

# Intense Bushfire: Australia's dark age of climate catastrophe

Saturday 11 January 2020, by [HILL Grace](#), [KELLY Roxanne](#), [PLESTED James](#) (Date first published: 6 January 2020).

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It is impossible to find words appropriate to the immensity and horror of Australia's bushfire catastrophe. Day in day out for months on end we've been bombarded with harrowing images and accounts of death and destruction - of roaring walls of flame over 100 metres high; of deadly "fire tornadoes" powerful enough to flip fire trucks; of bushfires creating their own super-cell thunderstorms with lightning strikes sparking new blazes ahead of existing fronts; of giant plumes of smoke turning day into eerie, pitch-dark night; of thousands forced to huddle on beaches and cower on boats as ash and embers rain down on them and their communities burn before their eyes; of convoys of evacuees stuck on roads blocked by flames, while others await evacuation by sea; of whole towns burnt to ashes by fires so intense that no fire fighting force on Earth could stop them.

Millions not directly affected by the fires have endured choking clouds of smoke that have smothered vast areas of the country for weeks at a time. Experiencing a landscape shrouded in fog, or hushed by the soft fall of snowflakes, can evoke a sense of the beauty and wonder of nature. The smoke, and the falls of ash that have at times accompanied it, bring something very different. A silence that is stultifying rather than peaceful. A dulling of the landscape that suspends the mind in anxious awareness of the disasters unfolding across the horizon. Can we look at a sunset now without that feeling of muffled dread seeping quietly into our bones - a feeling of being menaced by an alien and malign force, the extremes of which may threaten our very existence on earth?

Disasters of this scale have frequently proved to be turning points in politics and society. The horror they bring shakes society to the core - unsettling our sense of self and our understanding of our place in the world.

The 1755 Lisbon earthquake is perhaps the most dramatic example. The earthquake struck on All Saints' Day, at a time when many thousands of Lisbon's majority Catholic population were packed into the city's churches and cathedrals. Many of the earthquake's estimated 60,000 victims were killed when the roofs of these buildings collapsed. Others were killed in fires that raged through the city in the following days, most caused by candles burning in the churches. Still more were drowned by the tsunami that struck the harbour where survivors of the earthquake had sought refuge.

The earthquake provoked a crisis of belief that helped spur on the Enlightenment. If death and destruction on this scale could be unleashed on the pious Catholics of Lisbon, then what faith could be maintained in a benevolent God? Over subsequent decades, the authority of the Catholic church and associated institutions of feudalism were increasingly called into question by a new generation of thinkers seeking to shift society and culture onto a more rational, scientific foundation. The French Revolution, beginning in 1789, ushered in a new age of optimism about the capacity of humanity, utilising the insights of philosophers and scientists, to build a just and sustainable social

order.

Those hopes, however, were betrayed by a rising bourgeois class committed to replacing the religious despotism of feudalism with the despotism of the capitalist market. Over the subsequent two centuries, capitalism spread to every corner of the world. A minority gained untold wealth – more than any feudal king or queen could ever have dreamed of – through their exploitation of the world’s workers and the poor. And as their system has grown and spread, so too has the scale of its destructiveness. The science and technology that to enlightenment thinkers promised a society of genuine “liberty, equality and fraternity” are, in the hands of the capitalist class of today, increasingly just the tools for the plundering of earth’s natural and human resources in the name of profit.

Nowhere is the basic destructiveness of capitalism more apparent than in the case of climate change. And nowhere is the intellectual bankruptcy and moral depravity of our rulers more apparent than in their response to it. Australia’s current conflagration is far from being an unexpected “natural” event like the Lisbon earthquake. Scientists have been sounding the alarm about the increasing risk of bushfires driven by hotter and drier summers for decades. The equation is simple: the more carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases we pump into the atmosphere, the more we’ll face disasters like the one we’re currently experiencing. The fires that have laid waste to so much of south-eastern Australia over the past weeks and months are but a portent of the horrors that await us if we fail to make drastic cuts to emissions starting now.

How can we explain the fact that, with the country burning around them, our political leaders continue to act as if we can go on with the “business as usual” of Australia’s fossil fuel economy? At every turn in this disaster our Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, has attempted to downplay the scale of destruction, and to deflect any attempt to link it to the need for more serious action on climate change. At the height of the disaster, with homes and lives under immediate threat across a vast area of the country, he observed that the fires were happening “against the backdrop of” a test cricket match between Australia and New Zealand and claimed people suffering through the disaster might “be inspired by the great feats of our cricketers from both sides of the Tasman”.

