

# Australia: Carr scapegoats 'arsonists' over bushfires

Richard Phillips  
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High temperatures, gusty winds and abnormally dry conditions continue to fan bushfires on the outskirts of Sydney and throughout the state of New South Wales (NSW). Over 80 fires are still raging across the state including in outlying Sydney suburbs, some just over 20 kilometres from the city centre, the nearby Blue Mountains, Wollongong and Hawkesbury areas. On Wednesday 7,000 tourists and residents were evacuated from the south coast holiday town of Sussex Inlet, near Jervis Bay, when a two-storey high fire raced through the area destroying over a dozen properties. More than 500,000 hectares and over 170 homes have been incinerated since the bushfires began on December 24 with property damage and bushland destroyed expected to exceed the disastrous 1994 fires.

But while 20,000 fulltime professional and volunteer firefighters, many of them from interstate, heroically risk life and limb battling the blazes, NSW Labor premier Bob Carr is feverishly working to prevent any objective discussion on the escalating disaster, focusing attention and media coverage almost exclusively on so-called "arsonists", particularly youth.

When bushfires erupted on Christmas Eve, Carr was holidaying in China. Within hours of his return, a few days later, he began promoting press reports and flimsy police claims that "firebugs" were responsible for most of the fires. While these allegations were not backed up with any verifiable evidence, Carr seized on the claims, determined to preempt any political criticism of his government and its responsibility for not providing adequate firefighting equipment and manpower or taking sufficient preventative measures.

At his first press conference, Carr fulminated against "acts of wickedness" by firelighters, called for increased penalties for arson, which currently carry up to 14 years jail term under the Crimes Act, and demanded that judges impose the harshest punishments. He also urged residents to "join the hunt" by contacting Crime Stoppers with any information, established a special state government task force—Strike Force Tronto—involving 35 retired and serving fire and police officers to catch arsonists, and publicly criticised police for releasing three 15-year-old boys accused of lighting small grass fires in Shellharbour on December 27.

On Tuesday, Carr personally intervened to prevent police cautioning a 16-year-old boy alleged to have lit a fire near Cessnock in the Hunter Valley. The boy was captured by Minister for Gaming and Racing, Richard Face, the local mayor and a mine

caretaker, after they saw him running from an area near a disused coal mine where a fire had broken out. The only evidence incriminating the boy was that he had two cigarette lighters and was in the vicinity. When police questioned and then released the 16-year-old, Carr contacted them to insist that the boy be given a custodial sentence.

The next day, Carr told the media that the government would take an even tougher stand against young arsonists. Those caught lighting fires, he declared, should be made to take part in "restorative justice programs". "I think sending them to a juvenile prison is in some respects too good for them," he said. "What is better is to rub their noses in the ashes they've caused, by making them clean up the mess, work with the victims and go into a burns ward and talk to people who've suffered from fire." Yesterday Carr said that he would modify the government's "restorative justice program" next week to ensure that his new proposals were implemented as soon as possible.

Partner in Carr's witchhunting campaign has been the *Daily Telegraph*, which has editorialised for harsher penalties, including suggestions that the death penalty be restored, and published letters calling for arsonists to be burnt at the stake or jailed in cages at Taronga Park Zoo. Last Thursday the newspaper carried a front-page photo of a raging bushfire with black silhouettes of 21 people apprehended and questioned by police over the fires since December 27. The article was headlined, "21 Lucifers: The people accused of setting the state alight".

In fact, as of today none of the now 23 people currently alleged to have lit fires have been charged over any of the major blazes now burning throughout the state. Strike Force Tronto chief, John Laycock, has admitted that the 35 strong body currently has no suspects.

Seventeen of those apprehended in "citizens arrests" have been youth, aged between nine and 16, who have been accused of lighting grass fires or, in the case of two 9- and 10-year-olds, caught "lighting matches" near a football oval. Of the six adults arrested, one has been accused of unauthorised backburning and another of lighting a campfire during a total fire ban. To claim that these individuals are arsonists, who have set fire to property for criminal or malicious reasons, is designed to prevent any genuine examination of the cause of the bushfires and the measures necessary to prevent future ones.

