

Saving your legacy

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Dear Mum,

In my mind's eye, I see you here, walking along the Pittwater shore. The bay is grey today, but the sun is beginning to reach through the clouds to brighten the water and the wind is sougning through the Casuarinas. I have come to that finger of land near the school and to my surprise the anti-tank pyramid is still here, marking the war you fought.

I used to sit in this spot and wonder how your generals must have thought the West Head gun battery would not hold, hence these defences down the bay. In my childish way, I imagined myself a coast watcher, reporting on enemy movements and decoding signals when the next war came along.

Then when a flyer came in my letterbox about coal seam gas mining in the water catchment I realised that an invader of a different kind was attacking our way of life. It's really beautiful down the coast where I live now, but the mining corporations want to drill in the Woronora Dam area. This dam and four others all along the escarpment supply water to Wollongong, Sydney and the Southern Highlands. They know that any drilling activity in the catchment could poison the water, yet it seems our parliament and courts, our water board won't protect the dams any more.

Things are getting worse by the day. The government is so extreme and they are trying to implement a budget which benefits large corporations, yet will utterly diminish the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. They say we are 'living in the age of entitlement' because we expect *our* taxes to pay to support us through difficulties like unemployment and sickness and pay for education and retirement. Only people who worked their whole life in an office could think it is OK to stop people from retiring until they're 70. And all the while the corporate tax rate is being reduced.

Sadly Mona Vale Hospital is under threat. Your community on the peninsula is still fighting to save it, but it looks grim. The government want to sell the hospital off to developers, and spend the revenue on a private hospital at Frenchs Forest. I remember how important the hospital was to you. You told me the story of how just after the war the community started to mobilise to build the hospital, and the big parade we went to through Mona Vale on opening day. It must have been such a relief knowing it was there, bringing up young children in the funnel-web capital of the world.

They started blaming your generation for the high cost of health care years ago, and now your children – the baby boomers – are described as "unaffordable" as we start to hit 60. I don't understand this. In 1946 when our troops were home there were thousands of young men in need

of health care for debilitating war conditions, as well as a boom in births. The government didn't talk about not being able to afford the care of the disabled and mentally ill servicemen, or tell pregnant women to fund their own care. They just opened rehabilitation hospitals, built maternity wards and opened schools. After six years of war, yet they still managed to find the resources needed. Because that was part of the social contract the government had with the people.

But here we are now, the Treasurer, Hockey crying about a 'budget emergency' when since 1964 our economy has grown by a factor of 320% (and that's after adjusting for population and inflation). Over three times better off, but they tell us there is no money for health care for the very generations who grew this wealth.

So here I am finding out why and strange as it may seem, I have now become the coast watcher I imagined I would be as a child, but rather than use binoculars from cliff tops I use the internet and official reports to try and decode what those who are attacking your legacy are doing and planning next.

I discovered that the money of citizens paid in taxes is being siphoned away from public health services and used to build health 'assets' that can be bought and sold on the financial markets. Private interests want our public assets sold so the money from the sales, together with our superannuation, can be spent on infrastructure. This infrastructure won't be publicly owned. It will be owned by private equity investors and sovereign wealth funds. Shrewd operators stand to make billions from trading assets and commissions and fees. The super fund elites collected \$18 billion last year. Our health and even the data on it they collect, is being described as 'a trillion dollar market'. It's sickening, how they are spending our collective wealth on privatised assets but not on actual services.

On the Gold Coast, they've just opened a new hospital costing over \$2 billion and they boast that 70% of the beds are private rooms –but want to reduce the money doctors and nurses get paid. Doctors are fighting back, but the Newman government is trying to impose contract conditions that make doctors' duty to their patients untenable.

Much of our media has been representing corporate interests for a long time. What you once called 'enemy propaganda' is called 'spin'. I call it 'lies'. Like the lie about our level of debt forcing the government to sell our public assets. They are saying this to us, even as they borrow more and more money to pay corporations to build infrastructure which will then be privatised. The government has raised the debt ceiling from \$300 billion to \$500 billion. It's a sell-off and a mass borrowing all at once. Our children will have a huge debt, and they won't have any assets left to 'sell off' to pay it.

In the past, I know, you might have simply called it 'theft', but today in the computer age I think I'll call it 'hacking'. Who are the hackers? Investment banks, like Goldman Sachs and JP Morgan, have hacked into our financial system and are turning the wealth of the nation, literally, against us, the people.

The boards of our state and federal governments, entrusted with making all these major investment decisions like the Future Fund and Infrastructure Australia and Infrastructure NSW, are now mainly chaired and chosen from the same firms who benefit from privatisation, like foreign investment

banks and construction companies. Last financial year the government allowed over \$19 billion in foreign investment to come from the British Virgin Islands, a well-known tax haven.

I remember Nan and Gran describing how the bankers called in all the loans on individuals and the government during the Great Depression, and your own bitterness at seeing countless people sent to the wall. After the Great Depression and WWII were endured and fought, did you imagine it could ever happen again?

But the worst of the news is that the government is planning to sign a corporate investment agreement called the Trans Pacific Partnership Agreement. This gives a *private tribunal* power to override the decisions of our courts which will utterly diminish us as an autonomous sovereign state, the very thing you fought for and Alec and Peter died for.

Hockey is trying to convince the people that they have *no* entitlement, but it is not about entitlement. It is about the right of every generation to inherit the legacy of past generations and the responsibility of every generation to ensure that the legacy is added to and passed on.

Your generation left a post office and school in every town, safe drinking water, access for all to health care and a living aged pension and income for the sick and disabled. You did not leave a country where only the rich got health care and education without going into debt, nor did you leave a country where corporations and investment banks ran the government for their own benefit. We are conduits of the future and that is what ultimately gives our lives and the lives of our forebears meaning – that we collectively leave a better country, a better world behind us.

You fought *the tyranny of your day* and endured, as I must fight the tyranny of *my day*, the takeover of the country by those driven by an ideology that places corporate profits ahead of every other social and even spiritual goal.

I know how sad you must feel to hear all this, because you wanted a better life for us than you had.

But I know you are there, like the pyramid beside me as I dig my feet into the muddy sand of this place.

Your legacy will not be sold; it will go to the children. This I promise.

Always your loving daughter

Caroline



Betty Ellen Colton neé Wiltshire (VAD)
18.6.1921 – 11.3.2000