GRATTAN Institute

A summer reading list for the Prime Minister

8 December 2010

Grattan Institute

A summer reading list for the Prime Minister

As well as time to spend with family and friends, summer holidays are great for reflecting upon the year past, considering the year to come - and reading.

This is particularly true for our political leaders: throughout the year they have far less time than many to read. So Grattan has put together a selection of books we think they might find stimulating over the break. They are all good reads that will provide both entertainment and food for thought not just for the Prime Minister, but for politicians of all parties at all levels of government.

Obviously, we do not endorse every word in these books. We also hope that our leaders get the chance to do some reading purely for pleasure over the summer. Most of all, we hope they return refreshed and inspired, and even better equipped to lead the country.

Why the West Rules – for Now: The patterns of history and what they reveal about the future, Ian Morris (Profile Books Ltd., London, UK; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, US, 2010)

Fault Lines: How hidden fractures still threaten the world economy, Raghuram Rajan (Princeton University Press, US, 2010)

Trivial Pursuit: Leadership and the end of the reform era, George Megalogenis (Quarterly Essay 40, Black Ink Books, Aus, 2010)

Disconnected, Andrew Leigh (University of New South Wales Press Ltd., Sydney, Aus, 2010)

Our Fathers, Andrew O'Hagan (Faber and Faber Ltd., London, UK, 1999)

Art+Soul, Hetti Perkins (Miegunyah Press, Aus, 2010)

Merchants of Doubt: How a handful of scientists obscured the truth on issues from tobacco smoke to global warming, Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway (Bloomsbury Press, UK, 2010)

Wolf Hall, Hilary Mantel (Fourth Estate, UK, 2009)

Why the West Rules – for Now: The patterns of history and what they reveal about the future, Ian Morris

In 1860 the British burnt the Beijing Summer Palace, and looted a Pekinese dog – named Looty – who was presented to Queen Victoria. Yet just 260 years earlier China was well advanced with larger cities, more energy per person and higher literacy than anywhere in Western Europe. So why didn't Chinese gunboats sail up the River Thames?

Ian Morris argues that most civilisations in history bumped up against natural limits to development. Through a rollicking history ride full of entertaining asides, Morris shows how the success of civilisations attracted marauding nomads and reduced per capita incomes as growing populations competed for finite resources. When adverse climate variations compounded their problems, empires tended to fold.

Despite the fact that human development in the last 100 years has been 20 times the sum of the preceding 10,000 years, the critical question remains the same. Civilisations cannot survive when they bump up against resource constraints and climate change. How can human ingenuity solve this dilemma in our own time?

Fault Lines: How hidden fractures still threaten the world economy, Raghuram Rajan

Closer to our own time, what fundamental forces rocked the world's leading countries in 2009? Rajan, former chief economist of the International Monetary Fund, is clinical in his analysis of the causes. Legislators were well-intentioned in supporting home lending, the central bank believed in keeping interest rates low, while financial institutions thought their risks were manageable. The combination, however, was disastrous, and the problems were compounded by the perception that government would protect bond-holders and firms if there were a crisis.

There are some salutary lessons for Australia. Central banks may need to set interest rates to target asset bubbles as well as inflation. Government involvement in the housing market as an actual or implicit guarantor tends to end in tears. A perception that government will step in to prevent failure of a particular bank that has taken too many of the wrong risks just promotes even more irresponsible risk-taking.

Rajan's prescriptions are deceptively simple: improve the quality of education for the children of lower income earners; strengthen the US social safety net; open up domestic industries in developing countries to improve productivity; free up exchange rates; and reduce deficits in developed countries. He suggests that international organisations such as the IMF should do more as advocates for these outcomes, appealing directly to the voters of each country to act in their own long-term self-interests.

The Global Financial Crisis was the defining economic event of our times: Rajan's book may well be the definitive analysis of what happened, and what we need to do better in future.

Trivial Pursuit: Leadership and the end of the reform era, George Megalogenis

It is not a new criticism that today's poll-driven politics is not delivering policies in Australia's long term national interest. However, George Megalogenis argues that the hung Parliament resulting from the 2010 Federal Election should be a wake up call to politicians: the current model is not serving the interests of Australia's major political parties either.

Megalogenis attributes the shift in dynamics to a number of factors – the 24 hour media cycle, a generation of politicians who refuse to work together, the powerful lobbying of

vested interests and increasing concentrations of winners and losers along demographic and geographic lines. Together, these factors have made it too hard to have a sustained conversation with the Australian public about the need for, and benefits of, reform.

While his diagnosis of the problem is powerful, Megalogenis does not provide a clear prescription for change. With Australia's productivity performance continuing to deteriorate, his implicit recommendation is that all of us, from the Prime Minister down, need to find new ways of working together.

Disconnected, Andrew Leigh

There is a popular perception that forty years ago Australia was a kinder place where people were better connected and looked after each other more. Andrew Leigh, until recently one of Australia's leading academic economists, and now Federal MP for Fraser (ACT), gathers the numbers to test if this is true.