Over 6,000 of the 10,000 square kilometres covered by the greater Sydney area is bushland, making it one of the most

bushfire-prone regions in the world. Statements by firefighting experts have made clear over the last 12 days that the abundance of undergrowth, unusually dry conditions and the highly flammable character of eucalyptus oils in Australian trees have made the bushland a tinderbox, with fires easily ignited by lightning and other natural causes. State firefighting authorities have reported that many fires, including several that broke out before Christmas, were caused by lightning strikes.

On Thursday Nicholas Cowdery, NSW's Director of Public Prosecutions and hardly a severe critic of the government, issued a press statement cautioning Carr over his frenzied demands for increased penalties. Cowdery said that Carr was attempting to climb on an "emotional bandwagon" and warned that a rational approach was needed to deal with the fire disaster. True to form the *Daily Telegraph* published an editorial the following day accusing Cowdery of being soft on criminals under the headline "Misplaced concern for offenders". The newspaper warned that his job was "to prosecute, not legislate" and that Cowdery's office did "not bear responsibility for social services or advocacy of the rights of criminals."

Despite the fact that almost 250 people have been killed in bushfires and billions of dollars lost in property damage since 1967, total Australian government expenditure on bushfire research is less than \$2 million a year. According to Len Foster, Chief Executive of the Australasian Fire Authority's Council, research funding on bushfires in Australia is so poor that NSW and other states do not even have basic databases, allowing them to make relatively accurate predictions on the spread of fire in certain weather conditions.

Recommendations were issued in the aftermath of major fires in 1994 and 1997, including major changes in firefighting and emergency services and increases in manpower, equipment and precautionary burning activity. Carr was warned that unless these measures were introduced, the state would face further bushfire disasters.

This was further confirmed on Wednesday when the NSW Fire Brigade Employees Union revealed that 1,500 professional firefighters in Sydney could not be used because of a lack of vehicles. "There are 1,500 professional firefighters off duty in the suburbs of Sydney who are sitting idle and frustrated. But they have run out of fire engines," union secretary Chris Read told the press. Read also warned that firefighting capacity was being undermined by tensions between the NSW Fire Brigade and the Rural Fire Service and called for a single statewide service with a single chain of command and uniformity of equipment and training—another suggestion made in the 1990s but ignored by the Carr government.

The Carr government's reaction to the fires is entirely predictable. It follows the *modus operandi* employed by the government since its election in 1995. Working hand-in-glove with the tabloid press and radio talkshow hosts, Carr responds to poverty, unemployment, drug abuse, youth alienation and crime, or any other social issue with the potential to politically embarrass the government, by individualising the problems, finding scapegoats and then calling for a battery of new state laws and police measures, primarily directed against youth. When social

statistics are not available to fit the government's agenda, dubious, or in some cases false information, is leaked to a compliant press to help create the necessary political climate.

Carr is infamous among immigrant communities, for example, for claiming that criminal activity is the product of ethnic gangs and for his continuous demands for the racial profiling of suspects. In 1998 he responded to the murder of a western suburbs teenager by introducing dragnet laws allowing police to stop, interrogate and search people on the streets, set up general roadblocks and search all vehicles, impose curfews on youth and order anyone in a public place to "move on". Under the guise of combatting drug trafficking, the NSW Labor government also made it a serious offence to enter or leave declared "drug premises", effectively scrapping the presumption of innocence.

Other laws were enacted following the gang rape of a teenage girl last year. Claiming the rape was the result of ethnic gangs, Carr increased the penalty for gang rape to a life sentence and lengthened jail terms for kidnapping, assault and malicious wounding. Sentences were also boosted for crimes committed "in company"—involving two or more people—a new term for gang offences. When sections of the legal fraternity criticised these moves and pointed out that crime statistics did not match Carr's "crime wave" claims, he declared that he would not be deflected by anyone "who adheres to a 1970s civil liberties agenda."

Last year as opposition was growing to school closure plans affecting over 30,000 inner Sydney students, former education minister John Aquilina leaked a sensational story to the press that a Sydney schoolboy had been planning a US Columbine High School style massacre of his classmates. The claims, which turned out to be bogus, were aimed at creating a public hue and cry that would push broader concerns over public education into the background and also justify government moves for sweeping new police powers against youth.

As this record demonstrates, calls by some sections of the media and the ruling establishment for Carr to tone down his provocative efforts to blame youth arsonists for the NSW fires will largely go unheeded. Facing an election in the next 12 months, he is intent upon ratcheting up his demonisation of youth and the government's law and order agenda.



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