

Australian bushfires: the tragic outcome of government neglect

Richard Phillips
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As each day brings new details of the terrible human cost of the bush fires that hit Victoria last weekend, evidence mounts that government neglect, the run-down of emergency services and the lack of any comprehensive plan were direct contributors to the tragic loss of life.

The official death toll is currently 181, but the final casualty figure is expected to be well over 300 as police, soldiers and military personnel continue their search for bodies in the burnt-out ruins of around 1,800 homes.

So far more than 5,000 people have been left homeless by the inferno, which has burnt out more than 450,000 hectares, along with schools, small businesses and local facilities. Many homeowners face financial ruin, with property losses conservatively estimated at over \$2 billion. According to Australia's Insurance Council, up to one in five of those affected may not have had insurance coverage.

Milder weather conditions and rain on Wednesday and Thursday brought relief in some parts of the state but there are more than a dozen fires still burning, with several towns in danger. The Department of Sustainability and Environment warned today that the town of Healesville with a population of 6,700 is under serious threat from nearby fires. Hot weather forecast for this weekend is expected to produce new outbreaks in the state.

After the initial shock, public anger over the tragedy is growing. Letters to the newspapers have denounced the government and questioned its failure to act on the lessons of previous bushfires.

A letter to the *Age* from Paul Gleeson in Coburg declared: "We wake each morning to hear that the number of confirmed deaths from the bushfires has risen. Now is the time to demand that defence spending be directed to purchasing dozens of fire-fighting helicopters. Cancel the order for fighter planes, don't build submarines—build bushfire shelters."

In another letter, Alex and Marcia Leonard from Kinglake pointed out that every house in their street was destroyed by fire: "Our community was left exposed and unprotected by inadequate fire management before the fires occurred. The surrounding forests have had a fuel build-up of nearly a hundred years that, combined with 10 years of drought, left the whole, under-resourced community at risk of death by fire."

Public debate has broken out over the government's "stay and

fight or evacuate" policy, which imposes all responsibility on residents in high-risk areas to decide individually on how to respond to bushfires. The policy, implemented in the aftermath of the Ash Wednesday fires in February 1983, was used to justify the lack of government spending on what is an ever-present danger during Australian summers.

Journalists and scores of first-hand survivor and emergency workers' reports point to the impossibility of saving houses in the conditions prevailing last weekend. Many people died trying to defend their homes or were caught in cars trying flee from an inferno fueled by a 12-year drought and more than 46 degree centigrade temperatures.

According to Australia's fire danger rating index, which takes into account temperature and humidity, an over 50 rating is extreme. Last Saturday, the index is reported to have been five to six times higher.

Government cover up

In the face of mounting public criticism, governments, state and federal, have been desperately seeking to obscure their own responsibility for the lack of planning or a proper warning system and the inadequacy of the firefighting resources.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has proclaimed the bushfires as Australia's worst natural disaster and announced a "day of mourning" to honour those killed. Victorian Premier John Brumby has announced a Royal Commission investigation.

It is already clear, however, that no fundamental changes will be made. Even before the Royal Commission has convened, Premier Brumby told the media on Wednesday that a centralised evacuation policy is impossible.

"If you were to evacuate everybody every time there was a medium or high fire risk, you are literally talking about half a million people. To be honest, you can't evacuate half a million people, it's just not practical," he said.

Far from being impossible, a clear evacuation plan along with modern warning systems and emergency services boils down to time and money—investments that the state and federal government are not prepared to make.

According to numerous eye-witness accounts, the situation last

Saturday was utterly chaotic. Householders in many fire risk areas were compelled to contact the local ABC Radio service for blaze updates and emergency warnings.

Others were totally isolated—before and after the fires. Narbethong, for example, was cut off from the outside world for two days despite the fact that its local pub was providing accommodation and shelter to 150 people from nearby Marysville whose homes had been burnt to the ground. The first contact made was from a media team on Tuesday.

Victoria's emergency phone line was deluged by more than 4,000 calls at the height of Saturday's bushfires. The service, which had only 14 operators—all its available staff—working that day, simply could not cope as operators answered frantic calls from victims trapped in their homes or cars.

A report by Victoria's auditor general in 2003 criticised the state government's "consistent failure" to properly carry out controlled burning in bushfire zones; noted that only some of the municipalities covered by the Country Fire Authority were implementing voluntary planning controls in bushfire areas; and that fire education programs were "inadequate".

According to the report, nearly half the residents surveyed in the Dandenongs, a heavily-wooded mountain range southeast of Melbourne, believed they would be alerted by a fire siren. In previous years fire-prone towns and hamlets maintained fire sirens and warning bells to warn residents. These no longer exist.

Fire experts have also pointed out that fire-protection building codes covering homes in Victorian bushfire areas were inadequate to current conditions.

Brumby and Rudd have declared that a national emergency notifications service will be established in the next 12 months but similar proposals have been rejected in recent years on cost grounds by state and federal governments.

The Victorian State Emergency Services successfully tested a telephone and text based emergency notification system in fire-prone areas in Victoria in 2005. But it was not implemented due to bickering between the federal and state governments over who would pay the estimated \$20 million cost.

Arson witch-hunt

In an effort to deflect public criticism of governments, the media is deliberately whipping up an atmosphere of hysteria to pin blame for the fires on "arsonists".

A provocative editorial in Murdoch's *Australian* newspaper on Tuesday, entitled "The pain of fire, the evil of arson," bluntly declared: "Now is not the time to ask why so many lives were lost, whether warnings were inadequate or resources poorly deployed". The real issue, it insisted, was whether the fire was deliberately lit and the necessity for "far harsher punishments."

Others have taken up the theme. Prime Minister Rudd denounced arsonists as "mass murderers". Not to be outdone Brumby and

South Australian Premier Mike Rann branded them as "terrorists". Federal Attorney General Robert McClelland announced that any arsonist would face multiple murder charges and if found guilty would spend the rest of their lives behind bars.

Victorian police commissioner Christine Nixon appeared on ABC television's "Lateline" program on Wednesday claiming that the Churchill and Marysville fires could have been deliberately lit but provided no serious evidence. The Victorian police have established a special squad to determine whether any of the fires were deliberately lit and released an identikit picture of a so-called serial arsonist. No arrests have been made.

Earlier on Wednesday, however, Assistant Police Commissioner Danye Moloney, who heads the task force, expressed concern at the lynch mob mentality being created and appealed for calm. "There's a lot of finger-pointing at people down the road who may be absolutely innocent. And what a crime to be accused of, if you are innocent. Let us identify if there is a crime and who may be responsible," he warned.

The cynical diversions of the media and politicians and the limited amounts of government aid stand in stark contrast to the generosity of ordinary working people. More than \$75 million has been raised already in public donations, with over \$53 million pledged in the first two days. Thousands of people have volunteered their services to provide food, shelter, clothing, children's toys, medical care and other provisions for the bushfire victims.

Such was the response in public donations that Red Cross officials issued a statement calling on people not to phone their offices but to donate on-line because their telephone service was overloaded. Scores of flood victims from Ingham in north Queensland where roads and homes have been under water for a fortnight even donated their \$1,000 government relief grants to the appeal.

The elementary social solidarity displayed by this deluge of donations only underscores the inhumanity of a social order and its political defenders who place private profit before all else.

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