Leigh finds that Australians today have fewer friends who would help in a rough patch, and fewer friendly neighbours. The number, influence and membership of voluntary associations are down sharply – less than a third of the peak in the 1960s, with similar falls in political party membership, union membership, and sports participation. The only good news is that volunteering is picking back up. Leigh's work is consistent with Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone in the US*, and the recent report from the Young Foundation in the UK on material and psychological needs, *Sinking and Swimming: Understanding Britain's unmet needs*.

Leigh argues that some of the causes of reduced social connection in Australia are more people working long hours, more women working, and longer commuting times.

He suggests his readers can personally reverse these trends: hold a street party; use the web to find groups of people with similar interests; and volunteer. Those who do will be happier with their lives. Leigh leaves open the hard question for a Prime Minister: what can governments do (or stop doing) to increase social capital?

Our Fathers, Andrew O'Hagan

Against a background of constant attempts at urban regeneration, *Our Fathers* tells the story of three generations of the Bawn family in the west of Scotland.

An old-fashioned socialist, Hugh Bawn is 'Mr Housing', the man whose career was demolishing the slums of Glasgow in the 1950s and replacing them with high rises in the 1960s and 1970s. "He was known as the man who pushed the tower blocks. He believed they answered to people's needs." His generation of planners and councillors were passionate about improving the circumstances in which people lived. But, blinkered by over-reliance on isolated expertise and a paternalistic certainty of how people should live, they "wanted the world to answer to us". The towers they built became the 'blight of Glasgow', hated by those who had to live in them.

Like his grandfather, Jamie Bawn believes passionately in providing affordable housing for the masses, but his vision involves the demolition of his grandfather's constructions, streets in the sky whose promise crumbled along with the materials from which they were made.

We no longer build tower blocks like those in Glasgow, but this extraordinary novel reminds us of the dangers of doing 'to' people. As Australia prepares for significant population growth we should pay attention to what makes new communities work. After all, "we shape our buildings, afterwards they shape us".

Art+Soul, Hetti Perkins

Art+Soul is a stand-alone book which grew out of a 3-part ABC documentary series on Aboriginal Art. Ranging across the traditional and the contemporary, from the Kimberley to inner-city Melbourne, curator Hetti Perkins describes the artists' desire to record their stories for their children and grandchildren, and to share them with the wider community. As Perkins remarks in the introduction,

> *"Many of the artists we meet in the book lived completely separated from non-Indigenous Australia as young men and women. Within the coming generations, even perhaps within our lifetime, living memory of our country before contact will be lost."*

The art is, of course, astonishing, but the real power of this book is to place it firmly within the individual experience of the artists. Welcomed into the homes and homelands of senior artists, we get past the marketing to the stories told by the artists themselves. Such access is a rare privilege, but is also confronting: making plain the contrast between the richness of the heritage underlying the stunning art, and the modern realities of Aboriginal Australia.

Merchants of Doubt: How a handful of scientists obscured the truth on issues from tobacco smoke to global warming, Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway

Oreskes and Conway – both historians of science – detail a 'truth is stranger than fiction' story about how a small group of scientists managed to deliberately create doubt about the need for government regulation across a diverse range of social problems. Over more than thirty years these men undermined the case for intervention in tobacco smoke, acid rain, ozone depletion and global warming. Mostly with distinguished careers in defence-related scientific research, they were motivated more by their concern to fight communism and government intervention than by a dispassionate assessment of evidence. They repeatedly employed a strategy of highlighting relatively minor cases of uncertainty, calling into doubt entire bodies of substantial scientific research which suggested genuine and serious health and environmental problems.

It is disturbing that such a small number of people could have such a pervasive influence over public debate. The authors argue that these scientists exploited the media's convention of providing 'balanced' reporting that aired both sides of an argument irrespective of merit. The general public and their elected representatives were readily drawn into doubt about the need for immediate action.

One of the important lessons to take from this book is that the media and politicians should become more familiar with the scientific peer review process and understand how a piece of research is regarded by the scientific community, enabling them to sort the wheat from the chaff. The media and politicians need to be able to go directly to the source of scientific research rather than relying predominantly on information intermediaries such as NGOs and, dare we say it, think tanks.

Wolf Hall, Hilary Mantel

Hilary Mantel's novel, set in the court of Henry VIII, has been around for eighteen months or so, and won the last but one Booker Prize. Nevertheless, we have included it this year for two reasons.

First, it has much to say about government, and the exercise – and ends – of power. Even more importantly, it is a powerful reminder of the inescapable need for real leadership. Treatments of the period usually emphasise the role of Thomas More, who here is presented as dogmatic and unbending. But Mantel takes Thomas Cromwell as her protagonist, and draws a sympathetic portrait of his extraordinary competence,

diligence and persistence; someone who stops at little to advance his reforming agenda, but who ultimately acts in the service of humane objectives: tolerance, kindness, education and freedom. It also deals with the intersection of individual psychology and wider events, showing clearly the effect that a particular personality can have on a situation:

> *"Here at the close of the year 1533, his spirit is sturdy, his will strong, his front imperturbable. The courtiers see that he can shape events, mould them. He can contain the fears of other men, and give them a sense of solidity in a quaking world: this people, this dynasty, this miserable rainy island at the edge of the world."*

Second, it is a cracking read. It is long, but it also both tight and intimate. Mantel's vividly realised sixteenth century is an absorbing place to spend holiday hours.