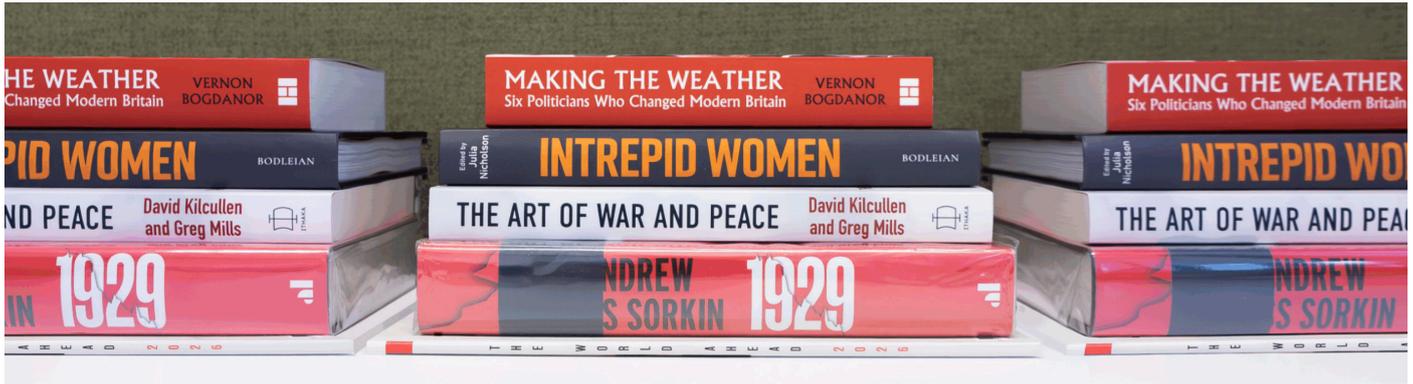


# Prime Minister's summer reading list 2025/26

Think Piece 45: December 2025



Wendy McGuinness

Since 2011, as part of our passion for improving long-term thinking in public policy, the Institute has sent each current Prime Minister a package of books to read over the summer break. To reflect our non-partisan approach, we also send the same package to the leaders of other major political parties. This initiative is inspired by the Australian think tank the Grattan Institute, which submits a similar list to the Australian Prime Minister each year.

The theme of this year's summer reading list for the Prime Minister is survival – not in the abstract, but in the face of real disruption. History teaches us that while we cannot always prevent a crisis, we can prepare for it. We can build systems resilient enough to withstand the storm and emerge stronger on the other side.

Two possible disruptions weigh heavily on my mind: the outbreak of a significant war and the shock of a financial crash. These are the kinds of events that have reshaped nations and tested our political leadership. With that in mind, I have selected what I believe are the most essential books for the Prime Minister to read this summer.

The two books below offer insights into how such crises unfold and how they might be navigated.

1. ***The Art of War and Peace: The Changing Face of 21st-Century Warfare* – Dr David Kilcullen and Dr Greg Mills**
2. ***1929: The Inside Story of The Greatest Crash in Wall Street History – and How It Shattered a Nation* – Andrew Ross Sorkin**

The next two books have been chosen for the political and scientific insights they offer. History reminds us that in times of crisis, the qualities that sustain leaders are not only intellect and strategy, but also temperament. There are enduring lessons here, including the importance of:

- remaining curious in the face of uncertainty,
- summoning courage when the path ahead is unclear,
- seeking wisdom and insights from a broad range of sources,
- building enduring and trusting relationships, and
- discerning when it is time to buckle down and stay the course, or alternatively, to take your losses and alter course.

These are the traits that have defined resilient leadership across generations.

Together, these two books tell the stories of twelve people – six women and six men. The first book follows six men who strive to change the world, and the second follows six women who want to understand the world. They remind us that history is shaped not only by great events, but by the personal quests of those who seek either to comprehend or to transform the world they inhabit.

3. ***Making the Weather: Six Politicians Who Changed Modern Britain* – Professor Sir Vernon Bogdanor**
4. ***Intrepid Women: Adventures in Anthropology* – Julia Nicholson (ed.)**

The fifth selection in this summer reading list could be simply described as 'and everything else'. See commentary on *The World Ahead 2026* below.

