonstrate that the neoliberal policy agenda, preeminent in Australian politics since the turn of the century, was paramount to the vulnerability to harm experienced by Australians throughout the COVID-19 Crisis.

2. Methodology:

This section will elaborate upon the methodology used to answer the research question. This thesis will use a mixed methods approach to examine the extent to which a neoliberal policy agenda left the Australian population vulnerable to harm during the COVID-19 crisis. The mixed methods approach utilises both qualitative and quantitative research methods to support the theories and hypotheses produced by the research. In section 2.1, this thesis will elaborate upon the importance of the first method used in the research, a literature review. Section 2.2 will justify and explain the utility of the second method used in the research, a quantitative comparative analysis.

2.1. A literature review:

In chapter 3, this thesis will conduct a literature review. The purpose of the literature review is to achieve three key objectives. The first is to consolidate an understanding of ‘harm’ as it is discussed in the literature and as it pertains to the topic. A definition of this theoretical concept is essential to the analysis conducted in this thesis because, as an abstract concept that is utilised differently across various fields of study, it must be contextualised before it can be measured.

The second objective is refining an understanding of neoliberalism as it is variously defined in the literature and identifying it as it has manifested in the Australian policy agenda. Though neoliberalism has certain identifiable features, there is no hard and fast understanding of a ‘correct’ application of neoliberalism in public policy; instead, States apply features of neoliberalism as they deem appropriate and to varying degrees. Therefore, to avoid making arguments about a generalised conception of neoliberalism that may not be valid in the Australian context, it is crucial to characterise Australian neoliberalism before it can be meaningfully analysed.

Finally, the literature review will establish the political context of Vietnam as it is understood in the literature. Vietnam, a nation that espouses state-oriented market socialism, represents a political context that directly opposes neoliberalism. Therefore, the Vietnamese response to COVID-19 is a pertinent case study to use in a comparative analysis, wherein the policy responses from two different political contexts can be measured according to their efficacy in mitigating the vulnerability to harm of their respective populations. This final section of the literature will demonstrate the suitability of Vietnam as a point of comparison for use in the comparative analysis that follows.

2.2 A comparative analysis:

In chapter 4 of this thesis, the aforementioned comparative analysis is conducted. According to Hopkin (2010), ‘the principal function of comparison in political science is that of developing, testing and refining theories about causal relationships.’ In this research project, a comparative analysis is used to discern the causal relationship between the philosophy that governs a policy agenda and socio-economic welfare in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. The quantitative analysis compares and contrasts economic indicators obtained from secondary sources within the literature and from publicly accessible government and non-government (NGO) online databases. In particular, this analysis will cross-examine household income and income inequality statistics from before and after the onset of the COVID-19 crisis in Australia and Vietnam. The data from prior to the COVID-19 Crisis depicts household income and income inequality trends in both contexts from the 1990s (a decade in which Australia and Vietnam implemented comprehensive policy reform) until the Crisis (2019). To demonstrate corresponding income and income inequality trends from each context during and after the COVID-19 Crisis, data is presented from 2020 until 2021.

This thesis uses household income figures as the fulcrum for its comparative analysis for the following reason. This thesis hypothesises that a decrease in household income differential before the COVID-19 Crisis and the period during and afterwards represents a failure by the government to mitigate the vulnerability to harm in its constituency. Therefore, by ascertaining and comparing these figures from both contexts, this thesis intends to determine the efficacy of the welfare policies in Australia and Vietnam in alleviating the negative ramifications of the COVID-19 crisis. The findings from this analysis will be utilised to critique neoliberalism in the Australian policy agenda.

Income inequality data will be used to supplement the aforementioned hypothesis. Though it has been increasingly critiqued as a poor indicator of prosperity, gross domestic product (GDP) nonetheless remains a commonly used indicator to demonstrate an economy’s performance and, by extension, its resurgence from a downturn (Philipsen, D., 2015). However, this thesis argues that if GDP and household income per capita increase while income inequality increases, this proposition is only partially true. A negative correlation between GDP and household income per capita and income inequality indicates an inequitable relief from the harm of a recession. Therefore, income inequality data helps determine an understanding of the efficacy of the welfare policies in the target contexts that is representative and not disproportionately affected by outliers in household income statistics.

3. Literature review:

Before conducting any analysis on the manifestation of neoliberalism in Australian public policy and its implications for the Australian population during the COVID-19 crisis, it is essential firstly to establish and clarify certain critical theoretical linchpins upon which this thesis' argument will be made. This literature review will sectionally discuss each of these linchpins.

The first section will investigate the conceptualisations of 'harm' discussed in the literature and clarify the most appropriate understanding of 'harm' to the question answered in this thesis. Understanding 'harm' is essential because it will frame the entire topic; by understanding 'harm', it becomes evident that protecting its constituency from harm is a governmental responsibility. This premise is imperative to the comparative analysis conducted in the following chapters because it contextualises the data analysed, providing a theoretical criterion against which they can be measured.

Section 2 will explore conceptualisations of neoliberalism as they appear in the literature and seek to distil an understanding of neoliberalism as it has incarnated in the Australian policy agenda. *Neoliberalism* is an umbrella term used to describe various policy strategies that reflect a modern variation of classical Laissez-Faire capitalism. The literature on neoliberal thought is notorious for its sheer volume yet apparent lack of critical analysis. The academic community has broadly adopted *neoliberalism* to describe policy strategies underpinned by what Cahill (2013) describes as the 'belief that markets, when freed from state 'interference', offer the most efficient and most moral way of providing most goods and services.' However, it is generally accepted that neoliberalism 'cannot be defined only by a simple and consistent set of ideas, policies and/or economic outcomes across different spatial and temporal instances' (Humphrys, 2018). Therefore, this thesis will comb the literature to establish the style characteristic of Australian neoliberalism to ensure specificity in its critique and avoid detracting from its argument by critiquing facets of neoliberalism that might not be apparent in the Australian context. Moreover, this section will highlight the existing absence of any research that utilises the Australian policy response to the COVID-19 pandemic as a case study that demonstrates the dilemmas inherent to neoliberal governance in the State. In doing so, this thesis will illuminate a 'gap in the literature' and determine the necessity of this research.

In order to rigorously critique Australian neoliberalism using the backdrop of the COVID-19 crisis as a case study, this thesis will conduct a comparative analysis of the Australian policy response to the Crisis with the policy response of Vietnam. Before doing so, however, it is important to establish the validity of Vietnam as a point of comparison in this analysis. Therefore, with this objective in mind,

section three of this literature review will delve into the literature regarding the Vietnamese political context. Alongside a discussion of the political philosophy which underpins the Vietnamese policy agenda, section 3 will discuss the ramifications of the COVID-19 crisis in Vietnam and the subsequent policy response.

3.1 The evolution of ‘harm’

The concept of ‘harm’ entered political discourse formally in John Stuart Mill’s 1859 essay, ‘On Liberty’. In ‘On Liberty’, Mill discusses the ‘nature and limits of the power that can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual’ (Mill, J. S., 2001). Throughout the essay, Mill advocates for the freedom of the individual to express their individuality, distilling this theme later in his ‘Autobiography’ (n.d.) as ‘the importance, to man and society, of a large variety in types of character, and of giving full freedom to human nature to expand itself in innumerable and conflicting directions’. Mill (2001) implies that society, in practice, increasingly compels individuals to conform to norms established by three primary forms of tyranny: the tyranny of a ruling political class, the tyranny of the majority, or the tyranny of ‘prevailing opinion and feeling’. For Mill (2001), this reality leaves society at a loss because ‘[m]ankind are greater gainers by suffering each other to live as seems good to themselves, than by compelling each to live as seems good to the rest’ (Mill, 2001 p.22,23). This proposition, the idea that, firstly, society does not accommodate the individual's liberty, and secondly, that the individual's liberty is sacrosanct to a healthy society, has become an indelible tenet in modern liberal democracy.

To cultivate the kind of liberal society that Mill (2001) advocates, the author proposes three fundamental categories of liberty which must be protected against tyranny. The first is ‘liberty of consciousness’, the liberty to have one’s own thoughts and opinions and to freely express those thoughts and opinions (Mill, 2001 p21,22). Secondly, Mill (2001) suggests that one ought to have the freedom of ‘framing the plan of [one’s] life to suit [one’s] own character’ (Mill, 2001 p.23). Finally, presupposing these liberties and, therefore, the freedom of individuality, Mill (2001) advocates the freedom of all individuals, not forced or deceived, to unite (Mill, 2001 p.23).

Of prime importance to Mill (2001) is how to ensure the protection of liberty from tyranny and the lengths to which the protecting body should be allowed to interfere in civil affairs to ensure this protection. At its simplest, a tyrannical political class is kept in check by observing the political liberties righted to individuals and obeying constitutional law. However, the tyranny of the majority and the tyranny of public opinion is more complicated to protect against and requires government interference in civil affairs. Mill (2001) proposes that such interference ‘is as indispensable to a good

condition of human affairs, as protection against political despotism' (Mill, 2001 p.12). In his essay, Mill (2001) seeks to uncover 'where to place the limit – how to make the fitting adjustment between individual liberty and social control' (Mill, 2001 p.12). The answer, and the object of 'On Liberty', according to Mill (2001), is

'that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively in interfering with the liberty of action against any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others' (Mill, 2001 p.18).

Though a foundational basis of protecting individual liberty, Mill's harm principle is not without its complications. For example, Turner (2014, p.300.) highlights the vagueness of Mill's use of the term 'harm'; while the principle may be ethically admirable, it is challenging to practically implement without a thorough understanding of 'where to draw the line on harm'. Turner (2014, p.300.) argues that in what he terms an 'expansive sense' (including the negative externalities of an action), most actions cause at least some degree of harm to others and notes that, therefore, the literature has attempted to define, or at least restrict what Mill's intended by 'harm'. Indeed, the literature is scattered with attempts to refine Mill's theory in this way, including, for example, the utilitarian defence of Mill's 'On Liberty' by Gray (1996, p.58.), who suggested that "'harm to others' is best construed as 'injury to the vital interests of others', where these comprise the interests in autonomy and in security'". Brink (2001, pp. 121, 122.) offers another definition, asserting that "in order to satisfy the harm principle, an action must actually violate or threaten the imminent violation of those important interests of others in which they have a right". Whether more or less restrictive, Turner (2014, p.300.) notes that it is agreed in the literature "that not just any negative consequence for others constitutes "harm to others" and thereby triggers societies right to consider interference".

