

Australian PM declares “new normal” of climate disasters

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Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison yesterday insisted that the population had to get accustomed to massive bushfires and other climate-change catastrophes, and accept the internal mobilisation of the military on the pretext of protecting ordinary people. Calling out the armed forces to deal with climate-related emergencies was the “new normal,” he declared.

Morrison’s stage-managed interview on Australian Broadcasting Corporation television was yet another expression of the contempt and indifference of the government and the whole political establishment for the vast human, social and environmental cost of the extraordinary bushfire crisis that has engulfed large parts of the continent since August.

Already, with at least two months of extreme heat, drought and fire danger still to come, nearly 2,500 homes have been confirmed destroyed, millions of people have suffered dangerous levels of smoke for days on end and 28 people have been killed, including four firefighters. The day before Morrison’s interview, Bill Slade, a veteran Parks Victoria firefighter with more than 40 years’ experience, had been killed by a falling tree while working to contain a fire near the town of Omeo in eastern Victoria. Up to one billion animals are estimated to have died as well, and terrible damage has been done to forests and other eco-systems.

These events have given people across the country and around the world a picture of the hellish conditions and human suffering being generated by global warming.

Morrison’s performance was a desperate attempt at political damage control, laced with evasions and falsehoods, and combined with an effort to exploit the disaster to boost the “emergency” powers of the state apparatus—in particular the ability of the federal

government to quickly deploy troops domestically.

Facing widespread outrage, the prime minister claimed that his government had done all it could—and taken “unprecedented” measures—to address the disaster. At the same time, he rejected calls for any effective action to cut carbon emissions, and for greater civilian fire-fighting resources. In a bid to deflect the mounting popular hostility to the government, he flagged a royal commission inquiry into the catastrophe—a traditional means of smothering discontent.

On every level, Morrison refused to give straight answers to any question. Asked about the fury directed against him by fire victims, he said: “There are things I could have handled on the ground much better.” But he dismissed the anger as “emotional” and claimed that he had visited fire-devastated communities “in good faith” to “listen,” not for photo opportunities.

In reality, in the fire-ravaged village of Cobargo, Morrison grasped the hand a young pregnant woman who has lost her home and then walked away as she demanded more resources for the volunteer Rural Fire Serviced. And, with TV cameras in tow, he similarly took the hand of a disgusted local fire captain who did not want to meet him.

Morrison also offered a new and entirely different explanation for his decision to covertly take a holiday in Hawaii as the crisis reached heights in late December. After earlier saying he had promised the vacation to his children for months, he claimed he had originally planned a holiday on the now fire-devastated New South Wales south coast, but had been forced to change his plans by since-cancelled official overseas visits to India and Japan.

A Murdoch media Newpoll, made public overnight, provided an indicator of the hostility toward Morrison

and the political elite. It reported that more voters (59 percent) are dissatisfied with Morrison's performance than satisfied (37 percent). Since the previous poll in early December, Morrison has suffered one of the greatest reversals in the poll's history—satisfaction fell eight points and dissatisfaction increased by 11 points.

Despite Morrison's evasions, his interview pointed to the underlying refusal of the ruling capitalist class to seriously address climate change because that would cut across the profit interests of the fossil fuel conglomerates and other key sections of the corporate elite.

Morrison said his Liberal-National government could "evolve" its policies, including emission reduction targets that are limited to cutting them to 26 percent below 2005 levels by 2030. But he insisted he would not deviate from those targets, which scientists have warned for decades are totally inadequate to prevent the earth's temperature from rising to calamitous levels.

The prime minister flatly defended the government's fraudulent and internationally-condemned use of supposed "carry-over credits" from the 1997 Kyoto pact to produce up to 80 percent of that target. His government remained committed to "a balanced policy" that "recognises Australia's broader national economic interests and social interest"—that is, the profit interests of the Australian ruling class.

Reversing his many previous denials of any connection between the bushfires and climate change, Morrison said there was "no dispute" that climate change was creating "the longer, hotter, dryer, summer seasons." Yet, he declared this to be an unstoppable process, which required greater "resilience" and "adaptation."

"The fact is, over the next 10 years and beyond we are going to be living in a very different climate and we need to improve our resilience to that," Morrison said. In other words, people just have to accept the failure of the Australian government and governments around the world to halt, let alone reverse, climate change and accept the terrible consequences—higher temperatures, long and more ferocious bushfire seasons, drought and other climate-induced catastrophes.

Above all, this "new normal," he said, meant "a more direct ability for the Commonwealth, particularly through the Australian defence forces to be able to take action." Having already invoked a power to order a call-

out of nearly 3,000 reservists, Morrison said that military deployments had to become more pre-emptive. This marked a "big historic change."

Morrison said this power would not be confined to bushfire emergencies, but could apply for all disasters, including floods and storms. Military interventions had to be launched when the chief of the defence force "believes there is a risk to life and safety" and "without any instigation at a state level."

Such a shift would further open the door to using the military to put down social unrest, while overturning the constitutional restriction on calling out the armed forces without a state government invitation. In 2018, the government, backed by the Labor Party, pushed legislation through parliament to allow armed military mobilisations to suppress "domestic violence" and protect "Commonwealth interests," without state requests.

Politically, Morrison could make such a media appearance only because of the role of the Labor Party and the Greens. Far from condemning the government, let alone calling for its removal, they have offered it advice on how to deal with the popular outcry. Labor leader Anthony Albanese welcomed the royal commission proposal and hailed the use of troops, saying only that a "national response" should have come earlier, while the Greens took credit for being the first to propose a royal commission.

No less than the Liberal-National Coalition, Labor and the Greens bear central responsibility for the bushfire emergency. Whenever they have been in office, at both federal and state levels, they have equally failed to address the climate crisis and have imposed austerity measures which have gutted essential social services while boosting military spending.



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