

As death toll rises

Evidence mounts of lack of planning prior to Australia's worst bushfire

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The death toll from the Victorian bushfires which began last Saturday has now reached 181. More bodies are being found as fire fighters and emergency personnel continue their search through the vast wreckage wrought by the firestorm. With at least 80 people still missing it is feared that as many 300 people may ultimately have died.

Fire fighters, many now working for the fifth straight day, are still battling to contain at least 20 fires that continue to burn despite a cool weather change and light rain. Authorities have said that it may take weeks to contain all the blazes. Firefighters warned earlier today that two of the largest fires in hill country east of Melbourne could unite and intensify, threatening several more towns as well as the state capital's **water and gas supplies**.

Terrible details of the fire's impact continue to emerge. In Kinglake, two sisters, Melanie and Penelope Chambers, 23 and 21 years old respectively, died trying to defend their horses and pets. Entire families were among the dead; in Kinglake rescue workers found the bodies of Adrian and Mirabelle Brown inside their home along with their three children, Eric, 8, Matthew, 7, and Brielle, 3. In Marysville, 72-year-old Elaine Postlethwaite managed to survive after fleeing before the inferno completely destroyed the town. However, her husband, 82-year-old Len Postlethwaite had refused to leave and is believed to have died. Also in Marysville, Fay and Bill Walker, both in their 80s, and their wheelchair-bound son Geoff, 53, were killed in their home after a huge tree fell and blocked the gate to their property, preventing them from fleeing in their packed car.

Ordinary Australians have rushed to donate money, blood, clothing and other supplies for the victims. In less than 36 hours, about \$20 million was donated; the Australian Red Cross had received more than \$7 million by mid-Monday from 40,000 people, before their web site crashed due to the overwhelming demand. Blood banks in many different areas reported large queues to assist the dozens of people with serious burns.

In the midst of this response from ordinary people, questions are beginning to be raised about the lack of official preparedness for the bushfires. There is growing evidence that the terrible toll wrought by the natural disaster was in large part due to the failure of government authorities to adequately plan for such events and to fund and develop the necessary social infrastructure. While Victorian Labor Premier John Brumby has announced that a royal commission will be convened, it is already clear that both the Victorian and federal governments hope to use the inquiry to deflect attention from their own responsibility.

It has now emerged that there was no central and state-wide centre in place to monitor the outbreak of the bushfires and to systematically alert and evacuate communities in danger. Instead, the response was largely ad hoc. Numerous towns and hamlets were left entirely isolated. Some local fire trucks and fire fighters left early to assist the fight against initial outbreaks in other parts of the state, resulting in their own base being left undefended when the firestorm spread. Its speed completely overwhelmed thousands of residents. Many followed official advice and tuned in to local ABC radio for official updates, only to find that their town was not being mentioned, even as they witnessed it burning to the ground.

The official "stay and defend or leave early" policy left it up to those at risk to decide whether to evacuate or remain in their homes. Government authorities thereby absolved themselves of any responsibility for ensuring the safety of vulnerable communities. Instead of a collective warning and evacuation system, individuals were left to decide what to do, often with inadequate or no information. Predictably, many people, especially those without home and property insurance, risked their physical safety and chose to "stay and defend" out of fear of losing everything they owned.

The "stay and defend or leave early" policy has long been criticised by fire fighting organisations in other countries. Last month Harold Schaitberger, general president of the International Association of Fire Fighters, which represents fire fighters and paramedics in the US and Canada, wrote an opinion piece titled "Leave firefighting to the pros" in the *Los Angeles Times*. "Stay-and-defend should make people run and hide," he declared. "Hearing anyone suggest that homeowners should not get out of harm's way is appalling. Hearing a public safety professional make the suggestion is shameless. Stay-and-defend is clearly a half-baked idea from people who believe that saving money is more important than saving lives... Public safety is the responsibility of federal, state and local governments. Taxpayers expect public safety to remain an essential government function performed by highly trained professionals."

It remains unclear to what extent the Victorian government's underfunding and inadequate equipping of the fire fighting service contributed to the disaster. For the past few months the United Firefighters' Union of Australia has run a public campaign encouraging people to demand that Brumby explain "why antiquated and outdated equipment that is dangerous to the community and firefighters themselves is currently in use, why the firefighters had to wait 5 years for new uniforms that would protect them, [and] why my firefighters have not one Training College that they can train at" (www.firecrisis.com).

Many questions have been raised regarding the absence of even the most basic fire warning system. One person whose family narrowly escaped the inferno in Kinglake wrote to the *Age* asking why warning sirens could not be installed in towns and hamlets to signal the need to evacuate. Notwithstanding the ferocious speed of the firestorm's advance, in an era of digital communication, with "real time" satellite imagery available of the entire earth's surface, there is no question that much more could have been done.

According to an article in the *Herald Sun* today, an advance early warning bushfire system was successfully trialled in 2005, but was then shelved as federal and state governments squabbled over who should pay for the \$10-12 million set-up cost. The trialled Community Information and Warning System automatically calls all homes and mobile phones in a specified area to pass on warnings and advice in an emergency. The technology also records which landlines have been contacted, allowing authorities to know which households are yet to be alerted.

Former superintendent Murray Adams, who led police emergency management efforts for 11 years, said: "I don't want to blame anyone in particular or get into a slanging match, but I cannot believe nothing has been done. We have the technology. It's quick, easy and effective, a magnificent tool, but we're not using it... As far as I know the only reason it hasn't gone ahead is funding."

Failure of planning, social infrastructure

Premier Brumby has suggested that a mobile phone text message alert service may be initiated. "We need to learn the lessons from what occurred over the last few days as we learnt from the bushfires in 1939 and 1983," he declared on Monday.