Turner (2014, p.320.), however, challenges this consensus view, supposing "that the reason Mill does not provide a specification of "harm" is that it should be understood in an expansive way, as a general term for bad consequence". The author proposes that this expansive view of the harm principle evidences that the sole purpose of the harm principle is "to remove paternalistic reasons from societies deliberations" (Turner, 2014 p.321). Turner (2014, p.321.) argues that the preclusion of paternalistic motivations from instances of social interference would "significantly change the way we think about the limits of social interference and would foster much greater social tolerance and diversity." For Turner (2014, p.321.), such a change would precipitate two essential considerations of 'harm'. Firstly, the author suggests that an expansive perception of the harm principle will render instances of "mere offense at one's "experiment of living" as weak considerations for social interference when compared to "more weighty paternalistic considerations in the interference calculation" (Turner, 2014 p.321).

This idea synergises with the thoughts of Mill (2001, p22.), who advocated for, where possible, the personal guardianship of one's own liberty, proposing that "each is the proper guardian of his own health, whether bodily or mental or spiritual." The second point in Turner (2014, p.321.) addresses those "more weighty paternalistic considerations", idealising a society in which "important social considerations are to be recommended in all their strength to a well organised and public-spirited social authority in those matters in which it has rightful control." This second point is underpinned by modern liberal democratic principles and, concerning Mill (2001), the third category of liberty, the freedom to unite. In Australia, for example, this point manifests as the accessibility of citizens to access public services that ameliorate possible instances of harm that they are otherwise unable to ameliorate themselves, such as Australia's universal public healthcare system, Medicare. However, while these points may provide a "two-stage defence of liberty" which may protect the majority, it neglects populations who are both unable to protect their own liberty and unable to access the social authorities charged with servicing these populations (Turner, 2014, p302).

Fineman (2010) proposes that this neglect stems from the consistent use of an inadequate subject as a point of reference for harm. Fineman (2010, p.262) attributes this subjection to the Western liberal tradition in which

"we have built our notions of what constitutes equality, as well as the appropriate relationship between state, institutional, and individual responsibility, around the construct of a political subject who is fully capable and functioning and therefore able to act with autonomy."

In this classical liberal subject, "competence is assumed and differences in power, circumstances, or actual ability are ignored" (Fineman, 2010, p.263).

The implication in Fineman (2010), then, is that texts that utilise this subject neglect the particularities that characterise the human experience. The fundamental issue of such neglect is the resultant creation of institutions that are designed to "facilitate the liberal, able-bodied subject who is of sound mind" that must respond to the harm experienced by demographics who do not reflect the character of the liberal subject reactively (Gallen and Mhuirthile, 2021). The services provided to vulnerable demographics by these institutions are, therefore, often piecemeal, focused on alleviating the effects of one source of harm at a time rather than "interrogate the institutional practices that produce the structures, concepts and institutions that further inclusion or exclusion" in the first place (Fineman, 2010).

Instead of using 'harm' as a reference point governments can use to determine the necessity of intervention, Fineman (2010) proposes vulnerability theory as an alternative framework to strive for

substantive equality by challenging the “existing allocation of resources and power”. Vulnerability theory seeks to answer the following question: “if our bodily fragility, material needs, and the possibility of messy dependency they signify cannot be ignored in life, how can they be absent in our theories about equality, society, politics, and law?” (Fineman, 2010, p.263). Fineman (2010, p.266-269) constructs vulnerability theory upon four premises. Firstly, vulnerability is universal. The term ‘vulnerability’ is used in vulnerability theory not to categorise or stigmatise a disadvantaged population but rather to address the inevitability of harm to the human condition. Secondly, vulnerability is constant. Though humans “can attempt to lessen risk or act to mitigate possible manifestations of [their] vulnerability, the possibility of harm cannot be eliminated” (Fineman, 2010, p.267). Thirdly, vulnerability is complex. While it can be internal or corporeal in nature, vulnerability can also manifest externally. External harms include those that “are not located in the body itself, but in the interruption or destruction of institutional or social relationships” (Fineman, 2010, p.268). Finally, vulnerability is particular. Vulnerability theory acknowledges that although vulnerability is a universal reality for humans, how it is experienced varies depending on an individual’s corporeal, social, and economic conditions, as well as their institutional relationships (Fineman, 2010, p.268, 269).

Vulnerability theory represents a contemporary evolution of the harm principle. Unlike its antecedent, which is limited to addressing instances of harm as they occur, vulnerability theory attempts to address the inevitability of harm, which, in the modern world, can be produced by increasingly complicated sources. Vulnerability theory explores the externalities of an individual’s familial, economic, and institutional relationships, understanding that these relationships, as well as potential sources of harm in and of themselves, can also gradually reduce an individual’s capacity to afford for themselves a guard against vulnerability. Vulnerability theory, therefore, provides a theoretical framework through which one can reconsider the responsibility of harm prevention with greater nuance and critique the accountability and efficacy of those governmental institutions currently responsible for harm prevention. As discussed in the following chapters, the COVID-19 Crisis acted as a catalyst which revealed internal and external vulnerabilities in the Australian population. Therefore, Vulnerability theory is an ideal theoretical framework to critique the Australian government’s policy response to the Crisis and will be leant on throughout the analysis conducted in this thesis.

3.2 Australian neoliberalism

3.2.1 A brief history of neoliberalism

Though neoliberalism has risen to prominence in much of the developed world, the foundational ideas of the ideology are not new. Neoliberalism is underpinned by the concept of Laissez-Faire capitalism proposed and expounded upon by Adam Smith throughout his corpus, but most notably, *Wealth of Nations* (1776). Smith (1776, p326) suggests that people will only ever engage in economic affairs for their own interest, noting the “uniform, constant, and uninterrupted effort of every man to better his condition.” However, he goes on to suggest that this is not necessarily a bad thing because by ‘pursuing [one’s] own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it’ (Smith, 1776, p114). Smith (1776, p117), therefore, suggests that governments ought to withdraw as much of their intervention in common markets as possible, enabling an ‘invisible hand’ to compel people to contribute to the greater good of the community.

A digression is necessary here. It should be noted, as it is often neglected, that while Smith (1776) laid the foundation for what would become Laissez-Faire capitalism, he also theorised the inherent risks of such a system that must be guarded against. Smith (1776, 470) was aware of the inequitable nature of his society and the harm that the “exclusive privileges” of a few have the potential to impress upon the liberty of many.

For Smith (1776), labour is society's fundamental unit of value. He proposes that “What is bought with money or with goods is purchased by labour as much as much as what we acquire by the toil of our own body (Smith, 1776, p.122).” Smith’s labour-focused perception of value demonstrates that he believed in the importance of the protection and empowerment of labour. This care for labour stems not only from the observation of the personal, micro level, wherein Smith (1776) wanted for every person to have the power to “enjoy the necessaries, conveniences, and amusements of human life” (Smith, 1776, p.122), but also for the efficiency of the economy at the macro level. Smith (1776) believed that productivity was directly influenced by the motivation of the labour force, something which could only be inspired by the aforementioned power derived from the returns received from one’s labour. Using slavery as an example, Smith (1776, pp.387,388) noted that a

“a person who can acquire no property can have no other interest but to eat as much and to labor as little as possible. Whatever work he does beyond what is sufficient to purchase his own maintenance, can be squeezed out of him by violence only, and not by any interest of his own.”

Smith (1776), therefore, cautioned against the advent of mercantilism, market economics, private property, and the employer/employee relationship (referred to variously throughout the text as the, for example, landowner/labourer or master/workmen relationship). These relationships depend upon wages which depend “every where on the contract usually made between those two parties [employer

and employee], whose interests are by no means the same. The workmen desire to get as much, the masters to give as little as possible (Smith, 1776, p.158).” For Smith (1776), if not managed equitably, this relationship risks dampening an employee’s motivation and, therefore, their productivity. The conflation of value and wealth with monies at the expense of labour is a danger inherent to the precursors of neoliberalism, foreshadowed in Smith (1776).

Smith (1776) recognised the threat that single entities, which have benefited from inequitable gains from the market through the exploitation of relationships such as the employer/employee relationship, may have on the economy at the macro level and the function of the ‘invisible hand’. Johnson (2021) notes, “Smith recognized that capitalism would inevitably lead to price controlling monopolies.” As noted in the Antitrust Law and Economics Review (1996, p27), hereby the ALER, “Smith loathed monopoly, particularly its inefficiency... and its impoverishment of nations”. Smith (1776) observes the major impairments of monopoly on society as the raising of prices and the suppression of wages in pursuit of greater profits. For Smith (1776, p95), great profits of a monopoly do not reflect a healthy society, but instead, reflect the opposite: “the oppression of the poor must establish the monopoly of the rich, who, by engrossing the whole trade to themselves, will be able to make very large profits.” In defence against monopoly, therefore, does Smith (1776) make an exception for government intervention in economic affairs. Smith (1776, p116) proposes that it “is to prevent this reduction in price, and consequently of wages and profit, by restraining that free competition which would most certainly occasion it, that all corporations, and the greater part of all corporation laws, have been established.”

To summarise this digression then, while Smith (1776) may have cultivated the proliferation of Laissez-Faire capitalism, it is tragic that its modern iterations, including notably neoliberalism, largely disregard the cautions in Smith (1776), and encourage instead, the pursuit of personal profit ahead of the prosperity of a community. It is interesting, and of particular importance to this thesis, to note that in Smith (1776), there was room, both morally and economically, for what would become the harm principle and the government’s mandate to minimise the vulnerability of its constituency to harm – room for a mandate which, somewhere in the future, was squashed.

Though preeminent after Smith (1776), Laissez-Faire capitalism was not without its detractors. Later political theorists viewed Smith’s work as founded upon erroneous assumptions and that, contrary to his beliefs, pursuing a common good is intrinsic to humanity. One such detractor is John Rae, who, in his *New Principles of Political Economy* (1834, p12), argued that

“as individuals seem generally to grow rich by grasping a larger and larger portion of the wealth already in existence, nations do so by the production of wealth that did not previously exist. The two processes differ in this, that the one is an acquisition, the other a creation.”

To Rae, facilitating ‘invention’ is a fundamental role of the government as ‘invention’ is ‘the only power on earth that can be said to create’, and thus, is the most efficient way to increase national wealth (Rae, 1834). Rae, therefore, was an early champion of protectionism, the idea that governments must adopt a policy that safeguards domestic industry from international competition.

Resistance to the ideas of Smith was also evident in the works of Friedrich List in his *National System of Political Economy* (1856) and Daniel Raymond in his *The Elements of Political Economy* (1836), whom both agreed with Rae, suggesting that Smith failed to distinguish between national and personal wealth;

“it seems to be an admitted dogma with Dr. Smith that national and individual interests are never opposed, but a more unsound doctrine in principle, or a more abominable one in its consequences, cannot well be imagined. Such a doctrine, if adopted in practice, would destroy all government, and tear up the very foundations of society” (Raymond, 1836, p355).

