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This is the author’s preprint version of this article.
I realised during the recent election campaign that I have lost, if I ever had it, the feeling that it is useful or even wise to pay much attention to what politicians say. I place far more trust in the opinions of people ‘in the know’ – scientists, journalists, historians, lawyers – than in the rhetoric of politics.

Every commentator has a position of their own, of course, although I still believe that empirical science can be impartial even if interpretations vary. Which is why I’m more inclined to trust physicist Ian Lowe’s position on nuclear power than that of any politician. Lowe is the author of Black Inc’s September *Quarterly Essay*, *Reaction Time: Climate Change and the Nuclear Option*. With cool precision, Lowe builds up a devastating argument against investment in nuclear energy in this (or any) country. Lowe is a particularly clever rhetorician, one who warns readers against himself: he admits that ‘there is no objective truth about the future performance, cost and safety of nuclear reactors. … So you should read all statements about the nuclear issue – including this essay – with a critical eye.’ His tone is passionate but never hectoring, and though he uses humour to sweeten the pill, this is a very frightening book.

But it has nothing on Naomi Wolf’s *The End of America* (Scribe). This might be the most powerful, inexorable piece of polemic I’ve ever read: ‘There are ten steps that are taken in order to close down a democracy or crush a prodemocratic movement. … Impossible as it may seem, we are seeing each of these ten steps taking hold in the United States today.’ Wolf compares the rise of historical totalitarian
states with what’s happening in America today. Although these changes have occurred under Bush, she points out that ‘in the absence of traditional checks and balances, President Hillary Clinton endangers us no less than President Giuliani.’

Following *The End of America*, I read Julian Burnside’s *A Watching Brief* (Scribe), and was hardly reassured by the contrast between Australia and the US. It wouldn’t be impossible to map Wolf’s ten steps onto recent Australian events discussed in Burnside’s book. He is particularly passionate about the legal status of asylum seekers, and human rights abuses: The Pacific Solution, Guantánamo Bay, and detention centres all arouse his indignation, but he is sometimes inclined weaken his argument by overstating his case: it doesn’t help to describe asylum seekers as ‘a handful of women and children fleeing the Taliban or Saddam Hussein.’ As he says himself, ‘honesty matters’.

UNSW Press is rivalling Black Inc and Scribe in timely contributions to the political debate. Their recent publication *Deported: A History of Forced Departures from Australia* by Glenn Nicholls is part polemic, part scholarly study. Nicholls traces the law and practice of deportation since federation, and suggests ways in which deportation laws can be made more humane without sacrificing security or sovereignty. The historical perspective is particularly illuminating: by pointing out that Australia was first populated by deportees, Nicholls casts an unfamiliar backlight onto today’s deportation policies.

The books in the UNSW Briefings series have striking titles, like *No, Prime Minister: Reclaiming Politics from Leaders* and *Behind Closed Doors: Politics, Scandals and the Lobbying Industry*. But despite the marketing, these short books are not always as polemical as they appear. James Walter and Paul Strangio’s *No Prime Minister* is a classic work of persuasion: charting the growth over the past 30 years of
the power of political leaders, and suggesting how it can be countered. John Warhurst’s *Behind Closed Doors* is milder, allowing that ‘people who operate behind closed doors are not necessarily doing anything untoward,’ despite lobbying’s ‘the dark side’ represented by Brian Burke. Both kinds of book are informative and useful, but this slightly sensational marketing might mislead.

Some books have little trouble getting readers on board. Kevin Bales’ *Ending Slavery* (University of California Press) presents an uncontroversial point: slavery should be eliminated. But didn’t Wilberforce manage that 200 years ago? No: worldwide, there are some 27 million slaves today. Bales is passionate and practical, offering advice to everyone from individuals to the UN. I now wonder about the source when buying chocolate or cotton products.

At the end of each *Quarterly Essay* Black Inc prints responses to the previous essay from various viewpoints. This reinforces the series’ claims to promote intellectual debate, but reading these claims and counterclaims, how one craves the view from nowhere: the ultimate, authoritative truth about the future which is, of course, not available to any present-day mortal. Instead, one must make do with the pleasure of being carried on a wave of intelligent rhetoric, having one’s beliefs eloquently validated, scoffing at the ‘the Energizer Bunny of Australian politics’ (Howard according to Walter and Strangio) or ‘the silver bodgie himself’ (Hawke according to Lowe).

All these books are backed up with copious but unobtrusive notes – essential for responsible persuasion – though there is sometimes the sneaking feeling that the scales are weighted, especially when facts are fudged or language is sloppy – ‘Globalization is a verb’, says Bales! It doesn’t really undermine his argument, but it calls into question the clarity of his thought processes.
Is the world going to hell in a handbasket? On the evidence of these writers, perhaps so, but at least, thanks to these books and many like them, we’re not going quietly.