

COMMENTARY

JUDITH SLOAN

Anti-nuclear Bowen stuck in a fantasy world of his own

Picture the scene. It's a "town and gown" event being held at the University of Chicago. An entrepreneurial businessman approaches a well-known economics professor. He outlines his business proposition, describing the market, the potential demand, the technical requirements, the costs. The professor's response is simple: if it's such a good idea, it would already exist.

And let's not forget here the group of countries at the recent climate COPs that have committed to tripling the capacity of nuclear generation in their countries by 2050 – 31 this year. Australia is increasingly looking like an irrelevant wallflower on the world stage of climate action.

It is also why the cost generation estimates put out by the CSIRO must look an ill-conceived and befuddled mess to an outside observer. Apart from the obvious question of why a government-funded scientific organisation is even undertaking such an exercise – estimating costs is an exercise for economists, accountants and engineers, not scientists – the guesses are simply irrelevant. The thing that really matters is system-wide costs.

If Bowen is so convinced nuclear has no future in the country – well, apart from ANSTO and AUKUS – then he should commit to lifting the bans because, in his mind, it would make no difference. We could then assess whether there is any real interest in building a nuclear power industry in this country

Note here also the embarrassing result of the latest iteration of this dubious exercise – that coal-fired power is the cheapest means of generation, something the average person in the street probably appreciates. It's something the Chinese and Indians also fully understand.

The CSIRO nuclear results remain completely unconvincing, particularly those related to small modular nuclear reactors. It is true that the utilisation rate of nuclear plants is very important to the outcome on unit prices. But to assume a low rate of utilisation, as the CSIRO does, is to skew the data towards relatively high costs.

The CSIRO has now conceded nuclear power plants last longer than 30 years – that was the assumption last year. But the methodology employed means there is no noticeable difference in the costs of a plant that lasts 60 years rather than 30 years. The reality on the ground is that even after considering refurbishment and maintenance costs, the last several decades of a nuclear power plant generates very low capital as well as operating costs.

One of the key benefits of hav-

ing several nuclear plants in Australia is the saving on the renewable energy overbuild as well as the extremely expensive and relatively under-utilised infrastructure needed to connect the intermittent power to the grid. Network costs currently are the largest component of electricity prices; a future with nuclear would constrain their costs relatively to reliance on renewable energy.

It will never make economic sense to build transmission lines at a cost of many billions of dollars for electricity to flow only a quarter of the time, say, and at somewhat unpredictable times. But this is what the Bowen plan involves. Once that transmission line is certified as a "regulated" asset, the costs are passed on to consumers essentially for ever. This aspect of the government's strategy has been under-reported.

The fact is that new transmission lines are causing all sorts of headaches in addition to the legitimate objections of rural and regional folk to the unwelcome intrusion on the landscape. The cost of constructing new transmission lines has blown out dramatically. Just take the completely unjustified Copper-String transmission line linking Mount Isa to Townsville. Only last year, the Queensland Labor government estimated the cost at \$1.5bn; it is now estimated to cost at least \$9bn.

No doubt there is a lot of water to go under the bridge when it comes to the nuclear-plus-renewables versus renewables-plus-storage debate. Sadly, it won't be a sensible debate because Labor is intent on politicising the issues rather than objectively weighing up of the costs and benefits.

Labor has dug itself into a hole that may end up costing the country dearly. Bowen has finally realised that his plan can only work with gas as a critical backup. But having demonised gas for so long – and let's not even talk about the behaviour of the Victorian and NSW governments here – there is now a shortage of gas for domestic purposes. We face the bizarre prospect of importing LNG, with all its attendant costs, to shore up the electricity grid as well as supply gas to the domestic market.

The end result is electricity prices that are highly correlated with the gas price, with gas as the marginal supplier. Having acres of rooftop solar makes no effective difference to this outcome and creates problems for grid stability.

Hopefully, there will be some sensible debate in the New Year. If Bowen is so convinced nuclear has no future in the country – well, apart from ANSTO and AUKUS – then he should commit to lifting the bans because, in his mind, it would make no difference. We could then assess whether there is any real interest in building a nuclear power industry in this country.

Throughout the English-speaking world elites are falling over themselves to believe the very worst of their own countries.

Let's consider Canada. In May 2021 an Indian band in Kamloops, British Columbia claimed ground-penetrating radar had discovered "soil disturbances" that evidenced unmarked graves containing the remains of 215 "missing children" in land associated with an Indian Residential School.