It’s as if the clock of the Enlightenment is being wound-back. Instead of listening to scientists, Morrison channels the talking points of the “high priests” of conservatism in the Murdoch Press. Instead of anything resembling a rational, scientific assessment of what caused the fires, and what we might do to prevent future fire disasters, we get fairytales – that the whole thing is the fault of the Greens, or that the fires are just a normal part of Australia’s “natural cycle”.

Morrison’s coalition colleague and former National Party leader Barnaby Joyce went furthest down this path in a rambling video message he recorded on Christmas eve. In it, he says he recognises the climate is changing, but denies the government can, or should, do anything about it. Rather, he says, “we’ve got to acknowledge... there’s a higher authority that’s beyond our comprehension – right up there in the sky – and unless we understand that it’s got to be respected, then we’re just fools, we’re going to get nailed.” This, incidentally, is essentially the same argument made by the Catholic authorities of Europe in the aftermath of the Lisbon earthquake in an attempt to defend their power against the progress of Enlightenment thought.

Some have suggested that Morrison’s apparent lack of concern about the bushfires is related to his evangelical Pentecostal faith. If your world-view includes a belief in the coming “end of days” in which the whole world and all its sinners will perish while the faithful few ascend to heaven, why would you worry too much about some bushfires? This, however, can’t be sustained. Morrison’s actual religion isn’t so much Pentecostalism as it is the fundamentalism of free market capitalism. His true lord isn’t Joyce’s “higher authority in the sky” but the all-too-worldly, tangible and grubby

authority of the “almighty dollar”. The guiding light in Morrison’s world is the light of capitalist profit – and it’s on the altar of profit, not religion, that Australia’s future is currently being sacrificed.

The unfolding bushfire catastrophe, like the Lisbon earthquake, should help spur a movement to finally rid ourselves of the capitalist despotism that is driving us to our doom. Signs, so far, are hopeful. The anger felt by millions of Australians against Morrison and his fellow coal-fondling conservatives is palpable. We have to recognise, though, that we’re in for a long and hard fight. We may, perhaps, force Morrison to step down. This would be an important victory. Waiting in the wings, however, is a long line of fellow “believers” ready to take over the reins. Unfortunately for us, this also includes the opposition Labor Party, who in the aftermath of the 2019 federal election have striven to prove themselves to be just as faithful servants of the fossil fuel barons as the Liberals.

We can harbour no illusions. Our current rulers, in Australia and around the world, will be more than prepared to watch us burn if they can just reserve for themselves a “heavenly realm” in which their profits and power are maintained. This is the new dark age towards which we’re headed, one in which ordinary people are forced to fend for themselves amid mounting environmental and social catastrophe, while the rich turn a blind eye to the problem, retreat into fortified enclaves or threaten violence against anyone daring to challenge their rule.

If we want to avoid that fate, nothing short of revolution will suffice. Against the power of the fossil fuel addicted capitalist class and their political servants, we need to mobilise the power of workers, students and the oppressed. Against a society run in the interests of the profits of the wealthy few, we need a society that serves all its people. To do this we need masses on the streets. We need to protest, occupy and strike until the entire system cracks and crumbles around us, and out of the rubble we can build something better in its place.

This is the one hope emerging from the catastrophe we are living through today: that when historians look back on the events of the coming decade, they will record that “let them watch cricket” became, for the Australian revolution, what “let them eat cake” was for the French.

## **James Plested**

- Red Flag, 06 January 2020:  
<https://redflag.org.au/node/6989>

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## **Canberra chokes on toxic smoke**

The new year was welcomed in Canberra amid orange and grey air and a red sun so dimmed you could stare right at it. Those who had no choice but to venture out did so wearing masks, while others without masks used their arms and shirts to cover their mouths. Walking through the city centre, the wail of multiple fire alarms was incessant, almost drowning out the sounds of people coughing and vomiting in the haze. Other than that, silence.

Only upon entering the air-conditioned shopping malls was it possible to appreciate how much smoke has permeated clothes, hair and airways. These centres were full, the din of fire alarms preferable to breathing smoke. But the reprieve didn’t last long – many of these centres closed

during the worst of the smoke. Multiple public places that could have provided refuge for people, including the Portrait Gallery, Questacon, Australian National University, University of Canberra, post offices, and public pools – were closed. Hospitals had to cancel medical procedures because of the effect smoke was having on their buildings and equipment. The health effects of the smoke are impossible to quantify, and may take many years to manifest. One woman has already died after going into respiratory distress shortly after arriving by plane in Canberra.