5. ***The World Ahead 2026* – The Economist**

Figure 1: Prime Minister's summer reading list bookmark

<b>With compliments</b>
<b>The Art of War and Peace – the Changing Face of 21st Century Warfare</b> Dr David Kilcullen and Dr Greg Mills Published 6 October 2024
<b>1929: Inside the Greatest Crash in Wall Street History – and How It Shattered a Nation</b> Andrew Ross Sorkin Published 14 October 2025
<b>Making the Weather: Six Politicians Who Changed Modern Britain</b> Professor Sir Vernon Bogdanor Published 22 March 2025
<b>Intrepid Women: Adventures in Anthropology</b> Julia Nicholson (ed.) Published 12 May 2025
<b>The World Ahead 2026</b> The Economist Published November 2025
<b>MCGUINNESS INSTITUTE</b> TE HONONGA WAKA

## Looking forward

Lastly, a broader reflection on the year ahead. New Zealand (and the world) is caught in the relentless churn of a washing machine, the door sealed, the turbulence impossible to escape. The global landscape has irrevocably changed. Looking back across time, the decades from the 1950s to the present increasingly appear as an anomaly – a period of unusual stability and prosperity. What we are experiencing now may, in fact, be a return to the normal: a world defined by power, money, disruption, uncertainty, and the constant need to be vigilant and adapt when needed.

Over the last 12 months, the image of ‘Brand America’ has shifted dramatically. Where once soft power dominated, through the influence of culture, ideals and diplomacy, we are increasingly seeing a move to hard-power military might. In this shifting balance, decisions made by the United States have, perhaps unintentionally, placed new pieces on the geopolitical chessboard into Putin’s hands, expanding his reach and altering the game in ways that reverberate far beyond the immediate moment.

Put plainly, Trump’s choices have fuelled the fire that strengthens Putin’s ability to achieve his goals. Wealth more broadly is increasingly in the hands of the few, and, as the old adage says, money is power.

The cost of these shifts is not abstract; it is borne by people – in lives lost, in poverty, in the disruption of daily existence, in the erosion of trust, the loss of hope, and the lack of control one feels when the future looks bleak. The years ahead will demand resilience, clarity and courage.

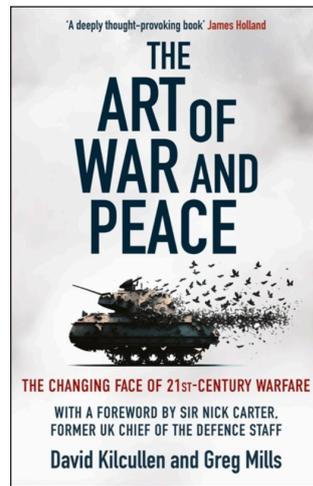
History reminds us that leadership is tested during times of turbulence. For a prime minister, the essential quality is a steadfast moral compass. Time and again, we see that when uncertainty prevails, it is strength of character and clarity of vision that ensure the country survives, better and stronger than before.

In my view, 2026 is likely to be the year when our Prime Minister, and our country, will be tested to choose between one of the great powers – this is happening globally and our turn is coming. If that eventuates, it is important we know who we can trust and why, and what common goals align us today and in the future. Arguably, whatever happens in the future, a good defence and security relationship with Australia will be critical.

New Zealand faces the challenge of balancing its relationships with both the United States and China. Any choice that ties us too closely to one great power risks distancing us from others. It is therefore essential that the Prime Minister, along with other leaders of influence, articulate a clear vision of the nation New Zealanders aspire to create and chart a thoughtful path forward. For example, is it a nation that:

- strives to strengthen its democracy?
- contributes meaningfully to the cause of world peace?
- confronts the challenge of climate change?
- honours the dignity and unique culture of its people?
- establishes enduring systems to protect biodiversity and to preserve our environment for generations to come?
- is globally recognised for integrity and consistency (e.g. honouring our commitments under the Paris Agreement)?

This is not the time for New Zealand to rest on its laurels. Instead it is the moment to hone our tools and prepare for the day when the turbulence eases, when the relentless spin finally halts and a new normal emerges. Beyond it lies a world transformed – unfamiliar, demanding, and permanently altered.