This statement raises a critical question: did the government make any regular and systematic checks and updates of its bushfire emergency practices or were policies put in place after 1983 simply maintained without review?

Over the last 25 years, successive Labor and Liberal governments at both the state and federal level have pushed through a series of pro-business economic reforms that have left virtually every aspect of social life vulnerable to the dictates of the "free market". Industries and services have been privatised, infrastructure opened up to "public private partnerships", and vital social services starved of funds and operated on a "user pays" principle. The very concept of a coordinated and long-term central plan for bush communities—encompassing all aspects of their physical, social, and economic security—is anathema to the imperatives of the profit system. These are all issues that will no doubt remain suppressed by Brumby's royal commission and any other official investigations.

While the authorities' bushfire response policy appears to have remained largely unchanged since the 1983 disaster, that is not the situation confronting vulnerable communities. The rising population of these towns and hamlets is suspected of contributing to the high death toll in the latest disaster. Many retirees have moved to the bush, while a large number of working people who are unable to afford to buy a home in Melbourne now also live in semi-rural towns just outside the state capital and commute to their workplace.

This expansion of semi-rural dwellings has been largely unplanned and unregulated, driven by the interests of property developers rather than the health and safety of residents. Moreover, standards in Victoria are lax

compared to other states. The *Australian* yesterday reported that unlike New South Wales, in Victoria there are no restrictions on the use of flammable housing materials such as cedar wood. NSW is also alone in prohibiting the building of homes on ridge tops and in imposing strict rules for water supplies. Calls are now being made for mandatory construction of secure underground bunkers in residential bush areas.

It appears that climate change has greatly increased the risk of severe bushfires. Professor David Karoly, a member of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, told the ABC "Lateline" program: "What we're seeing now is that the dice have been heavily loaded so that the chances of these sorts of extreme fire weather situations are occurring much more rapidly in the last 10 years due to climate change... Certainly in some situations, we're seeing unprecedented extremes. The hot temperatures on Saturday in Melbourne and in many parts in south eastern Australia were unprecedented. The records were broken by a large amount and you cannot explain that just by natural variability."

A number of sharp criticisms have been raised regarding the controlled burning program that is supposed to reduce an excessive build-up of dry bush vegetation, which fuels major fires. Stuart Ellis, who chaired a Council of Australian Governments inquiry into the 2002-2003 bushfires, told the *Australian*: "Prescribed burning is occurring, but is enough of it occurring? In my view, no."

This is a long-standing issue, which is also bound up with a shortfall in government funding. The *Business Spectator* cited a 2007 newspaper article by Craig Ingram, the independent state parliamentarian for East Gippsland. "I believe the main barrier in achieving prescribed burning targets is lack of resources," he wrote. "At Cann River, for example, the National Party supported the slash and burn staff cutbacks that occurred. DSE [Department of Sustainability and Environment] and parks staff at Cann River were slashed in half, from of 24 to 12. At the same time during Peter Hall's (National Party member) political watch, DSE bulldozers and other fire fighting equipment stood idle across the region due to the department having no funds to put diesel in the tanks or to employ operators to drive the machines. This may explain why in the seven years of the [former Liberal] Kennett government the department never met the targets set down in the fire management plans and in fact were 50 percent below their own targets."

Sections of the media, above all the Murdoch press, have alleged that the inadequate controlled burning program was due to the influence of inner-city Green "latte conservationists" who are supposedly more interested in saving trees than people and property. No evidence has been produced to substantiate these accusations.

The central aim here seems to be to find a convenient scapegoat for the disaster and to deflect any scrutiny of the authorities' bushfire preparations. This agenda is also behind the increasingly hysterical campaign against arsonists. While it appears that the two most devastating firestorms—those that destroyed Marysville and much of Kinglake—were triggered by lightning or other natural events, that has not stopped the media and senior politicians, including Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, from whipping up a pogromist-type atmosphere, suggesting that arsonists were responsible for all the deaths.

Many who managed to survive the bushfires are becoming increasingly frustrated and angry with the lack of official support. Survivors are being blocked from returning to their properties to survey the damage. The restricted access is supposedly because the affected areas are being treated

as crime scenes, but residents in some areas have bitterly complained that journalists are nevertheless being allowed in.

Kylie McErlain told the Associated Press yesterday that she had been prevented from bringing a truckload of generators up to her bakery in Kinglake to re-establish power and help the residents who stayed to defend the town. "We need to feed the people up there," she said. "It's just a shemozzle." Paul Ryan, whose brother John stayed in Kinglake to save his house, said he was being denied entry because he was not a resident. "John managed to fight to save his house but he's been stranded up there on his own since Saturday and they won't let me through," he said. "John doesn't want to come down. He's worried that if he comes down they won't let him back up."

There have also been serious delays in the provision of assistance. The *Australian* journalist Gary Hughes, whose home was destroyed, only narrowly escaped the fire. When he and his family applied to Centrelink to access the emergency cash pledged by the Rudd government, they were told they had to provide identification to qualify.

Hughes subsequently wrote an open letter to the prime minister: *"What's that meant to be, Kevin, some cruel joke? Losing everything means just that—everything. There are many like us who didn't have time to calmly pause to collect wallets and purses as we fled our homes with wet towels over our faces to avoid choking to death on toxic smoke and flaming embers. Maybe bureaucrats think more clearly in a crisis. Survivors unable to produce identification were told they needed at the very least a copy of a bank statement to prove who they were. Come back with a bank statement, they were told, and their applications for emergency relief would be processed. Kevin, how are people who most likely have also lost their cars supposed to get to their bank and back? Catch a bus? Beg a lift on a passing fire truck?"*



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