If it was any other summer, the government may have been able to weather this crisis, even benefit from it, by appealing to “national unity” and praising everyone’s bravery or stoicism. Not this year. Not in an age when the impending climate catastrophe has become undeniable, and its effects no longer simply a matter of speculation. What this summer also shows is that the effects of the climate crisis will not impact us all equally. Capitalism’s inequality permeates everything, even the air we breathe.

The logical thing to do when a city’s air quality rapidly becomes the worst in the world and dangerous to human health is to evacuate people to where the air is breathable. But leaving the city is not feasible for most people. We don’t all have the necessary money, holidays or work arrangements that permit us to take off to Hawaii whenever the mood takes us. Nor do we have second homes to retreat to or friends with large houses in far flung parts of the country.

The next best thing after evacuation would be to protect people from the smoke. But somehow in spite of the God-ordained laws of supply and demand, masks have been in short supply, with most shops running out weeks ago. On 1 January at 1am, Canberra’s air quality reading index reached 7,700, more than 38 times what is considered hazardous. Advice from ACT Health read, “Everyone should avoid all physical activity outdoors. Sensitive groups should temporarily relocate to a friend or relative living outside the affected area. If this is not possible, remain indoors and keep activity levels as low as possible”. It wasn’t until 6 January, almost a full week later, that the government deigned to send masks. A mass poisoning was taking place, but getting protective masks to Canberrans was not a priority.

Staying indoors was no protection for many people, especially those in Canberra’s infamous rental properties. Many rentals in Canberra have no insulation, do not seal, and have no air conditioning. They’re so inadequate that an estimated 42 people die in them each winter because of the cold. There’s no chance of keeping poison smoke out of houses like that. Air-conditioned public spaces initially offered some refuge, but they too gradually succumbed to smoke. Desperate renters share advice on community facebook pages, including suggesting putting wet towels over holes, vacuuming the air if you can’t afford an air filter and keeping pets inside overnight so they don’t die.

Rightly, some workplaces have shut down due to the risk posed by working in the toxic air. So far this has been driven by the companies, not the unions. But with poor air quality likely to be the new normal, businesses will not be willing to forgo profits in this way for long periods. Workers need the pro-active backing of their unions if they’re to be properly protected at work.

Fire itself is also a direct risk to Canberra, yet ACT firefighters are under-resourced. Since 2015, the union has been asking the government for 94 more firefighters, new fire stations, trucks, and upgraded training.

This is the battleground of the climate crisis – smoke, fire, flood, storms, and drought will increasingly impact major cities. Businesses will not willingly pay for safety equipment for all workers, nor close every time there’s poor air quality and continue to pay wages. Landlords will not pay for high-quality air purifiers to be installed and maintained in every home. Everywhere we turn, there will be a capitalist, landlord, or politician standing in the way of real environmental justice.

The fossil fuel companies who have made their billions from creating this hell receive \$29 billion in government subsidies every year. And in the face of this deadly chaos, they are pursuing new environmentally destructive projects like the Adani Carmichael mine. This money should be used to fund renewable projects, pay volunteer firefighters, fully equip the fire fighting force, modify homes to make them fit for habitation in heat, cold, and smoke, supply masks for all, rebuild the homes lost in the fires, and much more. For a response to the crisis that isn't a dystopic nightmare, we need to reject the politics of national unity, of "we're all in this together", and revive the politics of knowing and fighting our enemy.

## **Grace Hill**

- Red Flag, 08 January 2020:  
<https://redflag.org.au/node/6989>
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### **Ignore the cynical, manipulative arguments of the police and get to the protests to demand real action on the fires and the climate crisis**

The country is in the midst of a fire and climate crisis and the police say that protests against the criminal inaction of the federal government - its anti-science climate denialism, promotion of fossil fuels and reluctance to act to defend the lives and properties of people facing apocalyptic firestorms - should not go ahead.

Demonstrations are planned across the country on Friday 10 January (see below for details). The arguments being deployed against attending them are utterly cynical and totally manipulative. Victorian acting assistant commissioner Tim Hansen is quoted by ABC News urging "fair-minded Victorians" not to turn up. According to the national broadcaster:

"He said police were still actively engaged in supporting their emergency services colleagues in bushfire zones, working in fire-ravaged communities and facilitating evacuations while dealing with day-to-day policing. 'We will meet those obligations, but this is a distraction for us ... We see frontline police returning from the fire ground, returning from the fire zone that are fatigued, that do need a break, and this is now another operation we need to resource.'"

