

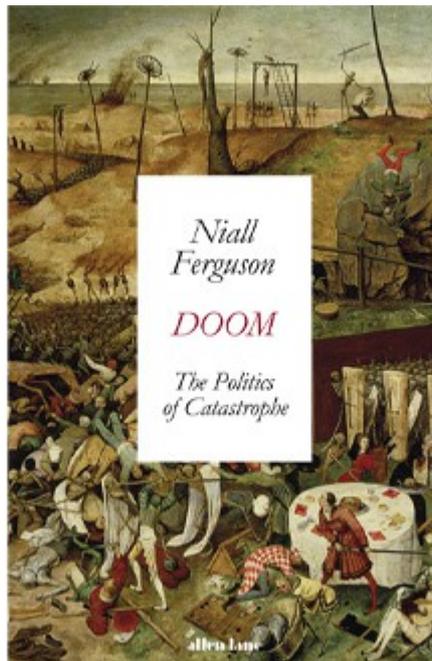
Something Very Fishy

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When leaders pursue the politics of catastrophe, the cure becomes worse than the disease, writes IPA Research Fellow Morgan Begg in this review of Niall Ferguson's new book.

It seemed appropriate that just days before Dr Peter Ridd's challenge for academic freedom was heard by the High Court a United Nations committee announced its intention to list the Great Barrier Reef as being 'in danger' and called for Australia to 'urgently' address the threat of climate change. The UNESCO World Heritage Committee declaration that the reef was endangered coincided precisely with what was at the core of Peter Ridd's dispute with his former employer, James Cook University (JCU). Ridd was subject to a series of investigations and disciplinary proceedings which were based on private and public comments which challenged the scientific consensus that the reef was dying, and to criticise the research being produced which failed to be properly checked by people who were not able to be objective about their work.



Doom: The Politics of Catastrophe
Niall Ferguson
Penguin Allen Lane, 2021,
pp496

Ridd was later fired by JCU, and State and Federal governments have slavishly spent billions of dollars to 'protect the reef'. In other words, debate about reef health was quashed, and all governments have bought into the narrative that the reef needed protection. That international bureaucrats would believe the same was inevitable .

The reef saga reveals something about our modern political culture and scientific establishment that is not limited to climate science. It seems now that science has been replaced by 'the science', where white-coated 'experts' make theocratic proclamations about what the scientific advice tells them. The political class is in their thrall, unwilling to blaspheme against the dogma of the day. Consider what has happened since March 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated what the world governed by 'the science' looks like. It finds its form in the single-minded, myopic focus on eliminating risk from virus infection but ignoring the side-effects of their policy prescriptions, combined with an intolerance towards any views which go against the medical advice.



Peter Ridd (second from

left) after his hearing at the High Court, June 2021, with John Roskam, Cheryl Ridd, Morgan Begg, Evan Mulholland, and Elaine Ridd.
 Photo: IPA

This kind of alarmism is only possible if certain preconditions are met. The first is that society must be suitably atomised so people can be conscripted as followers of the cause. Once people are sufficiently alienated and the ties of community and civil society are shorn, they can be induced to find meaning through social causes such as climate activism or to be ‘Danbots’—the social media enforcers of Victoria’s emergent police state.

Climate activism is being weaponised by the Chinese communist government.

The second and third conditions—mendacity and avarice—are not unrelated. For instance, the United Nations committee listing the Great Barrier Reef as endangered is chaired by the Chinese government, and comes at a time that Beijing is destroying reefs in the South China Sea to create military installations on artificial islands.

The climate activism and catastrophist official reports are being weaponised by the Chinese communist government to weaken Australia as a regional power, which in turn enhances their own power in the region. Exaggerating the threat is also immensely beneficial for a network of activists and researchers (to the extent they can be separated): ‘trusted’ scientific organisations such as the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (see for example its *Outlook Report 2019*), the Australian Institute of Marine Sciences, the Great Barrier Reef Foundation and others collect hundreds of millions of dollars every year from State and the Federal government every year on

the proviso their work is indispensable, given the threat of catastrophic climate change.

Their work now has the imprimatur of the UN, which can shame Australian governments into committing to greater climate 'action'.

