

Australia: Bushfire investigation report a whitewash

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The recently released royal commission interim report into the “Black Saturday” bushfires, which swept through the state of Victoria on February 7, killing 173 people and destroying over 2,000 homes, is a political whitewash.

While the 360-page report reveals the consequences of the failure of emergency authorities to warn many fire-prone communities, it makes no direct criticism of the state Labor government, or its predecessors, whose cost-cutting “stay or go” policy was responsible for the high loss of life on February 7. In fact, the report’s 51 recommendations are designed to ensure that this policy, albeit with modifications, remains.

“Stay or go”, which was progressively implemented by Australian governments during the late 1990s, places responsibility on individuals to determine whether they should evacuate before fires arrive, or stay and implement their own fire-fighting plans to defend homes and property. The policy allows the state to divest itself of responsibility to provide evacuation services, fire-safety refuges, and an adequately equipped professional firefighting service.

Prior to February 7, a key slogan in official bushfire emergency literature distributed to fire-prone communities was, “People save houses, houses save people”. Contrary to this claim, 117 of the 173 who died on February 17 were in their homes, many of them attempting to defend their properties.

Victorian state premier John Brumby told the media following the interim report’s release that “refinements” would be made to “stay or go” and then claimed that the royal commission had validated the government response to “Black Saturday”. He insisted that the state would not evacuate fire-threatened communities. This, he claimed, was logistically impossible.

Asked who should take responsibility for the catastrophic emergency service failures, Brumby said everyone had “done their best” in the extreme weather conditions and arrogantly declared: “All Victorians feel responsible for what occurred on February 7. All of us. I do. [Country Fire Authority chief] Russell Rees does. Everybody does.”

This week Brumby formally endorsed the interim report’s recommendations, declaring that his government would establish an integrated bushfire warning system and web site, new vegetation clearing rules and introduce other changes. The essential framework of the state’s emergency policies, however, remains—that life and death decisions in bushfires should primarily be determined by individuals.

Catastrophic failure

Notwithstanding its refusal to indict the state government, the interim report exposes an ill-prepared emergency service and the failure of state authorities to implement safety measures proposed after previous fire investigations. The report reveals that:

- * No national uniform bushfire warning system existed on February 7 or even a consistent national standard for message warnings. Local sirens did not exist or had been removed in many fire prone areas, despite official recommendations following the devastating Ash Wednesday fires in 1983 that they should be used to alert communities.

- * Proposals by the Council of Australian Governments in 2004 for the establishment of a national disaster warning system and for bushfire warnings to include location, size and intensity of bushfire threat, as well as the expected movement of the fire and appropriate action to take, had not been implemented.

- * Over 10,000 calls to the grossly understaffed triple-0 emergency number went unanswered, as did 80 percent of calls to Victoria’s bushfire information line. Staff levels were inadequate on February 7 to cope with the widely anticipated influx of calls for assistance.

- * Three government schools and three kindergartens were incinerated on “Black Saturday”. If the fires had occurred on a school day hundreds of children could have been killed because there was no state-wide policy requiring government schools to either evacuate or close in the event of fire. No schools were closed on any of the officially-mandated Total Fire Ban days during December 2008 or on 5 and 6 February 2009.

- * Only one-third of those surveyed by the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre had received information about how to prepare for a bushfire prior to the 2008-09 fire season.

The report is sharply critical of the role played by Country Fire Authority (CFA) chief Russell Rees and noted that “there was no person in charge,” at the Integrated Emergency Co-ordination Centre—Victoria’s central emergency services office—on February 7. The CFA is the state’s largest emergency service with about 59,000 volunteers but only has 400 professional firefighters.

CFA chief Rees, the report states, “did not appear to become actively involved in operational issues, even when the disastrous consequences of the fires began to emerge.”

Rees's responsibilities on "Black Saturday" included, "ensuring an [incident management team] was in place for major fires and that he was kept informed of the fire situation so he could inform those above him of the fires in a strategic sense."