Nevertheless, the bones of *Wealth of Nations* (1776) – the idea that human engagement with the market is the most fundamental means of producing public wealth and must therefore be facilitated as seamlessly as possible – continued to dominate the political-economic system throughout the twentieth century. Perhaps the most striking manifestation of Smith’s thought emerged, despite a steady effort to increase the role of government as a custodian of public welfare, especially in the wake of World War I, World War II, and the Post War Consensus, in the late 1970s and 1980s, championed by British prime minister, Margaret Thatcher.

Throughout the 1970s in Britain, revivals of Smith’s ideas were endorsed by members of the country’s conservative Tory party, encouraging a shift of the party’s policy further to the right (Ledger, 2017). However, the culmination of the OPEC oil shock of 1973-4, the IMF crisis of 1976, and the ‘Winter of Discontent’ marked the tangible evolution from the Laissez-Faire conversation to a political reality with the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979. According to Ledger (2017), the key themes of ‘Thatcherism’ comprised ‘privatisation, a showdown with the trade unions, [and the] Big Bang in the City of London[1]’. These core neoliberal tenets are particularly redolent of the concepts explicated by Milton Friedman in his work, *Neo-Liberalism and its Prospects* (1951).

In this article, Friedman (1951) outlines the defining features of neoliberalism that distinguish it from its precursors. For Friedman (1951, p3)

“Neo-liberalism would accept the nineteenth century liberal emphasis on the fundamental importance of the individual, but it would substitute for the nineteenth century goal of laissez-faire as a means to this end, the goal of the competitive order.”

Competition, then, is the fulcrum upon which the success and failure of an economy hinges and is essential to cultivate. Friedman (1951, p4), though acknowledging that the government has an important role to play in the functioning of society, suggests that in order to maintain and encourage competition in the market, the powers of government must be “limited in scope... designed to permit government by law rather than by administrative order.” As Chernomas and Hudson (2017, p56) put it, is that the “theme behind all of Friedman’s work... is that an economy based on the market will float along happily on the waves of progress, while one hampered by the lead weight of the government will sink like a stone.” The palpable sense of irony that is felt in this comment derives from the argument that in Friedman’s work, there is a “failure to understand power relationships in society” (Chernomas and Hudson, 2017, p15). This is pertinent to this thesis as this failure represents the departure from government protection against individual vulnerability that was mentioned in the discussion on Smith (1776). A responsibility that according to Friedman (1951, p4) is limited to “the function of relieving misery and distress... [provided], however, that the performance of this function involve the minimum interference with the market.”

The ideas of Friedman and other early pioneers of neoliberal thought, including Alexander Rustow and Friedrich Hayek, centred around, as Dean (2016) puts it, ‘a broadly constructivist rather than naturalist approach to the market, that... would define a positive role for the state in the construction of the conditions necessary for the free operation of the market’. Dean was not the first to identify authoritarian themes in the neoliberal philosophy, referring to the critique of neoliberalism by Carl Friedrich, entitled *The Political Thought of Neoliberalism* (1955), which refers to the neoliberal proposition to differentiate the political and the economic through the adoption of Benjamin Constant’s phrase ‘The government beyond its proper sphere ought not to have any power; within its sphere, it cannot have enough of it’ (Friedrich, 1955, p513).

Dean (2016) draws the link between neoliberalism and a cycle of disaster, alluding to the necessity of the economic crises in the 1970s to catalyse the introduction of neoliberal public policy and the eventual Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2008 that was instigated by more “than 30 years of deregulation and reliance on self-regulation by financial institutions ... [that] had stripped away key safeguards” (FCIC, 2011: xviii). Dean (2016) notes, however, that unlike the former crises, which

stimulated a change intended to prevent similar crises from recurring, the GFC prompted a paradoxical response in which we see the “coexistence of the public discredit of neoliberal policy with a ‘rebooting’ of the same system.” Furthermore, rather than attempting to manage the shortcomings of neoliberal public policy, the contemporary political system “simply accepts the evolution of complex systems and the inevitability of catastrophe” (Dean, 2016). As of the international outbreak of COVID-19, the neoliberal order had been well established and its influence over public policy the world over bordered on immutable.

3.2.2 Neoliberalism in the Australian context

It is unsurprising that Australia, a fledgling liberal democracy, followed in the footsteps of its preeminent siblings in the USA and UK and began to embrace neoliberal thought. However, also unsurprisingly, just as Australia's political and economic context is different from the USA and the UK, so too has been the style of neoliberalism that has taken root in the State. Garnering an understanding of the unique style of Australian neoliberalism is vital to an analysis of the Australian policy response to the COVID-19 Crisis because it will aid in the identification of policy that is influenced by neoliberal thought, which can then be critiqued through comparative analysis with a similar policy implemented in a context which espouses different philosophical underpinnings.

Michael Pusey established himself as the preeminent writer on the influence of neoliberalism in Australia when he published ‘Economic Rationalism in Canberra: A Nation-Building State Changes Its Mind’ (1991). In this book, Pusey discusses Australia’s “displacement of its traditional, interventionist - some would say, social democratic - state by an aggressive market-worshipping economic rationalism which promotes a laissez-faire, minimalist state” (Pusey, 1991, pp. 106-107). To determine his thesis, Pusey (1991) conducted interviews with 215 Senior Executive Service officials, concentrating on the interviewees’ social backgrounds, values and attitudes, and qualifications. Of particular concern to Pusey (1991) was the developing hegemony of privately educated economists in the central agencies. Pusey (1991, pp. 60-80) found that 72% of the sample in agencies of finance, treasury, and prime minister and cabinet, held degrees in economics and business administration, belying the increasing majority opinion across agencies that state intervention in economic affairs must be minimised. Pusey (1991) argues that his findings evidence a growing intellectual dominance of central agencies over public service departments. In his review of Pusey (1991), Self (1993, p.196) neatly summarises the ramifications of the evolving Australian political apparatus:

“[t]his reduction in public goals has produced a bureaucracy driven by a sophisticated but narrow concept of efficient resource management, an indifference or hostility to internal (or external) specialist advice which goes beyond these parameters, and a fervid but often fuddled borrowing of business practices and theories.”

In Pusey (1991) neoliberal transformation of the Australian political apparatus is characterised, and the implications of this transformation on the government mandate are described. However, Pusey (1991) does not attempt to uncover the root causes of this transformation. Bainbridge (1997), on the other hand, investigates the causality of the neoliberal transformation of the Australian bureaucracy described by Pusey (1991) and offers his own conclusions on the ramifications of this process. Bainbridge (1997, p22) proposes that neoliberalism found its footing in Australian politics in the 1980s as “the end of the post-war boom and the transition into a prolonged crisis of employment inflation had led to a crisis of confidence in Keynesian economics.” Supported by economic think tanks, neoliberal contingents within the Liberal Party, taking the Thatcherite epithet of ‘dries’, became the majority, precipitating an ideological evolution within the party, shifting its traditionally conservative consciousness towards economic rationalism. The policy approach of the Labor party, which held office for the majority of the 1980s after the defeat of Malcolm Fraser in 1983, was pressured less by ideological debate but by internal and external pressures, both nationally and internationally, that made responding to the crisis using a Keynesian approach impossible.

The response to the crisis, then, was characterised by what Bainbridge (1997, p.22) called “scorched earth economic policy”; revolving “around slashing government spending, cutting and targeting welfare, ‘opening’ markets to competition, deregulating industries, privatising and introducing competition to State enterprises, lowering wages and raising profits, and micro-economic reform.” According to Bainbridge (1997, p.23), deregulation became the primary tool for crisis management, precipitating enormous injections of credit that the existing economic system could not accommodate for leading the economy, and the finance sector in particular, into recession. Motivated by the idea that “the ‘real’ economy was not deregulated enough to absorb the extra credit”, the dominant solution, however, was to redouble deregulation - exemplifying the acceptance of inevitable catastrophe inherent to neoliberalism referred to in Dean (2016).

In ‘Economic rationalism in Canberra 25 years on?’ (Pusey, 2018), Pusey returns to his critique of neoliberalism in the Australian political system, ‘Economic Rationalism in Canberra’ (Pusey, 1991), and updates his arguments in light of 25 more years of empirical evidence. In doing so, the author provides the literature with an evolutionary history of uniquely Australian neoliberalism. Pusey (2018), like Bainbridge (1997), recognises ‘New Right’ think tanks as drivers of neoliberal progress in Australia. However, he also attributes the proliferation of the neoliberal agenda to more

complicated sources. Cahill (2013), too, contests the widely held opinion that neoliberal think tanks were the primary force proselytising neoliberalism in Australian politics. Cahill (2013, p.81) proposes that, while these think tanks inevitably had some influence over the transformation of Australian public policy, the argument that they were the sole instigators of this structural shift “not only plays down other plausible explanations, but also fails to appreciate the more complex role of neoliberal ideas in such changes.” To Cahill (2013, p.81), the “influence of neoliberal ideas should be understood as contingent upon contextual circumstances in which they were deployed.” One such circumstance for Pusey (2018) was international pressure from organisations such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organisation (WTO), and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Pusey (2018, p.54) argues that the multi-directional pressure forced upon the Australian political apparatus corrupted its identity as a ‘nation-building state’ that believed that “the purpose of policy was to improve the quality of life of a nation-society.” What followed was a ‘structural adjustment’ that transformed the Australian political bureaucracy from a “*moral institution*... staffed by people who were, by and large, pragmatic utilitarians and committed centrists” to a system “set by a new generation of economists operating within largely self-referential and ideological economic doctrines that treated the state, regulation and taxation as a brake on economic activity” (Pusey, 2018, p.54). For Pusey (2018, p.54), the Australian political apparatus had been hijacked by a class of econocrats that believed as a truism, that “economies, markets and money can always, at least in principle, deliver better outcomes than states, bureaucracies and the law” and in which the “purpose of economic management [had] been reduced to little more than the protection and accumulation of capital.”

Humphrys (2018) postulates that the Prices and Incomes Accord (1983-97), signed by the Australian Labor Party (ALP) and the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), was a critical juncture in the Australian government’s adoption of a neoliberal policy agenda which exemplified a different aspect of the moral transformation of the Australian political apparatus discussed in Pusey (2018). The Accord presented the social and economic policy of the Hawk-Keating ALP governments. It was characterised by an agreement with trade unions that exchanged the restraint of wage demands to mirror inflation as well as the cessation of industrial action in return for ‘moderation on prices and non-wage incomes, an expansion of the social wage, and the implementation of progressive tax reform’ (Humphrys, 2018). Humphrys (2018) notes that the suite of government promises quickly became abstracted by wage controls. Where Pusey (2018) analysed the shift in personnel that comprised the ‘structural adjustment’ of the political system, Humphrys (2018) analysed the signing of the Accord as ‘a distinct spatial example of neoliberalism emerging alongside – and through – corporatism.’ Corporatism and neoliberalism, which are commonly considered ‘mutually exogenous’ forms of economic management, are, to Humphrys (2018), ‘part of an overall political-economic program.’

