

One year since Australian bushfires: communities abandoned as government cover-up continues

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Sunday marked the first anniversary of the devastating bushfires in the Australian state of Victoria that killed 173 people—23 of them children—and destroyed more than 2,000 homes.

The occasion was accompanied by a welter of platitudes from federal and state politicians. Victorian Premier John Brumby cynically declared that the fires had revealed “the true meaning of community spirit”. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd attempted to promote nationalist sentiment, declaring that while the anniversary of “Black Saturday”—February 7, 2009—was a day of mourning, it was also “one of tremendous spirit and inspiration. The tragedy brought out the best of the Australian character and inspired countless acts of bravery and generosity.”

Such proclamations, which were echoed throughout the enormous media coverage of the one-year anniversary, are part of an orchestrated political campaign to cover-up two basic facts. First, that state and federal governments bear direct responsibility for the bushfire death toll. Years of cost-cutting and deliberate neglect of emergency services had a terrible impact, along with the so-called “stay or go” policy, which makes individual residents responsible for deciding if, when, and how they should evacuate. Second, authorities have done very little in the last twelve months to support survivors and to rebuild the many affected communities. Nor have measures been put in place to ensure a more effective emergency management response should such destructive bushfires strike again.

The 2009 fires blackened over 300,000 hectares (740,000 acres) and left more than 7,000 people homeless. The state Labor government and the media used the anniversary to present a grossly misleading picture, suggesting that burnt-out communities were gradually being re-established and that families were rebuilding their devastated homes. The *Australian* newspaper claimed on January 30 that in most fire-affected communities, “the air rings with sounds of hammers and saws as new homes and dreams take shape”.

What is the reality? Contrary to the official spin, figures released last November show that of the more than 1,080 rebuilding permits approved at that time, only 300 were for houses. Many

communities are now ghost towns and will never be rebuilt. The Strathewen hamlet, for example, where 27 people were killed, remains in ruins, while the tourist town of Marysville, which was virtually wiped out by the blaze, is unlikely to be fully rebuilt. Kinglake is similarly devastated, with only a handful of homes and businesses being re-established. (See: “Victorian bushfire survivors continue to face uncertainty and devastation”)

Many survivors are still in temporary and overcrowded government portable housing. Insurance Council of Australia figures released last week indicate that only 8 percent of bushfire victims who had home insurance are rebuilding—far below the usual reconstruction rate of around 80 percent after comparable disasters.

There are several factors behind the extremely slow reconstruction rate. Very few public and community facilities have been re-established in the fire-affected settlements, rebuilding costs are prohibitive, many claimants were under-insured, and in many instances the level of government assistance offered has been totally inadequate. According to the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority, for example, almost 5,000 grants worth \$25 million have been issued to small business and primary producers to help them back on their feet. This is less than \$5,000 per grant—a pittance when compared to the massive damage incurred.

Among the bushfire survivors there is little confidence that the government will establish safe conditions or adequate emergency services to prevent or minimise the impact of another fire disaster. Appeals for the establishment of fire refuges or bunkers, serious increases in fire-fighting manpower and training, and more preventative burning have been ignored or rejected outright by the state government. These and other proposals, such as a state-wide evacuation plan and placing power lines underground, have been deemed “unfeasible” or too expensive.

Current preventative burning targets remain at 130,000 hectares a year, a figure unchanged in the last five years. This is 30 percent less than the area called for by a Victorian parliamentary inquiry in 2008. In addition, the state’s fire prevention budget for 2009 was

11 percent less than in 2007; only 45 additional project fire-fighters have been hired since Black Saturday.