While this explains some of the motives at play, it may not fully explain how a temporary shutdown to ensure hospital capacity was not breached quickly morphed into an eradication strategy which is seeing lockdowns enacted 15 months after the first state of emergency was declared.

Historian Niall Ferguson's latest book, *Doom: The Politics of Catastrophe*, helps to shed further light on the forces at work here. In his expansive study of disasters throughout history, Ferguson identifies a psychology of political incompetence, and in particular notes that in such crises there tends to be a failure to learn from history, a failure of imagination, a tendency to fight the last crisis, threat underestimation, and procrastination, or waiting for a certainty that never comes.



Niall Ferguson

This is often the case, but obviously the response to COVID-19 does not perfectly fit this model. Western governments had learned from the history of recent pandemics, but such plans were thrown out the door. In Australia, the *Australian Health Management Plan for Pandemic Influenza*, first written in 2014 and updated by the federal Department of Health in August 2019, was entirely contradicted by the COVID-19 response implemented in 2020. The Plan's balanced and evidence-based framework was overridden by every aspect of the State and Federal Government response which favoured blanket measures across the entire population, including closure of interstate borders, mandatory isolation, school closures and mandatory mask rules. Rules elsewhere, such as the United Kingdom's *Influenza Pandemic Preparedness Strategy 2011*, were similarly discarded. Rather than threat underestimation, governments focussed their efforts on COVID-19

like they were fighting a holy war.

Politicians have put so much political capital into their draconian response.

More useful is what Ferguson reveals in historical case studies. In particular, the pandemic of 1957 revealed how the United States adequately and proportionately responded to a new and deadly influenza pandemic without strict social isolation measures, scare campaigns, and school closures. Or how—despite the total professionalisation of politics since then—the quality of policy development and governance is so much worse now. As Ferguson notes,

There is no need to idealise the federal government of the Eisenhower era... It is enough simply to observe that the rise of the ‘administrative state’ has produced pathologies every bit as harmful, and perhaps in the long run more so, than the virus SARS-CoV-2.

Ferguson also identifies in other crisis responses the harm done by bureaucratic inertia, group-think and mediocre middle managers pursuing perverse incentives. In the case of COVID-19, we know many public health officials have been handed immense emergency powers to govern—without democratic control or accountability—the lives of every person in their respective states, which is something they were never qualified to wield. And politicians have put so much political capital into their draconian response, many are seemingly locked into that position, either fearing the perception of backflipping or that they may be castigated as engaging in the high crime of spreading ‘conspiracy theories’. Hence why governments have doubled-down on their lockdown strategy, and have refused to revisit even in light of evidence that would seriously undermine its viability.

Ferguson’s study is not entirely without value, but its worthwhile insights tend to be buried under a dizzying array of information. The breadth of research is clear, but the work struggles to land an impact. The thesis of Ferguson’s work, if there is one, is that all disasters—whether natural or manmade—are grounded in “a history of economics, society, culture, and politics”. This is obviously true, and a clearer thesis fails to emerge, as Ferguson could be mistaken for including in *Doom* perhaps every tidbit and fact he collected in his research, many of which are irrelevant.

This leads to a larger criticism of Ferguson’s writing: so much ultimately tends to be uninteresting. Ferguson is a conservative of some variety, but as a public intellectual must make every effort to hide it. This task is only made more difficult as the elite of global citizenry to which he appears to associate has become more disconnected and divorced from reality. As Charles Haywood noted in his review of Ferguson’s 2015 book, *Kissinger 1923-1968: The Idealist*, writing on his website ‘The Worthy House’:

[Ferguson] sails an unstable path, between the Scylla of cancellation and the Charybdis of irrelevancy. He’s conservative, or what passes for that amongst our elites, but a member of, and dependent on, our loathsome ruling class of ‘global citizens’. He always risks being cancelled, because he’s based in reality. As his class departs more and more in its thoughts and habits from reality, such men of the in-between twilight have less and less room to manoeuvre.