For Humphrys (2018), this political-economic program is redolent of Antonio Gramsci's critique of the liberal notion of 'the separation of powers', wherein he proposes the idea of the 'integral state'.

Humphrys (2018) explains Gramsci's 'integral state' critique as

‘an understanding of how the state (political society and the state apparatus) comes to lead or direct civil society (atomised social interests and the relations between them) politically – and how, in particular, it responds to social and political dissent to projects focused on ensuring stable capital accumulation.’

Humphrys (2018) draws the parallel between the simultaneous deepening of neoliberalism and corporatism in the Australian political apparatus and Gramsci's concept of the 'integral state' to understand how, through the Accord, pre-existing corporatist arrangements in Australia enabled the 'enwrapment of the labour movement through a social contract [and] allowed the construction of a new hegemonic project in the form of neoliberalism.'

In Humphrys (2018), the driving forces of neoliberal progress identified by Pusey (1991, 2018) and Cahill (2013) are conceptualised as a 'capitalist class'. The cultivation of neoliberalism in Australia, then, ensures a disproportionate allotment of power to the capitalist class and is representative of what Gramsci would call a 'process of capitalist class domination and hegemony' - a condition which, despite continued criticism, remains, however paradoxically, in control (Humphrys, 2018).

3.2.2.1 A note on the Australian states

At the time of writing this thesis, the literature does not include a study of the different manifestations of neoliberal policy across the different states of Australia. It is, however, essential to recognise that within their respective jurisdictions, each state reserves the right to implement a policy agenda that appropriately accords to their unique contexts. Therefore, neoliberalism, in much the same way that it presents differently between the USA, the UK, and Australia, presents differently across states. To make this point, this brief section will use existing literature to demonstrate the differing democratic values of each state before noting the neoliberal trends that nonetheless reverberate across jurisdictions.

Observing the assertion by Tranter and Smith (2021, pp. 622-623) that "party identification is not only the strongest indicator of voting behaviour, but also predicts how people align on a range of social and political issues", this thesis will draw attention to party preferences across Australian states. As there

are few examples of studies that examine the trends in party preferences in state elections, this thesis will highlight federal election voting patterns in each state constituency, acknowledging that Australian “voters tend to vote the same way, whether nationally or sub-nationally” (Bolwell and Eccleston, 2018 p.271). In their study of the 2019 Australian Federal Election, Cameron and McAllister (2019, p.21) noted, for example, the ‘traditional’ voting preferences of Western Australia (WA) and Queensland, which typically favour the Liberal Party. In the 2019 Federal election, the votes for the Liberal Party comprised a 44% majority of overall votes in both WA and Queensland, the most significant Liberal Party vote across the country. It is reasonable to assume, then, that while both the ALP and the Liberal Party push a neoliberal policy agenda, such an agenda might find greater support in these states when compared to their counterparts in New South Wales, a swinging state, and Victoria and Tasmania, which typically lean toward the ALP. Regardless of preference, however, every state in Australia has realised structural changes that typify a neoliberal policy agenda.

Pick, et al. (2008), in their study on regional development in the Pilbara region in WA, investigate one such example in the advent of “New Regionalism”. “New Regionalism” is the phrase given to a multi-sectoral approach to regional development which depends fundamentally on strong public-private partnerships and policy responses to development issues defined by the locale of that issue, as opposed to blanket policy approaches dictated at the executive level. Sweeping public policy throughout the world in the 1980s, “New Regionalism” became prevalent in Australian states and territories in the mid-1990s. Consisting of “the integration of the regional economy into global production chains through the creation of linkages between local businesses and large multi-national corporations”, New Regionalism was intended to stimulate “economic growth and prosperity... through orienting employment, infrastructure, etc. towards being competitive in the global marketplace” (Pick, et al., 2008, p.517). The authors, however, found that, in the experiences of interviewees, the decentralisation of regional development created “an environment in which the regional community is exposed to a range of social and economic risks, particularly the weakening of democratic institutions, social breakdown, and unmet social needs (health, housing and infrastructure)” (Pick, et al., 2008, p.517).

Gibson (2019) presents a case study of neoliberal policy implementation in Queensland, studying the evolution of the secondary schooling system in the state. Gibson (2019) proposes that this evolution epitomised the typical neoliberal approach in which the system is operationalised through a “discourse of competition, markets, and choice on one hand and accountability, performance objectives, standards, national testing and national curriculum on the other” (Apple 2004, p. 15). Gibson (2019) argues that this new reform demonstrates “how education is, within this context, being reconstituted to meet the perceived needs of capital.” For Gibson (2019), then, the education reforms in Queensland

are troubling; while on the one hand, the system is well placed to prepare students for engagement as workers in a capitalist society, on the other hand, the system risks losing its identity as custodians of “students as complex human beings capable of understanding themselves and their own needs”.

Andrew and Cahill (2009) provide an example of neoliberal reform in the New South Wales context in their study of the New South Wales prison system. In their study, Andrew and Cahill (2009, p.148) note reform consistent with trends in neoliberal policy reform across the country; “in prioritising the private prison model the NSW government is, it could be argued, simply following this dominant logic.” For Andrew and Cahill (2009, p.150), these reforms not only threaten to weaken the more nuanced features of prison service provision, such as its ‘corrective’ responsibilities, in favour of cost-efficiency but also threatens to use the privatisation and the rhetoric of cost-efficiency “for the indirect regulation of labour by the state.”

An example of neoliberal reform in the state of Victoria is presented in the study of primary health care (PHC) systems in the state by Roussy and Livingstone (2017). In their investigation, they analyse the conversion of the PHC model in Victoria, observing the shift from

financial rather than social imperatives... characterised by a reduced role of the state in favour of market mechanisms, and diminished public spending on goods and services (including health), with a concomitant shift in responsibility towards the private sector. (Roussy and Livingstone 2017, p. 637)

Roussy and Livingstone (2017) note that this conversion vulnerabilised PHC systems, diminishing the certainty of funding and alienating the systems from policymakers. The solution to these pressures has been to amalgamate previously localised service providers to create regional community health organisations to increase competitiveness in the marketised sector. While mergers have enabled PHC systems in Victoria to continue to operationalise typical PHC approaches, “such as community participation and intersectoral collaboration”, the struggle remains “remain viable and to reconcile their socially oriented vocation with the challenges of neoliberal economic thinking”. (Roussy and Livingstone 2017, p. 645).

In Tasmania, neoliberal policy reform can be identified in the evolution of the social housing sector since the early 2000s. Francis-Brophy and Donoghue (2013) discuss the introduction of a public/private partnership in Tasmanian Affordable Housing Limited (TAHL), which was designed to attract private investment to the social housing sector to assuage the financial strain on the sector that grew with the local housing crisis. The authors propose that TAHL initially successfully mobilised resources to the sector. However, tension developed in light of the contradictory desired outcomes of

partners; a weakened state presence struggled to “ensure that the level, quality and allocation of housing [was] based on social objectives and the public good rather than on profit and market objectives” (Francis-Brophy and Donoghue 2013, p.439).

Each of these case studies acknowledges the attraction of neoliberal policy approaches, noting, in particular, the rapid mobilisation of resources and the motivating power of the profit drive. However, each of the studies also cautions against the influence of neoliberalism in public service provision, arguing that reform in pursuit of cost-efficiency and profit not only exposes essential services to market volatility but, more nefariously, risks bastardising the purpose of public services altogether. Nevertheless, whether through the pressures of historical circumstances, or the ideological demand of democracy, neoliberal policy approaches are firmly entrenched throughout Australia, regardless of the political biases of each state. As Bainbridge (1997, p.21) puts it,

what took place in the ‘high rationalist’ period was not merely a policy shift but, more fundamentally, a remaking of Australia’s economy and a recasting of the traditional political divisions of left and Right.

3.2.3 Willing vulnerability: preparedness for COVID-19 in Australia

What did the entrenchment of a neoliberal policy agenda mean for Australia’s preparedness for the COVID-19 Crisis? Given the acceptance, as Dean (2016) puts it, “of the inevitability of catastrophe” in perpetuating a neoliberal policy agenda despite numerous economic crises that expose its flaws, it is hardly surprising that the Australian economy was shaken by the economic crises instigated by the COVID-19 Crisis.

Most of the literature investigating this topic is strictly quantitative reporting and does not attempt to measure Australia’s preparedness for the COVID-19 crisis. Therefore, this data will be presented in the subsequent findings and analysis sections. It is, however, worth discussing attempts to assess Australia’s preparedness for the COVID-19 crisis, as the argument in this thesis revolves around a unique attempt to do so.

Harrison (2020) provides one such assessment in ‘Testing for Covid-19: Australia could have been prepared’. Harrison (2020) focuses on the medical and logistical response to the crisis investigating how, despite once possessing a medical industry capable of producing ‘PCR enzyme and DNA oligomers’ (both essential components of COVID-19 testing kits), Australia found itself with a shortage of COVID-19 testing kits. Interestingly, Harrison (2020) notes that the Australian

manufacturers of PCR enzyme and DNA oligomers “have gradually been acquired and operations have moved offshore to countries that provide incentives to the biotech sector.” It is important to note, however, that although Harrison (2020) identifies a glaringly obvious vulnerability in Australia’s preparedness for a virus like COVID-19, he does not question why no attempt was made to rectify the issue, nor does he seek to understand how such a vulnerability could have been so willingly created in the first place. Harrison (2020) diagnoses an issue that is a consequence of a typically neoliberal retreat of government from the market. However, he does not draw any causal links between the Australian political-philosophical context and the nature of its response to the COVID-19 crisis.

In their study ‘Estimating the Genuine Progress Indicator before and during the COVID pandemic in Australia’, Karatopouzis, et al. (2022), investigate the impact of the pandemic on the “social, economic and environmental aspects of people’s lives” that were impacted by the COVID-19 Crisis. The authors recognise that GDP, often used as an indicator of a country’s economic prosperity, “cannot account for national wellbeing” and, therefore, seek to employ the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) to measure the wellbeing of Australian citizens between 2019 and 2020. Whilst Karatopouzis, et al. (2022) contribute important findings on the multi-faceted impact of COVID-19 and the equitability of governmental responses to the Crisis, much like Harrison (2020), they do not attempt to make any causal links between Australia’s neoliberal policy agenda and their findings.

