

Australian bushfire crisis continues as political fallout intensifies

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For a second week, large, unpredictable and fast-moving blazes are forcing people to flee their homes, often at short notice, in drought-stricken parts of Australia, with fire authorities warning there is no relief in sight over coming months.

Thousands of people have lost their homes or suffered major losses already, many more have been traumatised. Much worse is feared to come in a bushfire emergency that began during September, that is, in early spring.

In the most populous state, New South Wales (NSW), six people have died and 479 homes have been destroyed since September. The state's Rural Fire Service deputy commissioner Rob Rogers tweeted on Sunday: "An awful statistic considering we are not yet in summer."

Last night, despite some milder weather over the weekend, nearly 60 fires were still burning in NSW and more than 80 fires across the neighbouring state of Queensland, many out of control. Frequent "leave now" evacuation orders continued in affected regions, including some on the fringes of Sydney and other urban areas.

Smoke is causing unhealthy air quality in Sydney and Brisbane and many towns along the east coast. Last Friday, Port Macquarie on the NSW mid-north coast, experienced the world's worst air pollution, exceeding New Delhi. The coastal town's Air Quality Index rose to 1,739—a rating above 200 is deemed hazardous—prompting health officials to warn residents to stay indoors.

Forty-degree heat and "catastrophic" fire conditions in Western Australia, which are expected to move across the continent this week, combined with dry lightning strikes, could intensify the fires. Later in the week, a three-day heatwave is expected in parts of the

eastern states.

Despite efforts throughout the political and media establishment to shut down debate, public discontent is growing over the underlying climate change causes of the fire emergency and the ever-more apparent inadequacy of the official response.

After outbursts of anger directed against them by devastated fire victims, Prime Minister Scott Morrison and Labor Party leader Anthony Albanese have both stopped visiting evacuation centres and tried to call a halt to any discussion of the crucial political issues raised by the fires.

Visiting a crisis co-ordination centre in Canberra last Tuesday, Morrison urged an end to "provocative" comments. "I think it's important that at moments like this, everybody take it down a few notches," he said. "It's because people need to know that we're focussed on their needs right here and now."

Likewise, Albanese dismissed protests over the lack of government action on climate change. "I don't think it's a time to be engaged in party politics," he said after a fire victim yelled "shame" at him during a photo opportunity in northern NSW last Tuesday. Ginger O'Brien objected: "Your house is not burning. My house is burning down. What are you doing? Nothing. You're laughing. You're playing with fire." O'Brien said there needed to be more money to support firefighters. "My friends are out there," she said.

For all their claims of "focussing on the needs" of victims, Labor and Liberal-National governments alike have left fire services seriously under-resourced, ignoring warnings by scientists, fire experts and former firefighting chiefs. In Queensland yesterday, only 155 fire trucks were reportedly on the front lines—an average of about two per fire.

In NSW, Emergency Services Minister David Elliott

told state parliament last Wednesday that “we have 75,000 volunteer firefighters ready for deployment as we speak.” According to the Volunteer Fire Firefighters Association, however, the number of able-bodied and committed volunteers who can climb on a truck and fight fires is closer to 18,500. Even the government’s figure of 75,000 represents a 13.5 percent decline in 13 years compared to the size of the state’s population—down from 1,062 per 100,000 residents to 918.

Former Fire and Rescue NSW Commissioner Greg Mullins said last week that people could have been better protected if the federal government had heeded warnings from himself and 22 other retired emergency officials about the coming fire season. Mullins said he wrote to Prime Minister Morrison in April and again “immediately after” the May election, requesting an urgent meeting to discuss funding for firefighting and action to address climate change.

Mullins said an intervention in April would have given the government an opportunity to lease more large aircraft tankers in time to help fight the fires. Instead of just seven water bombers currently in use, at least double that number were needed, he said.

Mullins said the government must take urgent action to address climate change. “This is where people say it’s political, but it’s a fact that over the past five years our emissions have been going up, not down.” Mullins said climate change “makes the drought much worse, and we see these mega-fires that we just can’t put out.”

Even now, the government has delayed any meeting until next month, when Natural Disaster and Emergency Management Minister David Littleproud has offered to meet the fire chiefs’ group.

In a newspaper column, Mullins described the conditions being faced by residents and fire fighters: “Unprecedented dryness; reductions in long-term rainfall; low humidity; high temperatures; wind velocities; fire danger indices; fire spread and ferocity; instances of pyro-convective fires (fire storms making their own weather); early starts and late finishes to bushfire seasons. An established long-term trend driven by a warming, drying climate. The numbers don’t lie, and the science is clear.”

Mullins said fires were burning in places and at intensities never before experienced—rainforests in northern NSW and tropical Queensland, and formerly

wet old-growth forests in Tasmania. Based on more than a century of weather observations, Australia’s official fire danger season extended from October 1 to March 31. During the 2000s, however, major fires had regularly started in August and September, and sometimes went through to April.

This is far from being an exclusively Australian crisis. The World Meteorological Organisation said in February that the four years to 2018 were the hottest on record globally, in a clear sign of climate change “associated with record atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases”.

While the relationship between climate change and fires is complex, there is ample evidence that the fast-warming climate is making bushfires more frequent, erratic and intense.

Studies have shown that weekly bushfire frequencies in Australia increased by 40 percent in the five years to 2016, particularly during summer months, suggesting a serious climatic shift. In the northern hemisphere, research released earlier this year found that California’s annual wildfire extent had increased fivefold since the 1970s.

Globally, as the fire crisis demonstrates, the profit-driven capitalist system is proving incapable of addressing climate change and the catastrophes being generated by it.



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