The media quickly sexed up the story into one of "mass graves", with all its connotation of murderous atrocity. On May 30 the Toronto Globe and Mail published an article under the title "The discovery of a mass gravesite at a former residential school in Kamloops is just the tip of the iceberg". In it, Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond, professor of law at the University of British Columbia, wrote: "It is horrific. But it is not shocking. In fact, it is the opposite – a too-common unearthing of the legacy, and enduring reality, of colonialism in Canada."

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau ordered Canadian flags to be flown at half-mast on all federal buildings to honour the murdered children. Because the Kamloops school had been run by a Roman Catholic religious order, some zealous citizens took to burning and vandalising churches, 85 of them to date. The dreadful tale was eagerly broadcast worldwide by Al Jazeera.

Yet, more than three years later, not a single set of remains of

a murdered Indian child in an unmarked grave has been found either in Kamloops or elsewhere in Canada. Indeed, not a single attempt to disinter an alleged grave has been made.

Judging by the evidence collected by Chris Champion and Tom Flanagan in their best-selling book, *Grave Error: How the Media Misled Us (and the Truth about the Residential Schools)*, it looks increasingly probable that the Kamloops story, and the ones that followed it, are myths.

Meanwhile, in Britain, the Church of England has committed itself to pour an initial £100m (\$198.4m) of its assets into an investment fund for "black-led" businesses around the world. This was made "to address ... past wrongs" in response to the discovery that the Queen Anne's Bounty, a forerunner of the church's endowment, had "links" with African chattel enslavement.

A document entitled *Healing, Repair and Justice* explains: "The immense wealth accrued by the church ... has always been interwoven with the history of African chattel enslavement," it tells us.

"African chattel enslavement was central to the growth of the British economy of the 18th and 19th centuries and the nation's wealth thereafter ... The cruelty of a multinational white establishment ... has continuing toxic consequences resulting from the denial of equal access to healthcare, education, employment, justice, and capital." Every one of

these claims, however, is either dubious or false. The Queen Anne's Bounty was hardly involved in the evil of slave trading at all. Most economic historians reckon the contribution of slave trading and slavery to Britain's economic development as somewhere between marginal and modest.

Slavery was perpetrated on black Africans by other black Africans long before it was perpetrated by white Europeans. And between abolition in 1834 and the present day multiple causes have intervened to complicate and diminish the effects of slavery.

Consonant with his church's policy, then archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby preached a sermon in Christ Church Cathedral, Zanzibar on May 12, in which he criticised Christian missionaries for treating Africans as inferior and confessed that "we (British) must repent and look at what we did in Zanzibar".

That is odd, since what the British did in Zanzibar during the second half of the 19th century was to force the sultan to end the slave trade. Indeed, the cathedral in which the archbishop was preaching was built over the former slave market.

And here's what pioneering missionary David Livingstone wrote about black Africans in 1871: "I have no prejudice against (the Africans) colour; indeed, anyone who lives long among them forgets that they are black and feels that they are just fellow men ... If a comparison were instituted, and Manyuema, taken at random, placed opposite say members of the Anthropological Society of London, clad like them in kilts of grass cloth, I should like to take my place among the Manyuema, on the principle of preferring the company of my betters."

Australia's equivalent is the extraordinary career of Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu*. Published in 2014, this argues that Aboriginal people, far from being primitive nomads, developed the first egalitarian society, invented democratic government, eschewed "imperial warfare", pioneered complex fishing technology, and were sophisticated agriculturalists. Such was the morally superior civilisation that white colonisers trashed in their greed, racist contempt and relentless violence.

Dark Emu was named Book of

the Year and received the Indigenous Writers' Prize in the 2016 New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards. It has sold more than 360,000 copies and has been made the subject of an ABC documentary.

And yet, while enthusiastically praised for challenging conventional views about Aboriginal culture and popularising the topic, it has been widely criticised for being factually untrue. While not a professional academic, Peter O'Brien has forensically dismantled it in *Bitter Harvest: The Illusion of Aboriginal Agriculture* in Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu*, systematically exposing the many gaps between claim and evidence.

Yet, like all virtue, it's vulnerable to vice. For it can degenerate from genuine humility into a perverse bid for supreme self-righteousness, which exaggerates one's sins and broadcasts the display of repentance: holier-than-thou because more-sinful-than-thou.

In *The Tyranny of Guilt*, French philosopher Pascal Bruckner captures this when he writes of contemporary, post-imperial Europe (and, by extension, the West): "This is the paternalism of the guilty conscience: seeing ourselves as the kings of infamy is still a way of staying on the crest of history."