Herein is a gap in the literature. This thesis will endeavour to fill this research gap by investigating whether neoliberalism might be at the core of Australia’s unpreparedness for the COVID-19 Crisis – whether Pusey’s notion of a ‘moral institution’ may have more adequately protected the welfare of Australians than the current system which is hellbent on capital accumulation.

3.3 The Vietnamese contradiction

The Australian policy response to COVID-19 was reactionary; the Government was compelled to step in as an essential service provider when the market failed and could no longer act as such. This process will be elaborated upon in the following analysis in chapters 4 and 5. However, it is crucial to recognise that this trap did not befall all countries, not at least to the same degree. Vietnam has declared itself a “socialist-oriented market economy” since 2001 (Nordhaug, K. et al. 2021, p.11). As Nordhaug et al. (2021, p.18) note, “questions of class, inequality and welfare are obviously fundamental to the socialist market economy.” It is reasonable to assume, then, that the Vietnamese Government, though it could never have anticipated a crisis to the scale of the COVID-19 crisis, would not have been caught as flat-footed as its neoliberally inclined counterparts because it maintains a proactive role in its supervision of the institutions responsible for essential service

provision. To what extent this assumption is valid will be discussed in chapters 4 and 5. However, it is fundamental first to define Vietnamese market socialism as it appears in the literature, establishing that the Vietnamese context is one about which such a hypothesis can be made and, thus, validating its use in the comparative analysis conducted in this thesis.

Vietnam declares itself at once a socialist State and a State where the project of socialist development is ongoing (Nordhaug, K. et al. 2021, p.11). Given its revolutionary roots, an admission of a ‘work in progress’ is understandable. Moreover, this admission indicates an open-mindedness and willingness to reform – a disposition that has enabled a unique form of socialism to develop in Vietnam.

Ideologically, Vietnamese socialism revolves around ‘Ho Chi Minh thought’ – the adaptation of the principles of Marxism-Leninism to the Vietnamese context (Nordhaug, K. et al. 2021, p.11). In the 21st century, however, Vietnamese socialism no longer draws international attention because of its links to the socialist revolution the century prior, instead drawing attention due to its adoption of a socialist-oriented market economy. Nordhaug et al. (2021, p.10), in their study of the development of the market economy in Asia, emphasise the Vietnamese position that this seemingly paradoxical and counter-revolutionary reform does not indicate the regression of socialism in the Country “but rather the application of the market economy as a tool for development rather than a social system.” Do (2022, p.272) argues that the divergence from a planned economic structure, typical of socialist States throughout the 20th century, had been developing since the conceptualisation of “Doi Moi”, or “Economic Renovation” by former General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam VCP, Le Duan, and the commitment, during the Sixth Congress of the Communist Party in 1986, “to [replace] central planning with a regulated market economy.” Fforde (2019, p.672) contextualises the socialist development of Vietnam, proposing three “moments of growth”, including central planning and ‘traditional communism’, Doi Moi and the transition to a market economy, and the ultimate culmination in socialist-oriented market economics. Fforde (2019) is careful to note that the ‘Vietnamese economic miracle’ – an aphorism for the meteoric rise of Vietnam’s economic growth since the turn of the century – was not a by-product of seamlessly implemented utopian socialist policy. The author raises concerns

that political activity was focussed on harvesting spoils rather than developing and implementing effective policy... that whilst the dominant ideology, shared by donors and the VCP (Communist Party of Vietnam), was that policy was driving change, critique of it would have to argue that state actions themselves fundamentally reflected not a pro-change policy logic but the structured interests of those occupying Party and state positions (Fforde 2019, pp.691-692).

Nevertheless, Vietnam has become a country in which there “has been consistently fast growth of national income... and, according to the four national Living Standards Surveys (LSS), there has been rapid reduction in absolute poverty” (Beresford 2008, p.235).

In the neoliberal context of Australia, the prioritisation of the market requires the retreat of the Government from economic affairs marked notably by fiscal austerity. However, must the relationship between market and government necessarily be defined by negative correlation? In Vietnam, where capitalist ideology is rejected, what exactly does the adoption of markets mean for the role of government? Nordhaug et al. (2021, p.122) argue that the adaptation of market economics in Vietnam is indicative of exposure to global capitalism, noting that the “neoliberal era has left its imprints in various areas of governance”. This hypothesis is evident in the partial privatisation of many state-owned enterprises responsible for public service provision. However, the State maintains the ultimate responsibility for the welfare of its constituents, casting a ‘social safety net’ including three overarching pillars: social assistance, social insurance and social health insurance, and labour market protection (Long 2010, p.294). According to Long (2010, p.294),

labor market policies are to prevent risks; social insurance and social health insurance policies aim to mitigate risks once they occur; while social assistance policies help people overcome their risks if they are unable to cope by themselves.

Evidently, Vietnamese market socialism represents a political and economic system that differs from Australian neoliberalism in the execution of its public service responsibilities. Therefore, the Vietnamese context exemplifies a fertile point of comparison which to compare Australia in an analysis of COVID-19 policy responses.

4. Findings:

In this chapter, this thesis will present findings from the literature and publicly accessible government and NGO online databases which pertain to the research topic. This chapter will be split into three sections. The first section will characterise trends in equitable growth in Australia and Vietnam between 1990 and 2020. Specifically, this section will detail household income statistics and the data pertaining to the relationship between GDP and income inequality from the period. The second section will describe the COVID-19 Crisis as it developed in Australia and Vietnam, broadly demonstrating the macroeconomic and public health implications of the Crisis. Moreover, this section will elaborate on the policy approaches implemented to ameliorate the harm of the Crisis in both contexts. The third section will return to equitable growth, only this time assessing the trend of

equitable growth in Australia and Vietnam during and after the COVID-19 Crisis. This final section will present data sets from 2020 that correspond to those presented in section one of the chapter. The findings presented in this chapter will inform the comparative analysis in the following chapter that seeks to discern whether Australia's neoliberal public policy agenda left Australians vulnerable to harm during the COVID-19 crisis.

4.1 Income and equitable growth trends in Australia and Vietnam before 2019

4.1.1 Household income and income inequality trends: Australia

For most of the twentieth century, Australia was considered a low-inequality country, with egalitarianism an essential component of public policy (Whiteford 2013, p. 10). However, since the 1980s, Australia has recorded a steady rise in income inequality (Shi et al. 2022, p.3564). In the 1990s and through the early 2000s until the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), real incomes increased rapidly while income inequality rose, indicating a growing division between high-income and low-middle-income earners (Whiteford 2013, p. 4). This division is evident in trends in the distribution of economic growth in Australia. Between 1991 and 2008, the bottom 90% of income earners received 64% of the share of GDP growth, while the top 10% received the remaining 36% (Richardson & Grudnoff, 2023). Over the next decade, between 2009 and 2019, this ratio depicts an alarming transformation; the bottom 90% received 7% of the share of GDP growth, whereas the top 10% received the overwhelming 93% majority of the share (Richardson & Grudnoff, 2023).

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and as demonstrated in Figure 1, mean income in Australia between 2000-2001 and 2019-20 has consistently trended upwards.

Figure 1. Weekly household income trends, Australia

Figure removed due to copyright restriction.

Source: ABS (2022)

Income inequality, depicted in Figure 2, reflects a different consistency in its trend. Using the Gini coefficient data gathered from Johnson and Wilkins (2006) and annual ABS publications to measure income inequality, Whiteford (2014, p.16) demonstrates that despite occasional decreases, income inequality has trended upwards. Recent ABS data illustrates that the negative income inequality trend presented in Whiteford (2014, p.16) has stabilised, measuring the Gini coefficient in 2017-18 at 0.328 (ABS, 2022).

Figure 2. Long-term income inequality trends, Australia 1981-82 to 2009-10

Figure removed due to copyright restriction.

Source: Whiteford (2014, p.16).

Australia's divergence from a low-inequality country to one wherein growth is not shared equitably by the population is widely attributed to financial deepening. Shi et al. (2022, p.3577) contribute to this conclusion, finding, in their investigation of financial deepening in Australia between 1980 and 2014, that "the growth in financial development indicators and FDI (foreign direct investment) inflows have caused for higher income inequalities in Australia." Ploszaj et al. (2020, p.313), in a study investigating the effects of FDI inflows and trade openness on income inequality in Australia and the G7 countries, FDI inflows had a positive impact on income inequality in Australia. On the other hand, Ploszaj et al. (2020, p.313) found that income inequality increased as Australia increased its openness to international trade.

4.1.2 Household income and income inequality trends: Vietnam

Since its Doi Moi and its adoption of 'market socialism', Vietnam has experienced consistent economic growth. Between 1989 and 2018, Vietnam recorded an annual GDP per capita growth rate of 5.4% making it the 5th fastest growing economy of the turn of the century (Nordhaug et al. 2021, p.6). Vietnam, one of Asia's poorest countries in the twentieth century, is now considered an 'emerging economy', and according to the World Bank, no longer a low-income country, achieving middle-income classification in 2010 (Nordhaug et al. 2021, p.7; World Bank, 2013). This development drastically reduced absolute poverty in the country. Between 1992 and 2016, the percentage of Vietnamese people living in conditions of absolute poverty reduced from 52.9% to 2% (Nordhaug et al. 2021, p.8). As depicted in figure 3, sustained economic growth precipitated a consistent positive trend in monthly income per capita. According to CEIC Data, average monthly income per capita in Vietnam increased 560 VND th. between 1994 and 2016 (CEIC Data, 2021).

Figure 3. Vietnam: monthly income per capita (VND th.)

Figure removed due to copyright restriction.

Figure 4. Vietnam: Gini index

Figure removed due to copyright restriction.

Source: World Bank, 2023

Despite its surge in growth, Vietnam has managed to minimise the rate of income inequality that often follows. Between 2002 and 2018, excepting the outlier in 2010 wherein the effects of the Global Financial Crisis had an adverse effect on income inequality, the Gini coefficient in Vietnam generally trended downwards, reflecting decreasing income inequality (World Bank, 2023).

4.2 Crisis: COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic is one of the most severe health crises to befall humanity and a multi-faceted public policy challenge. On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the coronavirus outbreak a “public health emergency of international concern” and began to counsel United Nations member states on how to prepare and mitigate the threat posed by the pandemic (WHO, 2020). Though the WHO attempted to establish a degree of universality in best-practice approaches to combating the Crisis, the public policy approaches adopted worldwide were unique, ultimately dependent upon a country’s unique cultural, geopolitical, and ideological context.