But Rees did not look at maps predicting the path of the Kilmore East fire on February 7 and was unaware that they were being drafted in the emergency control headquarters where he was working. Nor did he "ask anybody to check whether the Kilmore ICC [Incident Control Centre] was producing timely warnings."

Staff at Kilmore ICC were under-qualified and its communication system broke down. Another nearby ICC, at Kangaroo Ground, had better equipment and more qualified staff but, in line with emergency service protocols, was barred from issuing warnings because Kilmore ICC had been given control of the fire.

The Kilmore East fire destroyed the towns of Kinglake, Flowerdale, Strathewen and other towns, killing 121 people. The overwhelming majority of those who died were given no official warnings and were left to fend for themselves.

A week before the interim report was released Brumby reappointed Rees for another two years, declaring that he had "full confidence" in the CFA chief.

Little change for ordinary people

The royal commission has thus far received over 1,260 submissions—326 of these on the "stay or go" policy, evacuation and fire refuges. Others deal with inadequate or non-existent mobile phone and landline reception, and poor power supply in fire prone areas.

The interim report makes for chilling reading, not only for what it reveals about the February 7 fires, but because nothing fundamental is going to change.

The report notes that royal commissioners were "repeatedly" asked during local community consultations about the provision of a network of purpose-built fire refuges and that power-lines be relocated underground. These appeals, including calls for increased numbers of firefighters have been either ignored or deemed impractical.

Following recommendations from the Ash Wednesday fire investigation in 1984, fire refuges were established in a number of fire prone areas. These were de-commissioned during the subsequent two decades.

In 2001 a state government and emergency services working party declared that designated fire refuges made communities "less self reliant," "more prone to seek help from and even blame the relevant emergency authorities if something goes wrong" and "may undermine the 'stay or go' policy". By 2005 official state government policy stated that purpose-built fire refuges should only be provided "in rare and exceptional circumstances".

The changes to "stay or go" proposed in the interim report suggest that the government should tell residents that "leaving early" is the safest way

to survive a bushfire and "not all homes are defensible". Households should also have their own back-up plan to go to a "neighbourhood safer place," if necessary.

Use of the vague phrase "neighbourhood safer place" is in line with state government directives. Lawyers representing the state government told the commission in July that this term should be used because the government did not want to "raise expectations" that it would be building fire refuges.

According to the interim report "neighbourhood safer places" could be "car parks, amenities blocks and dam walls" as well as "open spaces (such as ovals, sporting grounds and race tracks)". The badly under-resourced CFA should "assist in the defence of designated community fire refuges and neighbourhood safer places".

A disastrous 2009-2010 bushfire season is already looming. Experts are predicting that the fires could be far more intense than those seen on "Black Saturday" and, according to the state government, over 52 Victorian communities are seriously fire-prone.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* warned in a comment published on March 6: "Brumby's forthcoming Royal Commission will be no different to past investigations. Its purpose is ... to provide a political breathing space for both the Victorian and federal governments to divert the concerns of survivors, fire-fighting experts and scientists into a state-controlled institution, where they will be contained, dissipated and rendered politically harmless.

"Even in the event that serious recommendations emerge from the Royal Commission, the Victorian government would be under no obligation to implement them. Its priorities will be no different to those of the governments—Labor and Liberal—that have gone before. It will plead 'insufficient resources' as it defends the profit interests of the banks, finance and insurance sharks, developers and construction companies that have already enriched themselves from the economic migration of thousands of working class families into bushfire-prone areas over the past two and half decades" (see: "Victorian bushfires demonstrate the need for a socialist perspective").

These predictions are being confirmed. The royal commission, which has resumed its hearings, has no plans to subpoena the state premier or any other state government minister for questioning about their role. Its final report is not due until July 31, next year.

The tragic loss of life on "Black Saturday" underscores a basic truth: the provision of modern firefighting and emergency services capable of protecting local communities from bushfires and other disasters, is incompatible with a social order based on the drive for private profit.



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