Writing at *Bloomberg.com* in June this year, Ferguson blamed vaccine hesitancy as a reason we should expect the COVID-19 regulations to remain in place for some time. This is the idea that people who are unsure about the safety of the vaccines, or who just disagree that their freedoms should be held hostage in this way, are the people responsible for restrictive measures staying in place, rather than the people who are issuing the actual restrictions. This can be understood as a refuge of the conservative seeking respectability, who can only advance rational ends by ensuring blame is still placed on the mainstream, relatively powerless segment of the population rather than the political class exercising actual power.

Allowing the political class to make freedom conditional on vaccines is wrong.

This is unfortunate because Ferguson knows the measures are harmful, independently of whether or not vaccines are available. In *Doom*, written well before vaccines were on the market, Ferguson considers that lockdowns suffocated livelihoods in exchange for an insufficient return in saved lives. He should also know that allowing the political class to make freedom conditional on vaccines is wrong, because they have been wrong about so much until now.

Indeed, COVID-19 is shaping up to be the catastrophe that never was. It has not proven to be the humanitarian crisis we were promised. Early modelling produced by the federal Department of Health published in April 2020 predicted that with “isolation, quarantine and social isolation” measures daily demand for ICU beds would be as high as 5,000. This bolstered the case for stringent lockdown measures to ‘slow the spread’ of the virus so it did not overwhelm hospital capacity. In reality, research indicates that in the first four months of the pandemic peak the daily ICU bed occupancy was 90, recorded in April 2020. The modelling was off by a factor of about 55. Between 1 June and 31 August 2020, total nationwide ICU admissions was on 236, with ICU admissions in all states (except Victoria) far below what occurred in 2009 because of the H1N1 influenza.

Early modelling from the influential Imperial College in London projected that without lockdowns there would be 40 million COVID-19 deaths worldwide. The model assumed an infection fatality rate of 0.9 per cent, but the actual IFR is 0.15 (off by a factor of 6) and the median IFR for people under 70 years of aged is 0.05 per cent.

Disastrously, in New York State, the scientific advice prompted Governor Andrew Cuomo to make space in the hospitals by sending elderly patients infected with the virus back to the one place it could flourish: nursing homes with other elderly people. One third of all deaths in the US due to COVID-19 occurred in nursing homes as Democratic governors obediently followed ‘the science’.

Also in the US, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention acknowledged in statistics that 95 per cent of COVID-19 deaths had an average of four related underlying health conditions, and that its death count includes “deaths involving unintentional and intentional injury”. A similar disclosure does not appear to have been made in the Australian context.

The political class has got it wrong at almost every turn.

Some conservatives who abhor the lockdowns argue we need to increase the uptake of vaccines so that the political class will feel comfortable shifting away from a restriction-focussed policy setting. This argument should be rejected. The political class has got it wrong at almost every turn and has not demonstrated the reason or restraint so much so that conservatives should be surrendering their principles. If the political class is not opposed at a fundamental level, they will only feel encouraged in their present path, and a shift away from their disastrous policies is not guaranteed. Unless the argument is put clearly that the pandemic did not warrant the response that has taken place—lockdowns were disproportionate, and vaccines are not necessary to return to normal—then the Overton window (the range of policies politically acceptable to the mainstream) will not shift.

A failure to make the political class uncomfortable for their actions could have long-lasting consequences. There is no shortage of policy areas that can be elevated into a doom scenario. The listing by a UN committee of the Great Barrier Reef as endangered is indicative of how a special interest can ratchet up fear for greater political action. As Dr Peter Ridd has asserted, the quality of the scientific research about the reef is thoroughly compromised, but this research has been used to generate enormous government outlays and demands for policy action to combat climate change. Despite this, the measures that have been proposed and adopted have still been made in the context of a political environment in which the population is either sceptical of the claimed risks, or considers the costs of action to be greater than the disease.

The COVID-19 response gives us a glimpse of what a government response can look like if the population can be convinced to accept the strongest policy action regardless of its cost. Without an effective opposition the 'doom' will not be the next pandemic or climate events, but the economic, social, and humanitarian crisis of the next government response.

Morgan Begg's account of Peter Ridd's legal saga, excerpted from Peter's Ridd's book, *Reef Heresy* (Connor Court Publishing, 2020), can be found at ipa.org.au/peterridd

This article from the [Winter 2021 edition](#) of the [IPA Review](#) is written by IPA Research Fellow, Morgan Begg.