4.2.1 COVID-19 in Australia

4.2.1.1 Lockdown

Australia recorded its first case of COVID-19 on January 25, 2020, and the public health-related policy took the form characterised by containment measures primarily focused on limiting the external threat of the virus (Wood et al., 2020). By February, the Australian Federal Government had

implemented self-isolation requirements for travellers returning from at-risk areas overseas and had banned the entry of Chinese foreign nationals into the country (Garnaut, 2021). Informed by WHO, Australia's strategic response to community virus transmission was characterised by detection, containment, and contact tracing (Wood et al., 2020). Nonetheless, the effective reproduction rate of the virus - the basic reproduction number compounded by factors that might limit a virus' communicability - continued to grow, reaching its peak on March 13, 2020, at 1.39. (Murphy, 2020). In response to the growing prevalence of COVID-19 in the community, the Australian Federal Government formed a National Cabinet on March 13, comprising members from state and federal jurisdictions designed to ensure consistency in the Australian approach to COVID-19 (Beck et al., 2020). Though the National Cabinet developed homogenous policy responses, state governments were responsible for the implementation of these policy responses within their jurisdictions (Beck et al., 2020). Therefore, despite a resemblance in the overall objectives of a COVID-19 policy response, it is crucial to consider the policy implementation and subsequent outcomes of each state separately. The most critical policy response was a nationwide lockdown enforced on April 29 (Murphy, 2020). The lockdown was the most critical element of the National Cabinet's 'COVID-zero' approach to the crisis. The primary objective of the lockdown was to freeze the exponential spread of COVID-19 and to 'flatten the curve' – a catchcry used by the Government to refer to the repression of the effective reproduction rate of the virus in the country (Beck et al., 2020).

The objectives of the Australian 'COVID-zero' approach were clearly defined, and a federalist enforcement structure had been established, however, the practical handling of the first waves of COVID-19 in the country was messy. Though the Biosecurity Act (2015) granted federal, state and territory governments the coercive legal capacity to implement strategies such as the lockdown, the seamless enforcement of the National Cabinet's policy was marred by ambiguous communication. Prime Minister Scott Morrison, informed by the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) – a body which comprises chief health officers from each of Australia's states and territories and forms the country's primary decision-making body in times of public health emergency – attempted to centralise the dissemination of information through daily press conferences (Lilleker, et al., 2021). However, Australians became inundated with conflicting sources of information as television became the public's primary source of information (Lilleker, et al., 2021). Mainstream media outlets competed to provide the most up-to-date information, inviting medical experts, scientists, and academics to comment on the status of the pandemic and the government's guidelines (Lilleker, et al., 2021).

State governments too, as the authorities responsible for COVID-19 policy implementation in their jurisdictions, began to disseminate their own information. Informed by interests that often conflicted with those of the federal government, such as education rather than the national economy, state

premiers held press conferences publicising information before the National Cabinet meetings (Lilleker, et al., 2021). This conflict of interests involves a pertinent example of the disunity in federal and state messaging. With the health of the national economy in mind, the federal government maintained that schools should remain open (Lilleker, et al., 2021). The Prime Minister proposed that the medical evidence calling for the lockdown of schools was insufficient and that by keeping schools open, parents would be free to continue working, relieving the federal government of the mounting fiscal pressure caused by the pandemic (Lilleker, et al., 2021). State governments on the other hand, interested less in the national economy and more on the education of their constituents, were determined to close schools and facilitate remote learning platforms. This example of consistency of approach across the states and territories is unique, however, as the implementation of many other public health measures varied. Social distancing requirements, for example, differed in each state. In NSW and Victoria, the two states with the greatest proportion of positive COVID-19 cases, mask-wearing in public spaces became mandatory, while in the remaining states and territories, mask-wearing became contingent upon the arbitrary direction of local premiers, who would implement degrees of lockdown in response to the prevalence of COVID-19 in their jurisdictions (Maarek, 2022, p. 150). The breakdown of communication had two unwanted consequences: fear, and an increasingly frail sense of governmental authority.

4.2.1.1.1 Social economics and epidemiology

Of particular pertinence to this thesis are findings regarding the relationship between socio-economic conditions and epidemiology. COVID-19 “has exposed socio-economic inequalities in many countries; people living with disadvantage are more susceptible to infection, hospitalisation, and death” (Flavel and Baum, 2022). In one study of COVID-19 infections across different postcodes throughout Victoria, this assertion is proven relevant in Australia. According to Roder, et al. (2022, p.353), incidences of COVID-19 infection were more prevalent in postcodes wherein people experienced household stress (mortgage or rental payments equal to or succeeding 30% of household income), employees were not afforded paid leave, and wherein homelessness was more common. The study also found that younger populations were more susceptible to COVID-19 infection, arguing that this finding too is related to socio-economic circumstances. Older employees more commonly benefit from “greater job security, lower rates of casual employment, and greater access to paid leave, while retired people are less prone to workplace exposure” (Roder, et al. 2022, p.354).

To assuage the financial strain caused by the lockdown policy approach, the Australian government implemented wage subsidy and unemployment benefit schemes. The equitability of these schemes is indicative of the government’s success or failure in observing the relationship between socio-

economic conditions and epidemiology. In the following section, findings that demonstrate the efficacy of these schemes will be presented.

4.2.1.2 Economic decline and recovery

As the international community struggled to contain the transmission of COVID-19, international market flows were stalled, precipitating an acute downturn in global economic growth (Lim et al. 2021, p.7). The International Monetary Fund (IMF) anticipated global economic growth to shrink by 4.4%, with World War II representing the only example of a more significant decline (Lim et al. 2021, p.7). Australia's most important trading partners, China, Japan, and the United States, mirrored this trend, recording decreases in economic growth in the first quarter of 2020 by 10%, 9%, and 7.9%, respectively (Lim et al. 2021, p.6).

After 29 years of economic growth, Australia, too, had begun its descent into recession, recording a decrease in economic growth by 0.3% in the first quarter of 2020 (Lim et al. 2021, p.6). The restrictive measures imposed by the National Cabinet, epitomised by the April 29 lockdown, exacerbated the strain on the Australian economy. In the second quarter of 2020, the Australian economy contracted a further 7% (ABS, 2020). In the same quarter, consumption expenditure had fallen by 12.5% (Lim et al. 2021, p.6). Australia, at this time having officially entered recession a period of recession, experienced financial strain in its business sector which precipitated a considerable increase in unemployment; between March and June unemployment rose from 5.2% to 7.4%, reaching as high as 17% during the June quarter (Lim et al. 2021, p.5; Davidson 2021, p.8). During this period over 2.3 million Australians, on top of those already experiencing disadvantaged circumstances, were either unemployed or otherwise experiencing financial hardship (Deady et al. 2020, pp.153-154).

In order to reduce the financial pressure experienced throughout the country, the Australian government provided a fiscal injection of AUD 194 billion across three social support packages (Wood et al. 2020). The first, provided on March 12, was AUD 17.6 billion injection targeting welfare recipients and businesses – businesses were targeted for the dual purpose of stimulating investment and affording to retain the employment of apprentices (Wood et al. 2020). The second, an AUD 46.1 billion injection, was provided on March 22 to support small and medium businesses and to supplement people dependent upon transfer payments (Wood et al. 2020). The final injection of AUD 130 billion on March 30, informed by international examples of job retention schemes such as the New Zealand COVID-19 Wage Subsidy and the United Kingdom's Coronavirus Job Retention

Scheme, and using the bones of the pre-existing Newstart benefit, was the JobKeeper Payment program (The Treasury, 2020).

The JobKeeper Payment program was overseen by the ATO who used existing business channels to distribute a monthly payment upon application to eligible employers (The Treasury, 2020). The employers were then charged with the fortnightly distribution of a \$1500 flat payment to employees (The Treasury, 2020). The JobSeeker policy provided, upon application, a payment of up to AUD 1,124.50 per fortnight to Australian citizens between the age of 22 and Age Pension age, who were unemployed, but actively seeking work, or sick, injured, or otherwise unable to seek work (Services Australia, 2023). JobSeeker recipients were required to fulfill mutual obligation requirements, including committing to and meeting the requirements of a Job Plan, in order to receive JobSeeker payments (Services Australia, 2023).

4.2.2 COVID-19 in Vietnam

4.2.2.1 Early success through quick action and creative public policy

Vietnam recorded its first confirmed case of COVID-19 on January 23, 2020 (Le, et al. 2021, p.3). Between the 20th of March and the 21st of April, Vietnam recorded the greatest swell of infection as Vietnamese citizens returned to the country aboard repatriation flights, and existing domestic clusters developed. During this period, the authorities recorded a total of 183 new cases (Le, et al. 2021, p.5). By April 22, Vietnam had the spread of the first wave of COVID-19 under control, having detected and contained all active clusters within the country and shrunk the only source of new cases to returning repatriation flights which were subject to quarantine checks upon arrival (Le, et al. 2021, p.5).

Vietnam shares an approximal 1000-mile border with China, and thus the rapid response to threat of COVID-19 was of paramount importance to the Vietnamese government. Le, et al. (2021, p.5) report that Vietnamese public health officials had begun preparation for the pandemic even before COVID-19 had been officially declared a public health emergency, having issued decision No. 5894, which detailed “the establishment and operation of the QRTs (Quick Response Teams) from the national to the district level to respond promptly and effectively to infectious epidemics and public health events”, as early as December 19, 2019. This was the first of a string of government guidelines and emergency dispatches disseminated during December 2019 and January 2020, specifying methods for diagnosis, treatment, and containment of the epidemic of acute pneumonia originating in China (Le, et al. 2021, p.6). Provincial governments, especially those that share the border with China such as the

Lang Son province which accommodates nine border gates into China, observed government guidelines and developed their own provincially specific action plans (Le, et al. 2021, p.5). Clarity and consistency of Inter-governmental communication and public communication are attributed a core component of Vietnam's success in managing the early onset of COVID-19. The latter has been lauded for its creativity and diversity in ensuring that education on the COVID-19 pandemic reached all spheres of Vietnamese society. Public education policy included, for example,

information related to the epidemic through free hotlines and a virtual assistant (chatbot) from the MOH (Ministry of Health), and the appearance of vivid and varied “spiritual dishes” to foster the anti-pandemic universal movement from the boom of music, to poetry, [and] films (Le, et al. 2021, p.13).