This is absolute garbage. The police didn't demand people stay home on New Year's Eve, when police were patrolling around the clock. There are no requests to cancel cricket matches and the Australian Tennis Open, which also "require" significant police resources. It is scandalous that the police are arguing that they must be present to surround people exercising their democratic right to peaceful assembly, and that we will be distracting from attempts to contain the fire carnage.

The idea that hundreds of cops are required to ensure the safety of a peaceful demonstration is ludicrous. As Uni Students for Climate Justice spokesperson Anneke Demanuele noted yesterday: "We haven't asked for the police to come to the demonstration at all. We're capable of holding this demonstration without police resources ... People of Melbourne march through the streets all the time".

If the assistant commissioner is concerned about resources, why is he not making public statements demanding more be given to firefighters and emergency workers? Why is he attacking those

demanding that more be done to protect lives? Does Tim Hansen really think that peaceful assemblies in capital cities are just as important to monitor as communities under threat in eastern Victoria?

No. He. Doesn't.

He has one message: shut up. Shut up about the crisis. Shut up about lack of resources. Shut up about inaction. Shut up and take what you get.

If he were genuinely concerned about resources, he would not attack those who are calling for more resources. The reality is this: shutting up is the worst thing we can do. More resources will come only because the fuming rage of people is put on public display. It is only because of such rage that we have been granted pitiful concessions from this government in the first place. Prime minister Scott Morrison's Hawaii holiday was cut short, 450,000 stockpiled face masks were miraculously discovered and distributed, and a \$2 billion bushfire recovery fund has been established. Those things happened only because people didn't shut up.

The government's gestures pale in comparison to the billions of dollars in subsidies it gives to fossil fuel companies every year. But they show that expressions of anger can go some way to force governments to bear more of the responsibility for these sorts of crises. That's why the planned protests are so vitally important.

The hypocrisy of government accusations against protesters deviating resources from firefighters is comical. It was not us that refused to pay volunteer firefighters. It is not us who won't provide enough funding to rebuild decimated towns. It is not us giving corporate tax cuts to big business while starving essential services of resources. How disgraceful is it that those with the power to make these decisions refuse to be accountable and instead try to generate a moral panic about protesters endangering people's lives?

It is disgusting, but unsurprising. Historically, the Australian state has taken a hard stance against protests that are gaining traction, and climate activism is no exception. In the 1970s, Joh Bjelke-Petersen's Queensland government arrested anyone partaking in street marches; those in the anti-uranium movement were common targets. While this might sound like a far stretch from yesteryear, Morrison has threatened a radical crackdown on boycotts of fossil fuel companies. The Queensland government recently tried to keep three peaceful Extinction Rebellion protestors in custody without bail, and the Victorian Police showed an exceedingly violent response toward Blockade IMARC protestors.

Just yesterday, it was reported Brisbane Greens councillor Johnathan Sri is being investigated for facilitating protests against climate change. It is clear that governments feel uneasy about the public's objection to Australia's addiction to fossil fuels, and are prepared to become more authoritarian to quash dissent. The Victorian acting assistant commissioner's comments are designed precisely to generate sympathy for such repression.

It is essential that we continue to mobilise in the current situation. Already, the millions of hectares burnt around the country have resulted in several dozen people dead. Thousands have been stranded without food and electricity, and rescue missions haven't mobilised enough resources, leaving the most vulnerable waiting days for evacuation.

Across major cities, millions are choking. Yet we are expected to carry on with business as usual. With the fires projected to continue for months, the situation could get worse - yet the government's priorities are elsewhere. When the tiny amount of relief provided so far has come only after public

anger, what “fair-minded” individuals would patiently sit at home and watch our leaders slip back into their negligence?

These fires have given us a small taste of what climate change has in store for us. Not only will it bring about devastation on an unprecedented scale - it shows that our leaders are happy to let us burn in the process. If we are going to have a society that navigates climate change in a manner that protects lives, we are going to have to fight for it, tooth and nail.

### **Roxanne Kelly**

PROTEST: Sack Scomo! Fund the fires! Climate action now!

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<https://redflag.org.au/node/6992>
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