

Australia: Few attend Rudd's much-hyped "National Day of Mourning"

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The Rudd's government's "National Day of Mourning", held on Sunday in the wake of the Victorian bushfires, which claimed more than 200 lives and 2,000 homes, was an exercise in cynical political manipulation, aimed at dulling critical thought and preventing any examination of what led to the disaster.

The central focus of the day was a service in the 15,000-seat Rod Laver stadium in the centre of Melbourne. Despite an unprecedented publicity campaign to promote the event, and predictions that more than 100,000 would attend, requiring large screens to be erected for the expected overflow outside, two thirds of the stadium seats were empty. Most of the audience was made up of politicians, government officials and their entourages, official delegations of soldiers, police, organisers and their hired help. Free buses organised to bring people from the bushfire areas arrived near-empty. In bushfire-affected regional centres such as Whittlesea, Kilmore, Yarra Glen and in other state capitals broadcast viewing points were set up. But only hundreds, not thousands, attended.

The relatively small numbers of bushfire victims and other ordinary working people who participated did so to mourn those lost and injured in the fires. For the political establishment, however, the entire affair was a means of diverting growing concerns about official responses before, during and after the fires into an orgy of nationalism and patriotism.

Large screens in the stadium conveyed images of firefighters, children, wounded animals, and devastated bush scenery, while the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, a didgeridoo player and a 500-member choir

supplied sentimental music. This was supplemented by audience members ringing little supplied bells at designated times and the blowing of a Jewish shofar.

Princess Anne, who flew out from Britain to represent the Queen, was joined on the platform by the governor general, the Victorian state governor, the state premier and opposition leader, the federal prime minister and opposition leader, a Catholic archbishop and a Buddhist leader.

The primary theme of all the speeches was Australian nationalism, laced with religion. As the *Herald Sun* observed, the stadium was transformed into a "makeshift mega-cathedral". Every religion and denomination was represented, with Prime Minister Rudd enthusiastically assuming the role of high priest. His speech was littered with religious references to the "soul", "solemn contract", "ancient values", "gates of hell" and "god's earth". He described his trip through the burnout area "as if I was walking through the valley of the shadow of death."

But the speakers' real concerns were never far from the surface. Rudd obliquely mentioned them when he declared: "In some countries tragedy exposes the fault lines in a nation, the strong abandoning the weak... but ours is a different nation. Our nation has been as one." This was a reference to the US Bush administration's notorious response to Hurricane Katrina, which engulfed New Orleans in 2005 and exposed the deep social divide between rich and poor. President George Bush's callous indifference to the plight of the hurricane's working class victims exposed before the American and world population the real state of class relations in the US.

Rudd and Victorian Labor Premier John Brumby have been determined to avoid the same mistake since the fires broke out. Both have made numerous visits to the affected areas, hugging and consoling as many people as possible in front of large media contingents.

A secondary theme was to portray the carnage and destruction caused by the fire as inevitable. In order to emphasise this point, Victorian Premier Brumby commandeered a firefighter's poem that included the line: "Saturday broke all of the rules, made me and my study look like fools." This served to bolster Brumby's claim that there was nothing his government could have done to prevent the loss of life and property.

Finally, there was the invoking of the nation's "martial spirit". In front of the heads of every branch of the military, Rudd likened the bushfire devastation to "the carnage of human conflict". Images of soldiers helping to clear the affected areas were beamed from the screens. The firefighters, Rudd went on, were "a new army of heroes where the yellow helmet evokes the same reverence as the [army] slouch hat of old." The "almighty army of volunteers" was also hailed.

Media coverage of the event tactfully honed in on individuals and small groups, not the largely empty venues around the country. Even sporting events that were billed as part of the "day of mourning" were poorly attended. An ABC report helpfully suggested that most people had decided to watch the event on television in their homes. No reports dared suggest that the attendance was woeful, much less consider why.

The reason is not that ordinary people don't care. There has been an extraordinary outpouring of public sympathy, donations and assistance to the bushfire victims over the past fortnight. For the political and media establishment, the unpalatable truth is that the systematic downgrading of public services and facilities over the past three decades, combined with the global economic crisis, which is already starting to savage jobs and living conditions, has created an unprecedented degree of distrust, alienation and anger towards official politics and its representatives—and the beginnings of a healthy hostility to such politically

choreographed events.

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