

Australian bushfire royal commission report—a political whitewash

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The final report of the royal commission into the “Black Saturday” bushfires that devastated large parts of the Australian state of Victoria on February 7, 2009, killing 173 people, including 23 children, and destroying more than 2,100 homes, was released on July 31.

The four-volume report provides a chilling summary of the fires—the worst in Australian history—and the catastrophic impact of the state’s seriously inadequate emergency response. It points to the “stay or go” policy, major failures by senior emergency services officials, lack of fire warnings to bushland communities, the absence of fire refuges or a collective evacuation program, and the poorly maintained, high-voltage powerlines that sparked almost half the fires, including the Kilmore East blaze that killed 119 people.

Contrary to hysterical media claims that the Black Saturday fires were lit by arsonists the royal commission alleges that 5 of the 11 began because SPAusNet and Powercor, which took control of the powerlines when the State Electricity Commission of Victoria was privatised in 1994, had failed to adequately maintain them.

In fact, the final report noted that electricity faults spark more than 200 fires in Victoria each year and warned that the number of fires caused by electricity failures “would increase” unless the state government and the distribution businesses took “urgent preventive steps”.

The commission also stated that Energy Safe Victoria had played “a largely passive role” and “not assessed in detail” whether the private power distributors were complying with the state’s safety laws. Powerline inspections were reduced from three to five years, allowing SPAustNet and Powercor to cut their operation and maintenance budgets by \$105 million and \$95 million respectively from 2001 to 2008. (See: “Bushfire testimony on tragic cost of electricity privatisation”)

Notwithstanding these devastating revelations, the commission’s report is a political whitewash. It fails to probe the economic imperatives behind the budget-cutting policies that were responsible for the high death toll on Black Saturday or to indict the state government for its deliberate run-down of emergency services and power-line maintenance. Labor Premier John Brumby was not even subpoenaed to appear at

the commission.

The report also fails to indict the government’s disastrous “stay or go” policy. Despite an avalanche of testimony from disaster survivors and fire scientists pointing out the tragic consequences of the policy, the commissioners’ report insists that its basic foundations were “sound” and could be improved with some modifications. Predictably, an August 1 editorial in the *Sunday Age* congratulated the commissioners for their “balanced approach” towards the policy.

“Stay or go” was introduced and expanded during the 1990s by Victorian governments—Liberal and Labor alike—as a cost-saving measure. It allowed state authorities to wash their hands of any responsibility to establish the kind of integrated evacuation programs used in other bushfire-prone countries, to provide an adequately-equipped professional fire-fighting service or to build long-demanded local community refuges and bushfire shelters.

Instead, residents were encouraged to defend their own homes and to determine when, and if, they should stay and fight approaching fires or evacuate. Most of those killed on Black Saturday, however, were not given timely warnings by state emergency authorities and died in or near their homes, having vainly attempted to implement their own fire-fighting plans in line with official advice that “houses save people and people save houses”.

Brumby’s “community consultations”

As the *World Socialist Web Site* warned in March 2009: “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.”

These warnings have been thoroughly vindicated.

Since Black Saturday, Premier Brumby has insisted on two issues: firstly, that everyone did their best on February 7, 2009—in other words, his administration bears no real responsibility—and secondly, that the state government will not implement any recommendations it considers too expensive.

Immediately following the release of the royal commission report, Brumby told the media that he “would not respond piecemeal” to its recommendations, but “consult” with local communities. “It would be disrespectful not to listen to the community and give them the opportunity to comment,” he declared.

Brumby’s concerns are a fraud. The scheduled “consultations” are invitation-only events that have nothing to do with “respecting” the opinions of local communities. For decades, residents’ suggestions, along with numerous recommendations by previous bushfire investigations, have been ignored by consecutive state governments, with tragic consequences.

Last week Brumby flew into the South Gippsland town of Craiglee, accompanied by numerous print and television reporters. The local bushfire recovery committee was not even informed that the premier was coming to the town.

Fire survivor Tony Mann eventually found Brumby and confronted him. “You have more press people here than you have members of the community. If this is community consultation, where are we at?” he demanded. Mann, who lost his home on Black Saturday, denounced the consultation process as a “joke”.

Brumby’s real concern, of course, is not the views of local residents but how much the royal commission recommendations will impact on the profits of power distributors and insurance companies, and the state budget’s bottom line.

The premier immediately opposed two key recommendations following the commission report’s release: the burying or bundling of hundreds of kilometres of ageing high-voltage power lines, and a state-funded housing buy-back scheme in order to relocate those living in fire danger zones.

Last week Victorian government sources told the media that the buy-back scheme was too expensive and would cost \$15 billion. Brumby claimed that the proposal would undermine people’s right to “build or rebuild where they want”.

Media reports have also suggested that state government officials are deliberately exaggerating the cost of burying high-voltage powerlines—with estimates reaching as high as \$60 billion. SPAusNet has estimated the cost at over \$7.5 billion and has threatened to offload it onto domestic consumers through an annual 20 percent increase in power bills for the next two decades.

The commission’s call for the burial of powerlines was also denounced by the corporate media. A *Weekly Times* editorial on August 4, for example, declared that the proposal was “absurd” and suggested that the state government “divert large chunks of its health, education and transport budgets into the powerline bury and bundle scheme.”

These responses underscore the fact that the provision of up-to-date emergency services—fire refuges, safe housing, and an efficient evacuation and transport system—is incompatible with the profit system.

The bottom line is that those living in fire prone districts are still being left to largely fend for themselves. Contrary to government claims that Black Saturday was a freak event, environmentalists and long-term weather experts have provided compelling evidence that firestorms such as the one that erupted on February 7, 2009, will only become more common.

Fire survivors and workers everywhere need to recognise that the only way to prevent the catastrophic loss of life that occurred on Black Saturday is by confronting the underlying cause of the problem—the capitalist system, which is incapable of providing a safe and healthy environment for the entire population. The perspective of pressuring state governments to change course has proven to be a complete dead-end. What is required is a political break from Labor and the entire official political establishment and the fight for a workers’ government based on a socialist program. Only through the collective ownership and democratic control of key industries, including the banks, insurance companies and property development and construction corporations, by the working class can a healthy and safe environment be guaranteed for all.

This is the program for which the Socialist Equality Party is fighting in the 2010 federal election. I urge all workers and youth to make a serious study of our policies, to participate in our election campaign and, above all, to apply for membership of the SEP.

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