

Australia: Royal Commission inquiry forced to investigate “stay or go” bushfire policy

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Widespread criticism of the government’s “stay or go” policy has followed the devastating firestorm, now known as Black Saturday, that hit the Australian state of Victoria on February 7 killing at least 173 people and destroying over 2,000 homes.

Nevertheless, three days after the tragedy, and before any investigation, Victorian Premier John Brumby told the media that “stay or go” was the “right policy” and had “served the state very, very well for the past 20 years.” Mass evacuation of residents from bushfire prone areas, he declared, was “just not practicable”.

Notwithstanding Brumby’s claims, the high death toll has produced such a chorus of questions and concerns, that the royal commission inquiry set up by the government has been forced to examine the policy.

Under “stay or go” individual homeowners determine their own response to approaching bushfires. Householders can decide to leave early or, if able-bodied and with adequate water supplies, try to save their homes during and after the fire front has passed.

Most of those who died on February 7 were not alerted to the rapidly approaching fires until it was too late. Nor were they warned about the severity of the blazes. According to standard fire rating measurements, a 12 to 25 index is considered high and a rating over 50 extreme. The Black Saturday index was unprecedented, ranging from 120 to 180.

“Stay or go”, which is officially endorsed by the Australasian Fire and Emergency Services Authorities Council (AFAC), the peak industry body, and the Country Fire Authority (CFA), Victoria’s largest fire fighting agency, has been systematically implemented by Labor and conservative governments, state and federal alike, in Australia during the past two decades.

While supporters of the policy claim it saves lives—an assertion contradicted by the high February 7 death toll—it excludes the development of mass evacuation procedures, which are widely used in other fire-prone countries, and ensures that governments are not obligated to provide safe havens, shelters, fire-proofed public buildings and other rudimentary safety procedures.

“Stay or go” was first proposed in the aftermath of bushfires in Hobart, Tasmania in 1967 that killed 62 people and destroyed 1,300 houses, many of which were located on the interface between urban development and bushland close to the city. Numbers of the victims died in last minute attempts to flee the fires.

Government support for the “stay or go” policy grew during the 1980s and 90s as state and federal administrations embraced “free-market liberalisation”, “user-pays measures” and privatisation of government services.

The state of Victoria is one of the three most bushfire-prone areas in the world. It has suffered three extreme fire events with heavy casualties in 70 years—1939, 1983 and 2009—as well as numerous other bushfires in the intervening years. Despite this, Victoria’s fire-fighting services are mainly staffed by volunteers. The CFA, which is responsible for 150,000 square kilometres of territory, has just over 400 professional fire-fighters and 50,000 volunteers, a pattern repeated Australia-wide.

One of the first documents calling for wider application of “stay or go” was the *Report of the bushfire review committee on bush fire preparedness and response in Victoria, Australia*. This publication was the product of an official inquiry into the Ash Wednesday fires of February 16, 1983, which killed 75 people in Victoria and South Australia.

Chaired by the Victorian Chief Commissioner of Police, S. I. Miller, the investigation noted that only 41 out of 211 municipalities had disaster plans in place and few had taken steps to provide for community protection and evacuation, including designation of safe havens/assembly areas and evacuation routes.

It endorsed “stay or go” as a “viable option to evacuation” and bluntly declared that because the establishment of a full-time professional service would be “prohibitively expensive” it was necessary to depend on volunteers.

During the late 1980s, “stay or go” began to be advanced, not just as an adjunct, but as a *replacement*, for evacuation.

Various academic works bolstered this perspective. *A Study of*

Civilian Deaths in the 1983 Ash Wednesday Bushfires, a 1992 report by Norren Krusel and Stephen Petris, even proposed that local communities should take responsibility for developing their own early warning systems!

Krusel and Petris's study stated: "While organisations like the CFA and the State Emergency Service (SES) remain responsible for the communication of risk, the deficiencies in the warning process can best be overcome if the people themselves also take some responsibility for obtaining information. This is best achieved if people work together as a community group.... In the same way that individuals should take responsibility for their own bushfire safety, they should also take some responsibility for their own warning."

"Stay or go" implemented nationally

From 1993 onwards, and in line with the "free market" assault on social spending unleashed by the Hawke and Keating Labor governments, the Victorian state government, together with the CFA, began developing "stay or go" policies that were then adopted, with minor modifications, in other Australian states. The CFA developed an initiative known as "Community Fireguard" to encourage community "self reliance" during bushfires. There are now over 330 Fireguard groups in Victoria, based on a street, or a road, or small groups of about 20 houses.

In 1997, major bushfires in the Dandenong ranges, close to Melbourne, threw the "stay or go" perspective into considerable question when three people died while sheltering underneath a house. The coroner's report criticised the policy, citing the remarks of one survivor who declared: "After 1983 I lost a bit of confidence in the CFA. They pushed the notion of staying in your house until the fire front passed and then get out and fight spot fires.... [T]his was a ridiculous option." The survivor went on to make clear that "in the area in which we live evacuation was the only thing to do ... this in retrospect has probably saved our lives."

These concerns were ignored by the state government. That same year, the CFA developed a "Bushfire Blitz", which consisted of neighbourhood or street meetings for residents in high-risk areas. A 90-minute presentation would outline options to deal with known risks and encourage plans appropriate to the local environment, including the formation of Community Fireguard groups, aimed at further pressuring local residents to defend themselves and their homes in the event of bushfires.

In 2001, an AFAC paper declared that responsibility for reducing loss of life and property lay jointly with state authorities, local governments, communities and individuals. It insisted, however, that fire authorities could not protect every residence. This in turn

placed pressure on those living in fire-prone areas to defend their homes, whatever the odds. The pressure was particularly acute on the under-insured and uninsured.

In 2003 the Victorian Auditor General made a detailed report on community fire preparedness, based on surveys of 800 people in Gippsland and the Dandenongs. It found that 64 percent of residents in the Dandenongs and 85 percent in Gippsland believed, *incorrectly*, that the emergency services would let people know whether it was necessary to evacuate.

Before Black Saturday, Californian state authorities in the United States were considering "stay or go" as a cost-cutting measure. Last year seven southern California counties were discussing the adoption of the official Australian approach, and a series of glowing articles about the policy was published last August in the *Los Angeles Times*.

While these proposals are now under a cloud, following the tragic loss of life in Victoria, the *Los Angeles Times* recently reported that although "stay or go" had "found little acceptance in the United States" as "wildfires become more severe and costlier to fight, some US officials say the Australian model deserves a serious look."

Whatever examination is made by the current Victorian royal commission investigation into the role of the "stay or go" policy in the 2009 bushfire disaster, the global economic crisis and ongoing demands from big business for tax cuts and social spending reductions will see insistent calls that it be maintained.

The royal commission has already made clear from the outset that it will make no specific recommendation about whether the scheme should be retained, or replaced with a mass evacuation policy, in its interim report, which is due in August. In other words, there will be no change in policy when the next bushfire season starts, later this year.



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