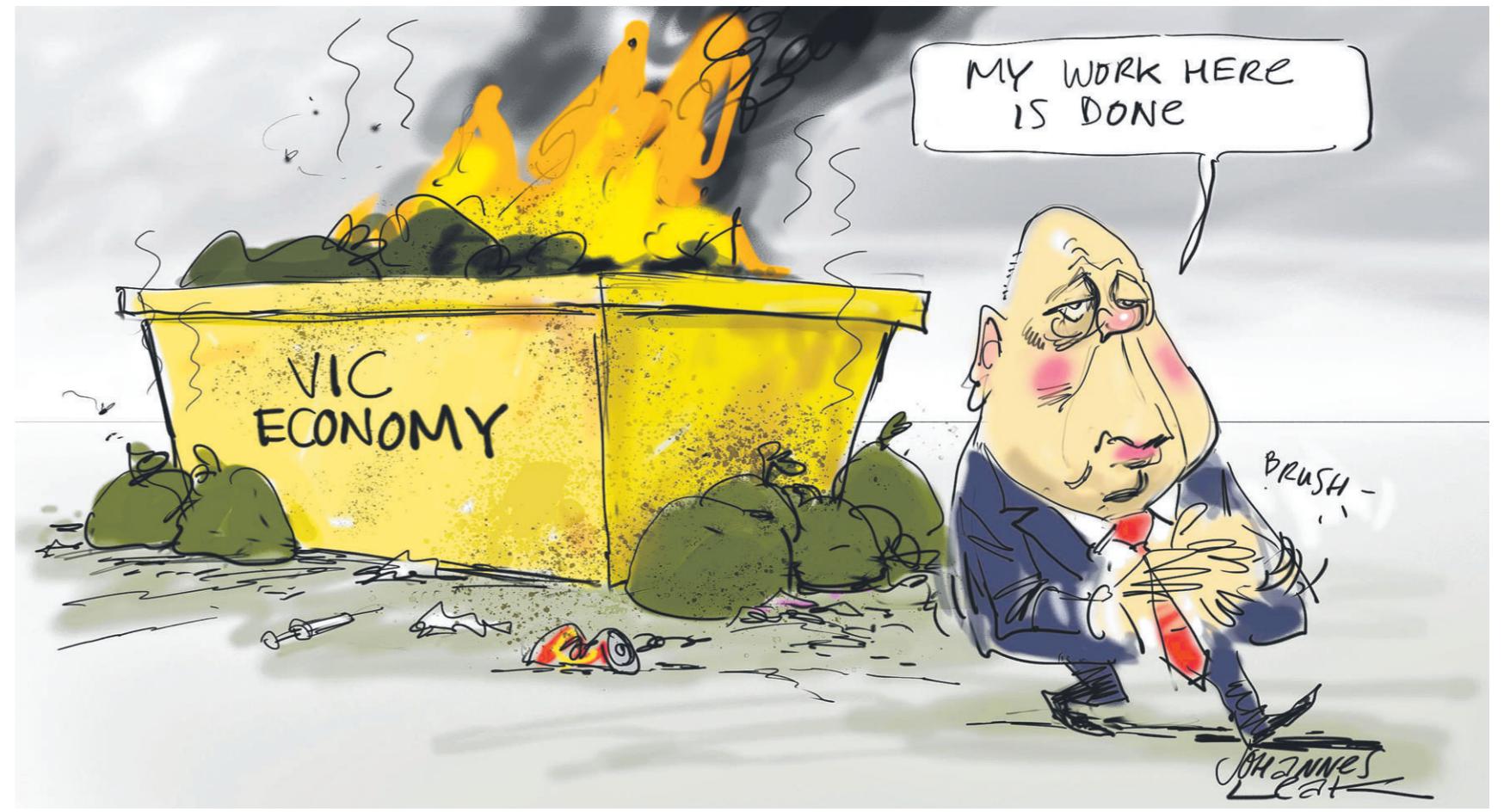
Since Freud we know that masochism is only a reversed sadism, a passion for domination turned against oneself. Europe is still messianic in a minor key ...

Barbarity is Europe's great pride, which it acknowledges only in itself; it denies that others are barbarous, finding attenuating circumstances for them (which is a way of denying them all responsibility).