## 1. The Art of War and Peace: The Changing Face of 21st-Century Warfare

Dr David Kilcullen and Dr Greg Mills

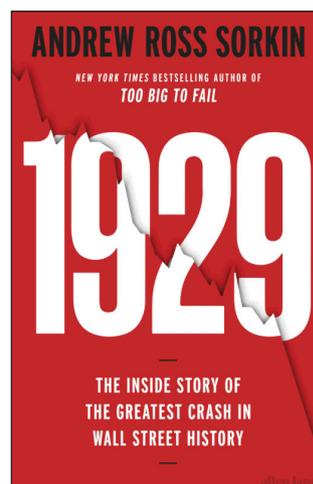
Published 6 October 2024

It is no surprise that modern conflict is becoming increasingly complex, chaotic and interconnected. Economic security and defence security are becoming so intertwined it is hard to know where one stops and the other starts. Over the past six months I have read or skimmed a lot of books on

security and defence. It is the issue of our time, and New Zealand can no longer feel confident that we have friends in high places. I can report there are lots of fascinating books on new technologies and how war is imminent, how it might start and how it might finish. What made Kilcullen and Mills’ book stand out was:

1. The authors are Australian and South African. Kilcullen is an Australian soldier, diplomat and academic and Mills is a specialist in African security, governance and economic reform. It was good to gain some insights into actual conflicts and a better understanding of the African continent. The role of African nations in the global arena is often underestimated, but along with India, they represent, in my opinion, the most powerful countries on the planet – who they decide to build enduring relationships with will tilt the playing field.
2. The authors are focused on exploring strategies to secure lasting peace – not war. But they are also pragmatic, which means that building defence relationships globally and focusing on security is realistic and should be progressed.
3. We are not wealthy, so we must be wise. The reasoning used to justify the government’s reluctance over the Paris Agreement could apply equally to defence: we are small, so why spend our resources when our contribution is unlikely to matter? Yet I would argue both issues matter profoundly. Geography may make New Zealand an island, but we cannot afford to think like one.

Kilcullen brings battlefield and counterinsurgency expertise, while Mills contributes policy, governance and African reform experience. Their collaboration in *The Art of War and Peace* reflects an understanding of military strategy and political economy, offering insights into how wars are fought and how peace can be built.



## 2. 1929: The Inside Story of The Greatest Crash in Wall Street History - and How It Shattered a Nation

Andrew Ross Sorkin

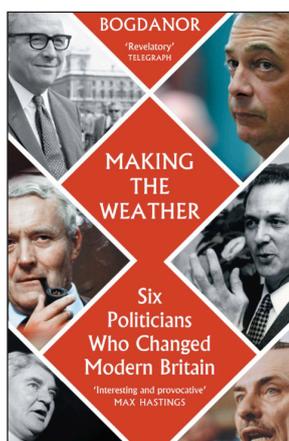
Published 14 October 2025

Andrew Ross Sorkin’s *1929: Inside the Greatest Crash in Wall Street History – and How It Shattered a Nation* is a vivid retelling of the financial cataclysm that brought America to its knees. Sorkin reconstructs the unbridled optimism, the

warnings, the personalities and the pervading atmosphere that led to overinflated financial markets, which preceded the final crash. He captures a nation suddenly confronting the fragility of its prosperity and the mass unemployment crisis that followed. Sorkin shows how the collapse was not merely a financial event but led to a social and political crisis. It exposed deep inequalities and distrust in key institutions. His book reminds me that:

1. Markets, nations and people form one vast, integrated system; when one part falters, the shock reverberates everywhere.
2. Stability depends on strong institutions. When banks, regulators and exchanges fail to uphold public trust, the entire system is at risk of collapse.
3. Markets and the judiciary must remain insulated from partisan politics. Once ideology intrudes, confidence erodes and chaos follows.

Sorkin's account is a reminder that markets run as much on psychology as on numbers and that a financial crash is capable of devastating a nation, with a speed and scale not unlike that of a pandemic or a war. The purpose of sound financial management is not merely to avert shocks, but to ensure that when disruption inevitably strikes, the system is resilient enough to rebuild the economy and drive recovery.