A new national bushfire-warning system, consisting of a series of alerts ranging from “low-moderate” to “code red (catastrophic)” warning levels, has been criticised by fire scientists as a knee-jerk response to the obvious failure of the decades-long “stay or go” policy. Former CSIRO fire scientist David Packham said that the new system was all “smoke and mirrors” and would create unnecessary panic. Dr Kevin Tolhurst said it was an “overly simplistic political outcome”. Tolhurst, a senior lecturer in fire ecology and management at the University of Melbourne, insisted that the system was too heavily reliant on weather forecasts and did not take into account vegetation, topography, population and probability of ignition. “Very little science actually went into it,” he declared.

It is little surprise that residents are reluctant to return to their devastated communities. Moreover, scores of survivors are reported to be dealing with serious depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, with several suicides reported. Alcoholism and marriage breakups are apparently common among many of those who lost love ones. Callously indifferent to these problems, government authorities have issued medical vouchers, allowing survivors of the fires just six visits to psychological counsellors.

Professor Alex McFarlane, an international expert on bushfire trauma, told the media last November that he was shocked that most people traumatised by Black Saturday had not even begun to receive treatment. Nor had there been any evidence of GPs in fire-affected towns being directly consulted to see what support they needed. Many survivors would continue to present for treatment for up to a decade, he pointed out.

The state Labor government’s cynical declarations of support for bushfire survivors on the one-year anniversary were issued the same day as important new details emerged of its direct manipulation of the Royal Commission into the disaster. While Brumby initially pledged that the inquiry would “leave no stone unturned”, the commission was always intended to serve as the key mechanism for a cover up of the political issues raised by Black Saturday.

The *Sunday Age* revealed last weekend: “[Brumby] has since tried to influence the commission’s schedule, and then, through government lawyers, to limit its findings. He also made it clear on radio last week that, if he did not like some of its findings, he would not implement them.”

The premier constantly briefs the Victorian government solicitor, John Cain Jnr, and through him Allen Myers QC, about what they must say in the Royal Commission. “What they tell Myers is that the government does not want people blamed nor scapegoats found,” the article noted. “So as long as Brumby is the premier, he will urge the royal commission to come up with findings that are essentially generic.”

In late January, Brumby wrote to the investigation’s chief commissioner, Bernie Teague, asking him to cancel hearings in the week before the fire’s anniversary. This, the premier claimed, was necessary out of respect for those who lost their lives. Brumby’s real concern was to prevent damning evidence from being aired in the lead up to the anniversary, which he regarded as a prized photo opportunity to boost his government’s rating in the polls. Senior barristers told the *Sunday Age* that the premier’s intervention was “extraordinary”.

When hearings continued as scheduled last week, the reaction of government lawyers to comments by Peter Rozen, counsel assisting the royal commission, bordered on hysterical. Rozen told the hearing that there appeared to have been a “disturbing lack of strategic planning on February 7”. He posed the question: “Can the people of Victoria have any confidence that anything has really changed?”

This was met with a furious response from Allan Myers, who told the commission that it was “simply false” that there was a lack of planning and preparation. Everyone involved had done their best, he insisted, and any other suggestion was “irresponsible and sensationalist, adversarial, pointless and damaging ... risible ... mischievous speculation. There are many things that happened which are regrettable, but that doesn’t mean someone has to be found to be at fault.”

Twelve months on, the essential framework of the state’s emergency policies remains. Nothing is permitted to impinge on the profits of the banks and finance corporations, private energy corporations or the developers and construction companies that have reaped huge profits from the government’s cost-cutting and privatisation policies. Critical life and death decisions in the face of dangerous bushfires remain primarily in the hands of the individuals affected, with the government accepting no responsibility for organising an effective and safe collective evacuation when required.

The situation one year on from the Victorian bushfires confirms the assessment made by the *World Socialist Web Site* in a comment posted on March 6 last year, “Victorian bushfires demonstrate the need for a socialist perspective”: “Any serious examination of the real causes of Black Saturday would reveal a harsh truth—that providing adequate fire-fighting and fire safety measures to protect every person facing potential threat is incompatible with the current socio-economic system, where everything, including human life, is determined by the dollar bottom line.”



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