In this display of virtue, the penitent hogs the stage: "By erecting lack of love for oneself into a leading principle, we lie to ourselves about ourselves and close ourselves to others ... In Western self-hatred, the Other has no place. It is a narcissistic relationship in which the African, the Indian and Arab are brought in as extras." Maybe Australia's Aboriginal people, too.

Nigel Biggar is the regius professor emeritus of moral theology at the University of Oxford and author of the best-selling *Colonialism: A Moral Reckoning*.

DAILY CARTOON | JOHANNES LEAK



NIGEL BIGGAR

Grievance politics fuels new era of fake history



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Even the aggressive suppression – of concerns about evidence and truth in the eager rush to irrational self-criticism.

One plausible explanation is the operation of a degenerate Christian sensibility. For Christians, the paradoxical mark of the genuinely righteous person is a profound awareness of their own unrighteousness. The saint is distinguished as the one who knows more deeply than others just what a sinner he really is.

There's considerable virtue in this, of course, for it tempers self-righteousness with compassion for fellow sinners, forbidding the righteous to cast the unrighteous beyond the human pale.

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TROY BRAMSTON

Summer holidays a time to get a good read on our pollies

A room without books is like a body without a soul, said Cicero. Books reveal our interests and passions, satisfy curiosities and knowledge gaps, and can provide fulfilment and entertainment. It is why for a decade and a half, I have asked leading politicians about their reading choices, which are, as ever, revealing.

Anthony Albanese, part-time DJ, named Nick Hornby's 31 Songs among his favourite books this year. He plans to read Jimmy Barnes's Highways and Byways over summer. The PM also names Michael Easson's In Search of

will pick up Jon Meacham's study of Abraham Lincoln, *And There Was Light*, over the break. Sussan Ley recommends Zac Seidler's *Masculinities and Mental Health in Young Men*, and the Liberal deputy is looking forward to the memoir of another deputy, JD Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy*.

Treasurer Jim Chalmers offers Meacham's biography of Thomas Jefferson as his best read, and rated Tony Blair's *On Leadership* highly. Jeremy Popkin's *A New World Begins*, about the French Revolution, is his summer book. His counterpart, Angus Taylor, nominated We Have Never Been Woke, by Musa al-Gharbi, as his top tome of 2024.

National Party leader David Littleproud liked Richard Flanagan's novel, *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*, and has Eddie Jaku's *The Happiest Man on Earth* on his reading pile. His deputy, Perin Davey, acclaims Patricia Wolf's thriller, *Outbreak*.

Tanya Plibersek suggests we read Kaliane Bradley's debut novel, *The Ministry of Time*, and has Dennis Glover's *Repeat: A Warning from History* on her book stand. Jason Clare liked Holland's *Pax in 2024* and has Patrick Radden Keefe's *Say Nothing*, about Northern Ireland, as his seasonal read. Catherine King loved Jane Moriarty's novel, *Three Wishes*, and is eager to start Helen Garner's *The Season*, about her grandson's football team. Murray Watt read James Neff's *Vendetta*, about the feud between Robert Kennedy and Jimmy Hoffa, which seemed relevant to his work. Next is Richard Kerbaj's *Secret History of the Five Eyes*. Madeleine King acclaims Henry Sanderson's *Volt Rush*, about metals and rare earths, and is keen to begin Frank Bongiorno's *The Eighties*. Chris Bowen names *The Men Who Killed the News* as his best read this year, and has Long Island, by Colm Tóibín, to read next.

Paul Fletcher says Lynch's *Prophet Song*, which won the 2023 Booker Prize, is a cautionary tale for any politician. He has Vaclav Smil's *Grand Transitions* top of his reading list. Jane Hume will tackle Max Boot's biography of Ronald Reagan and praises the novel, *Blue* Sisters, by Coco Mellors. David Coleman enjoyed Robert Penn Warren's classic novel, *All the King's Men*, and has Martin Amis's memoir, *Experience*, to read.

Matthew Reilly's novel, *Mr Einstein's Secretary*, topped Michelle Rowland's reading this year. Her summer book is Stanley Tucci's *What I Ate in One Year*. Moriarty's novel, *Here One Moment*, is Clare O'Neill's top read of 2024 and she has Patrick Ruffin's *Party of the People*, about the US Republican Party, scheduled next.

Amanda Rivkin's *Unmaking Angas Downs* this year and will read Michael Sandel's *Justice*. Susan McDonald recommends Darren Prickett's account of World War I engineers, *Purple Patch*, and has Sister Viv, by Grattan Kieza, to read. Jonno Duniam nominates Nic Haygarth's *A People's Frontier</*