### 3. Making the Weather: Six Politicians Who Changed Modern Britain

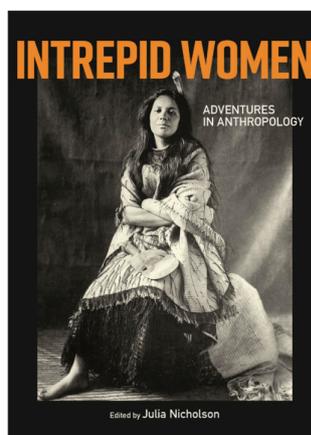
Professor Sir Vernon Bogdanor  
Published 22 March 2025

The phrase 'making the weather' in politics was most famously used by Winston Churchill to describe Joseph Chamberlain (1836–1914). Chamberlain managed to set the political agenda without ever becoming a prime minister.

In *Making the Weather*, Vernon Bogdanor explores the goals and aspirations of six 'maverick' post-war politicians. Although none of the six ever became prime minister, their ideas and convictions reshaped modern Britain. My three observations were:

1. It is rare to read a non-partisan political book (three politicians leaned right and three leaned left).
2. The issues that they canvassed remain relevant today: health care, immigration, international relationships (i.e. between the UK and Europe), democracy, proportional representation and electoral reform.
3. There is a difference between proximity to power and influence, and it is possible to influence the direction of a country – for good or bad – without being close to power.

Aneurin Bevan, Roy Jenkins, Tony Benn, Enoch Powell, Keith Joseph and Nigel Farage clearly forced the UK to confront new public policy directions. Bogdanor reveals how they 'made the weather', altering the climate of British politics for generations. To some extent, the ideas of these six UK politicians have already shaped the political climate in New Zealand. And Nigel Farage, with his capacity to stir up political debate, may yet unleash a storm in the UK whose reverberations are felt in the build-up to the 2026 elections in New Zealand. (See Figure 2 below.)



### 4. Intrepid Women: Adventures in Anthropology

Julia Nicholson (ed.)  
Published 12 May 2025

In contrast to the six white male maverick politicians, this book turns to the ambitions and achievements of six women of colour – in this case maverick anthropologists. While those men wanted to change the world these six women wanted to understand the world.

Figure 2: Six post-war male politicians from *Making the Weather*

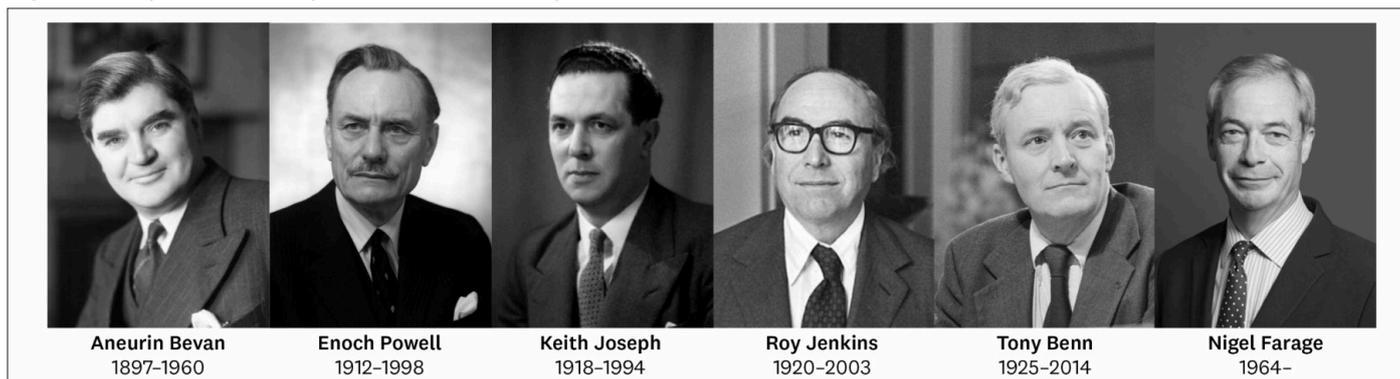


Figure 3: Six female anthropologists from *Intrepid Women*



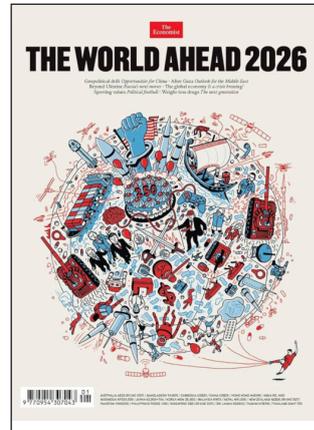
My three observations were:

1. The past acts as a compass; respecting history offers perspectives that might otherwise be lost, guiding fresh approaches to fieldwork and discovery.
2. Lasting change requires knowing what to protect, what to co-create, and what to leave behind – this is why the intersection of science and humanities is so important.
3. Independent thinkers challenge the status quo, reshape debates and imagine new possibilities for how we live and act. Mavericks have a role as catalysts.

Barbara Freire-Marreco lived among Pueblo communities in New Mexico and Arizona; Maria Czaplicka studied Siberian reindeer herders; Margaret Pattison Thom (better known as Mākereti Papakura) wrote about her own people, in consultation with her elders in Whakarewarewa (Rotorua); Beatrice Blackwood worked in the remote villages of North America and Melanesia; Elsie McDougall documented the textile traditions of Mexico and Guatemala; and Ursula Graham Bower immersed herself in the Naga Hills of northeast India. In *Intrepid Women*, Julia Nicholson sheds light on why the study of humans is necessary in order to understand our cultures, behaviours, languages, biology and histories. These six women were curious, courageous and generous.

The cover of the book features a striking portrait of Mākereti Papakura. The book is well worth seeking out, if only to read the remarkable chapter devoted to her. I first encountered her story

while researching material for our signature book *Nation Dates*. Born in 1873 at Matatā in the Bay of Plenty, Mākereti was of mixed heritage: her father, William Arthur Thom, was English, while her mother was a high-born Māori woman of Te Arawa, Tūhourangi and Ngāti Wāhiao descent. She began her career as a guide and performer in Rotorua, captivating visitors with her knowledge of Māori culture, before later becoming a famous anthropologist at Oxford University. Oxford University just awarded her PhD posthumously. (See Figure 3.)



## 5. The World Ahead 2026

The Economist  
Published November 2025

The final selection in this summer reading list could be simply described as ‘and everything else’. The Economist’s *World Ahead 2026* is not only a brave attempt at identifying ‘everything else’, it makes clear that the year 2026 is likely to be defined by increased uncertainty and accelerated change. New Zealand must prepare for shocks

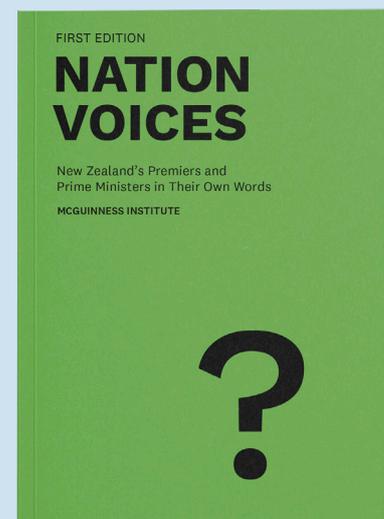
in geopolitics, technology and economics. We are entering uncharted territory, and 2026 promises to be a year full of excitement and danger.

## Upcoming McGuinness Institute publications

In June 2026, we will publish three books, presented as a series (see placeholder covers below). Although each explores a distinct theme in our nation’s past, they are united by their shared focus on New Zealand history.

- **Nation Dates (sixth edition):** Focuses on significant events that shaped Aotearoa New Zealand from 1769.
- **COVID-19 Nation Dates (third edition):** Chronicles the history of COVID-19 in New Zealand with a view to showcasing lessons for future pandemics.
- **Nation Voices (first edition):** Explores leadership under pressure as premiers and prime ministers face the challenges and embrace the opportunities of their time in office.

Figure 4: Upcoming McGuinness Institute publications



The McGuinness Institute is a non-partisan think tank working towards a sustainable future, contributing strategic foresight through evidence-based research and policy analysis.

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