After the detection of COVID-19 within Vietnam, a multi-dimensional approach to stemming the threat of the pandemic was adopted. An essential feature of this approach was contact tracing, with all contacts of a confirmed case notified and advised to observe a 14-day self-quarantine period. Like Australia, stringent lockdown measures were taken, targeting infection clusters. For example, in one commune outside Ho Chi Minh city, a 21-day lockdown was enforced (Quach, H.-L. & Hoang, N.-A. 2020, p.1). During this period, citizens were tested for symptoms of COVID-19 daily and essential supplies were provided (Quach, H.-L. & Hoang, N.-A. 2020, p.1). Across the country social distancing guidelines were implemented and a ban was placed on mass gatherings, including the temporary closure of schools and universities in areas affected by the pandemic (Quach, H.-L. & Hoang, N.-A. 2020, p.1). On March 22, Vietnam officially closed its borders, excepting repatriated Vietnamese citizens. Due to its success in managing the spread of the first wave of COVID-19, Vietnam was able to reopen its international travel routes by July 18 (Le, et al. 2021, p.18).

4.2.2.2 Financial strain and easing the burden on a complicated labour force

Due to the initial success of preventing the spread of the COVID-19 virus, Vietnam was able to maintain its economic growth, being the world's fastest growing economy in 2020, expanding its economy by 2.9% (World Bank, 2020; IMF 2021). However, as the policy responses to the crisis became more comprehensive, numerous key economic indicators began to falter. For example, the pandemic took its toll on the labour market. According to the World Bank (2022, p.6), 830,000 people were underemployed by the end of 2020, and by the first quarter of 2021 12.8% of the labour force reported either losing their jobs or having their wage reduced due to COVID-19.

To ameliorate the financial strain of the COVID-19 Crisis, the Vietnamese government introduced Resolution No. 42, a VND (Vietnamese Dong) 62 trillion social security package (Lahiff et al. 2022, p. 185). The package was designed to support people who were financially disadvantaged due to the pandemic, including a wage subsidy payment of VND 1.8 million per month, and a provision of VND 1 million to people who lost employment during the Crisis and were ineligible for the existing unemployment benefits (Lahiff et al. 2022, p. 185). Though Resolution No. 42 was able to support 20 million people who were unemployed throughout the Crisis, it did not account for people who had previously worked in the informal sector before being unemployed throughout the Crisis (Ngyuen, T. & Pham, T. 2022, p. 44). Therefore, in July of 2021, the Vietnamese government passed Resolution N0. 68, delegating local governments the responsibility of providing unemployed workers in the informal sector with cash payments equating to between VND 1,500,00 and VND 3,000,000 (Ngyuen, T. & Pham, T. 2022, p. 44).

4.3 Income and equitable growth in Australia and Vietnam in during and after the COVID-19 Crisis

4.3.1 Post-COVID-19 Household income and income inequality trends: Australia

The JobKeeper Payment policy was able to put a brake on rising unemployment but not stop it (The Treasury, 2021). Despite stabilising a decrease in the number of payroll jobs, the JobKeeper Payment could not support 60 per cent of employees who were ineligible for the subsidy or in organisations that did not apply (The Treasury, 2021). However, despite the negative externalities of the recession, income inequality decreased. According to Davidson (2022, p.9), between March and December of 2020,

The average incomes of the lowest 20% income group rose by 8% (\$56pw) and those of the next 20% rose by 11% (\$144pw). The average incomes of the middle 20% rose by 3% (\$53pw) and those of the next 20% rose by 2% (\$67pw). In contrast, the average incomes of the highest 20% fell by 4% (\$230pw).

These shifts in income statistics are reflected in the Gini coefficient measurement, which reduced from 0.328 in 2018 to 0.324 as of June 2020 (CEIC Data, 2021). The JobKeeper Payment policy was an essential determinant of this change. A survey hosted by the ABS found that of the employees receiving the wage subsidy, half were receiving a less than usual income, one-third were receiving a similar income, and one-fifth were receiving a greater than usual income (The Treasury, 2021).

The Australian economy began to recover in September 2020, recording a 3.4% rise in GDP (ABS, 2021). Correspondingly, the financial support provided through the JobKeeper Payment policy was gradually withdrawn. Since this period and moving into 2021, gross disposable income per household has continued to rise. However, the rise in each income quintile reflected contradictory trends to those depicted in 2020. According to the ABS (2021), the percentage growth in gross disposable income per household experienced in each income quintile from lowest quintile to highest were: 0.8%, 2.4%, 3.9%, 4.1%, and 4.3%. As Australia transitioned out of recession, income inequality increased more than pre-COVID-19 levels, recording a Gini coefficient of 0.33 in 2021, the highest income inequality assessment since it recorded the same in 2014, and 0.36 in 2008, the year of the Global Financial Crisis (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021).

4.3.2 Post-COVID-19 Household income and income inequality trends: Vietnam

Job creation and education have been essential to Vietnam's successful poverty reduction initiatives (World Bank 2022, pp.4, 60). Due to the strict lockdown policies employed by the Vietnamese government during the COVID-19 Crisis, hallmarked by the acceptance of "economic losses in exchange for the safety of people's health and lives", including the locking down of schools and the subsequent pressure put on domestic business, it was expected that poverty reduction would stall and absolute poverty would increase (Le et al. 2021, p.8). However, as of the end of 2020, the poverty rate in Vietnam had reduced by 1.6% from 2018 (World Bank 2022, p.27). This statistic is particularly impressive when considered against a backdrop of increasing poverty in many countries worldwide over the same period.

Nonetheless, the COVID-19 Crisis brought the positive trend in household per capita income growth to a halt in Vietnam, as household per capita income declined by 5% in 2020 compared to 2019 (World Bank 2022, p.58). Similarly, income inequality increased; the Gini coefficient reflecting 0.11 increased from 0.357 in 2018 to 0.368 in 2020 (World Bank, 2023). These negative shifts are attributed mainly to the negative ramifications of the COVID-19 Crisis on the agriculture sector, in which the most significant proportion of Vietnam's low-income earners are employed, and the initial inability of the government to accommodate informal workers in its social security packages (World Bank 2022, pp. 6, 23). As fiscal policy became more comprehensive throughout the Crisis and began to accommodate these demographics, these statistics stabilised, remaining robust even through worsening waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2021, household income per capita continued to decrease, though only marginally; monthly household income per capita decreased by VND 73,000 compared to 2020, a percentage decline of 1.7%. (General Statistics Office of Viet Nam, 2021).

5. Analysis:

Until this chapter, this thesis has sought to frame an examination of the extent to which neoliberalism left the Australian population vulnerable to harm during the COVID-19 Crisis in 2020. This thesis has established ‘vulnerability to harm’ as the locus for its analysis; it has characterised *Australian neoliberalism*; it has positioned and justified the positioning of Vietnam as a counterpoint to the Australian neoliberal context for the sake of analysis; and it has summarised the implications of the COVID-19 Crisis in each context, paying particular attention to the impact that the Crisis had on average household income, as well as income inequality data. This chapter will attempt to answer the research question in light of this information. In order to do so, this chapter will be separated into two primary discussions. The first will be a preliminary discussion of the correlations between Australian neoliberalism and the trends in average household income and income inequality before and after the COVID-19 Crisis. This discussion will analyse the inherent risk of the Australian neoliberal policy agenda. The second discussion will comprise the principal comparative analysis of this thesis, drawing on the COVID-19 Crisis experiences of Australia and Vietnam, analysing how each context succeeded and failed in mitigating their respective populations’ vulnerability to harm in the Crisis’ wake.

5.1 Neoliberalism and vulnerability to harm: a causal link

This thesis asserts that neoliberalism was instrumental in vulnerabalising Australians to harm during the COVID-19 Crisis. This assertion is founded upon a two-pronged hypothesis; that neoliberalism exposes Australians to three forms of vulnerabalisation, each of which contributed to the vulnerability to harm experienced during the COVID-19 Crisis. In order of discussion, this thesis refers to these forms as, ideological vulnerabalisation and social protection/safety net vulnerabalisation. In this first section, each of these three prongs will be discussed.

5.1.1 Ideological vulnerabalisation

In Chapter 3, this thesis reviewed the story of Australia’s adoption of a neoliberal public policy agenda as discussed in the literature. This story comprised the transformation of the perception of the role of government, or at least how its role ought to be conducted. Both the conservative perception, which predominated the agenda setting prior to the 1990s, and neoliberalism, which has dictated public policy ever since, enshrine the market as the most effective tool to achieve economic prosperity and, ultimately, the greater good for the community. The fundamental difference between classical

liberal and neoliberal ideologies is in the object that acts in the market to generate economic prosperity.

In conservative liberal thought, the individual's freedom to act unfettered by government intervention is sacred. In prioritising the individual, however, there is scope to understand how one individual might impose themselves upon the freedom of another, thus creating inequality. Therefore, the conservative liberal accepts the necessity of a degree of government intervention in order to regulate equal access to economic markets. Conversely, neoliberalism depersonalises the operative focus in the market equation, replacing the individual with the abstract idea of competition. In one thought, a policy agenda that traditionally served a purpose essential to government mandate became both wasteful and counterproductive, contravening competition in the market. Government mandate was transformed; no longer the protector of the individual's rights, the government had become a facilitator of free-market operation and the pursuit of profit at almost any cost.

Herein lies one form of vulnerabalisation that is inherent in neoliberalism; by removing the individual as the focal point of government protection, neoliberalism vulnerabalises individuals to the exploitation of those with more power in the market and who can, thus, dictate the terms of the former's engagement with the market. As identified by Chernomas and Hudson (2017), the failure in neoliberal thought to recognise and appreciate societal power relationships constructs a platform in the market through which income inequality can increase. As depicted in Chapter 4.1, the findings demonstrate a causal relationship between the financial deepening implicit in Australia's neoliberal policy agenda since the 1990s and rising income inequality. These findings are pertinent to vulnerabalisation to harm during the COVID-19 Crisis because, as Flavel and Baum (2022) discuss, people living in low socio-economic conditions were exposed to greater harm during the Crisis than those in relative affluence. Ideological vulnerabalisation, then, asserts that neoliberalism vulnerabalises individuals to harm at the hand of other individuals.

5.1.2 Social policy/safety net vulnerabalisation

Income inequality in Australia is inextricably linked to and exacerbated by social policy vulnerabalisation. This form of vulnerabalisation is centred around the policy implications of the shift in the perceived role of government alluded to in the section prior. Where ideological vulnerabalisation deals with vulnerability to harm at the hand of individuals, social policy vulnerabalisation considers the vulnerability to harm caused by the marketplace constructions or removal thereof. The most apparent of these constructions is the welfare state. In Chapter 3, this thesis notes the thoughts of Bainbridge (1997, p.21), who proposed that adopting neoliberalism signified "a

remaking of Australia's economy and a recasting of the traditional political divisions of left and Right". Bainbridge (1997) discusses the slashing of fiscal expenditure and the specific targeting of welfare as a core component of this process. Perhaps more concerning than cutting welfare expenditure, however, has been the reshaping of the goals of the Australian welfare state.

In an attempt to simultaneously minimise government presence in the market and further stimulate market activity, various public services that comprise the Australian welfare state are becoming increasingly marketised. In this process, the privatisation of numerous public services is coupled with the subsidisation of private sources of welfare. As discussed in section 3.2.2.1, this process in many Australian states has resulted in poorer quality public service provision as the marketised public service endures an identity crisis in which its purpose is complicated between quality service provision and earning profit. Of more significant concern, however, are the individuals for whom, despite subsidisation, public services remain inaccessible. While the Australian government does continue to provide some essential services, these services, as implied by Bainbridge (1997), have suffered a gross reduction in funding and often require the satisfaction of criteria and mutual obligation requirements.

The marketisation of the Australian welfare state causes social policy/safety net vulnerabilisation to harm during the COVID-19 Crisis because marketisation policy does not account for market volatility. Installing the market as a public service provider exposes marketised public services to fluctuations in the market. Whilst this may be positive during periods of economic growth, when the market enters recession, access to private welfare services becomes difficult for low-income earners unless the government commits to increasing subsidisation of these services.

Fiscal pressure is further heightened in instances of total market failure. Recalling Dean (2016), neoliberalism requires accepting "the inevitability of catastrophe" or, perhaps, a willing ignorance. If, indeed, the former is true, it is even more shocking that a robust social safety net does not exist in preparation for such instances. It is, perhaps, a reflection of human greed that a robust social safety net continues to be resisted in neoliberal public policy.

This flaw of neoliberalism was exposed during the COVID-19 Crisis. In Australia, the Coalition government was forced to be reactionary and triage, devising a welfare network that diametrically opposed its ideological orientation since the 1990s to assuage the financial harm experienced nationwide. Interestingly, the Australian response successfully ameliorated the worst of the financial burden. The Australian response will be discussed in further detail in the following section. Pertinent to this section is that regardless of its success, the Australian neoliberal policy agenda exposed the

Australian population to the possibility of market failure and, thus, caused social policy/safety net vulnerabalisation to harm during the COVID-19 Crisis.

5.2 A return to the left

The hypothesis presented in section 5.1 will be tested for rigour in this section. In order to conduct this test, the section seeks to answer whether vulnerability to harm was an inevitable externality of the COVID-19 Crisis regardless of a country's policy agenda at the time of the Crisis. This section will compare and contrast the policy approaches to the COVID-19 Crisis in Australia and Vietnam to inform its answer to this question.

5.2.1 Ideological vulnerabalisation in Vietnam

The most crucial difference between Australia and Vietnam is the political ideology underpinning each context's policy agenda. In the previous section, this thesis determined that Australia's neoliberal policy agenda exposed the Australian population to ideological vulnerabalisation to harm. Before discussing the policy ramifications of Vietnam's market socialist policy agenda, it is essential to consider whether it is also a cause of ideological vulnerabalisation.

As discussed in Chapter 4, though it has adopted various neoliberal tools in its socialist-oriented market economics, the Vietnamese political system remains staunchly socialist. Unlike both classical liberalism and neoliberalism, the socialist ideology of Vietnam does not conceive the individual as the sole object of prosperity, but the community, redolent of the socialist maxim, "from each according to their ability, to each according to their need" (Spies-Butcher, 2020). To reiterate Nordhaug et al. (2021, p.18, "questions of class, inequality and welfare are obviously fundamental to the socialist market economy". In theory, protection against ideological vulnerabalisation, then, should be enshrined in Vietnamese market socialism. However, it is worth noting that, in practice, implementing Doi Moi and embracing markets has complicated the pursuit of utopian socialist ideals. Recalling Fforde (2019), implementing socialist-oriented market economics has not been without corruption in Vietnam. Nevertheless, despite the encroachment of neoliberal policy tools and a complicated path to its current political agenda, the role of government in Vietnam remains to cultivate communal prosperity. Le et al. (2021, p.8) emphasise this sentiment, noting that during the COVID-19 Crisis, the Vietnamese government was prompt to accept "economic losses in exchange for the safety of people's health and lives."

5.2.2 Social policy/safety net vulnerabalisation in Vietnam

The Vietnamese economic miracle has comprised unprecedented economic growth in Vietnam since it adopted Doi Moi in 1986. The income per capita growth between 1986 and 2018 has contributed to the reclassification of Vietnam from a low-income economy to a middle-income economy. Of particular importance to this thesis is that this remarkable positive trend in income per capita growth contradicts the corresponding growth trend recorded in Australia over the same period insofar as it does not reflect a negative correlation between income per capita growth and income inequality.

As discussed in Chapter 4.1, between 2000 and 2019, income per capita growth in Australia has been consistent. Over the same period, income inequality has risen, reflecting an inverse correlation between the two variables. However, in Vietnam, between 1994 and 2016, household income per capita has improved while income inequality has reduced (with the notable exception of the Gini coefficient recorded in 2008, which represents an outlier likely caused by the GFC), reflecting a positive correlation between the variables. This thesis hypothesises that the stark differences in these statistics are primarily the result of the different social protection policies in each context. Where the Australian welfare state has gradually become marketised, welfare programs in Vietnam are ultimately managed by the State. To paraphrase Long (2010), the welfare state in Vietnam is characterised by a three-stage system designed to prevent risk before it occurs, assist those at risk, and provide for those unable to do so themselves. By casting a comprehensive social safety net, the Vietnamese government has been able to mitigate the potential for inequality inherent in market-based economics. The final stage, in particular, is a likely contributor to the mitigation of widening income inequality during the period of study in Vietnam that accounts for disadvantaged populations that would likely fall into poverty in a marketised welfare state.

5.2.3 Vulnerability to harm during the COVID-19 Crisis

As of the advent of the COVID-19 Crisis, the Vietnamese population was less at risk of harm caused by both ideological vulnerabalisation and social policy/safety net vulnerabalisation than people in the Australian context. Interestingly, as alluded to in section 5.1.2, the findings suggest that during the first waves of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Australian population were not vulnerabalised to harm as expected in the foreshadowing implicit in the findings from the study period prior to COVID-19. Household income per capita in Australia remained stable between 2019 and 2020, and yet income inequality reduced, reflecting an instance of positive correlation between household income per capita growth and income inequality. Moreover, these figures suggest that Australians were able to absorb

the financial harm of the Crisis better than the Vietnamese, who experienced a decrease in household income per capita and an increase in income inequality.

This thesis proposes that Australia's relative success at mitigating vulnerability to the financial harm of the COVID-19 Crisis can be attributed to a temporary recession of neoliberalism in the agenda setting. As the market failed, the Australian government had to intercede as the essential service provider, resembling public service provision reminiscent of the era before the establishment of the neoliberal order.

Two significant caveats are worth mentioning. The first is that the JobKeeper Payment policy was not perfect. It was created hastily and included both gaps in accessibility, as well as wastage. For example, the ABS survey referenced in Chapter 4.2 noted that "of those receiving the JobKeeper Payment, approximately half were receiving less income than their usual pay, one-third were receiving about the same and one in five were receiving more" (The Treasury, 2020). The second caveat is that though the JobKeeper Payment policy was successful in ameliorating much of the financial burden of the Crisis, one must not be too quick to draw a causal link between that success and the government's reduction of individual's harm as a result of the Crisis. The JobKeeper Payment policy was, at its core, an attempt to save the market and the Australian economy at large. Incidental to this goal was the protection of individuals from vulnerability to harm. In other words, the government treated individuals subject to this policy as worthy of financial protection only insofar as they were part of the mechanics of safeguarding Australia's markets and its economy as a whole, as opposed to being individuals whom it is the government's intrinsic mandate to protect from vulnerability to harm. This hypothesis is evidenced by welfare protection being conditional upon mutual obligation requirements, namely employment, rather than allowing people to have unconditional access to welfare support.

Whether neoliberalism vulnerabalised the Australian population to harm during the COVID-19 crisis remains to be answered. The answer, evidently, is complicated. On the one hand, as discussed in Chapter 5.1.1, vulnerabalisation of the individual is inherent to the ideological underpinnings of the neoliberal policy agenda. Moreover, the neoliberal policy agenda in Australia has gradually removed the social safety net which existed to protect individuals from the volatility innate in market-based economic systems. On the other hand, despite its apparent unpreparedness for an economic crisis, in this case, the COVID-19 Crisis, The Australian government was able to mobilise a policy response that afforded Australians a greater degree of protection than even those in a socialist system, as in Vietnam. This thesis concludes that despite the Australian government's success in softening the harm of the COVID-19 Crisis, the Australian neoliberal policy agenda leading into the Crisis did, nonetheless, increase the vulnerability to harm experienced by Australians throughout. This thesis

proposes that the Australian government's success in easing the economic burden of the Crisis can be attributed to the tempering of the neoliberal policy agenda due to market failure.

5.3 Policy proposal: the case for a universal basic income

The COVID-19 Crisis exposed the vulnerability to harm that results when a marketised public service suffers from market failure. In order to cast a safety net, and prevent disadvantaged communities from suffering from inadequate welfare accessibility and quality in future crises, this thesis echoes the call for the adoption of a universal basic income (UBI) in Australia. A universal basic income provides unconditional financial security in circumstances of heightened unemployment, such as that precipitating the COVID-19 Crisis, providing workers with the capacity to seek alternative employment or invest in retraining without the pressure of meeting mutual obligation requirements. Moreover, a UBI protects against the labour exploitation, whereby disadvantaged individuals are compelled to work in unfavourable working conditions in order to afford the costs of living. The implementation of a UBI, therefore, would address one of the causes of widening income inequality in Australia, discussed in chapter 5.1. Whilst this brief section intends to stimulate the conversation around the suitability of a UBI in Australia, this thesis strongly recommends further investigation of such a proposal.

6. Concluding remarks

The Australian experience of COVID-19 exposed the flaws inherent in neoliberalism. Throughout the literature, it was widely hoped that this exposure might precipitate a shift away from neoliberal policy, though this hope was often tempered by scepticism. Indeed, the dramatic rise in income inequality proves that such scepticism was not unfounded, as the neoliberal *modus operandi* has resumed with increased fervour. It remains only to hope that the lessons of the COVID-19 experience will stimulate a degree of policy reform in the future.

The primary limitation of this thesis is its examination of the COVID-19 Crisis and policy responses to the Crisis within relative temporal proximity to the event. The literature would benefit from future study analysing Australian household income per capita and income inequality data sets as they normalise after the COVID-19 Crisis. Moreover, similar comparative analyses conducted comparing the Australian political context with other political contexts would serve to deepen an understanding of the implications of a neoliberal policy agenda and the vulnerability to harm of constituents, further testing the hypothesis presented in this thesis.

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