Australian government calls for national emergency powers

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Beset by a deep political crisis, intensified by its contemptuous response to the ongoing bushfire disaster across large parts of the country, the Australian government is seizing on the catastrophe—which its policies have helped create—to push for far-reaching national powers to declare states of emergency.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison yesterday used a National Press Club speech to call for the overturning of the century-old constitutional division of federal-state powers. The Liberal-National Coalition government intends to seek changes that would allow prime ministers to declare national emergencies and call out the military, with or without state government agreement.

While offering no details, Morrison declared that laws had to be changed "where necessary" to enable "the Commonwealth to declare a national state of emergency with clear authorities," on its own initiative, "including the deployment of our defence force."

From both the political context and content of Morrison's speech, it is clear that this announcement has nothing to do with providing the urgently-needed resources or policies to deal with worsening bushfire calamities or other climate change-driven disasters.

There is no proposal to increase fire service budgets or overcome the reliance on over-stretched volunteers, let alone allocate the billions of dollars necessary to adequately prevent or prepare for such catastrophes. Morrison again categorically ruled out taking any increased action to cut Australia's rate of carbon emissions or otherwise address global warming.

Rather, Morrison's call signals an increasingly authoritarian response. His government's agenda is to strengthen the powers of the state apparatus to suppress the mounting discontent and political distrust being produced by ever-widening social inequality and the decades-long assault on working class living standards, working conditions and social services.

Emergency powers will not alter the shocking lack of civilian resources—aerial water bombers, modern fire trucks and equipment, professional firefighters, and evacuation infrastructure—laid bare by the bushfires. Instead, they would allow the state to impose virtual martial law, with sweeping authority not just to call out the armed forces but also to tear up basic democratic rights by suspending all existing laws.

Vast emergency powers already exist in the hands of state governments, and some have been invoked numerous times over the past six months. Yet fires have still killed more than 30 people—including volunteer firefighters—destroyed more than 2,500 homes, devastated livelihoods and eco-systems and created a potential health disaster for millions of people who have endured weeks on end in a smoke-polluted atmosphere.

Even as Morrison spoke, 75 fires were still burning throughout the continent, including two on the outskirts of Canberra, the smoke-filled national capital where his address was delivered. Many more dry and hot weeks lie ahead.

The government's unprecedented January 4 deployment of 3,000 military reservists, warships and planes only highlighted the lack of civilian resources, while seeking to accustom the population to the sight of troops and military hardware on home soil. In his speech, Morrison boasted of making the first-ever compulsory domestic call-out of reservists and military intervention without any state government request, saying he had been "very conscious of testing the limits of constitutionally defined roles and responsibilities."

Morrison tried to deflect the groundswell of popular hostility toward his government and the political establishment as a whole, fuelled by both the official indifference to the communities left to face infernos by themselves, and the wholesale and desperate political vote-buying exposed by the sports grants pork-barrelling revelations that have emerged over the past two weeks.

"I believe there is now a clear community expectation that the Commonwealth should have the ability to respond in times of national emergencies and disasters … in circumstances where the life and property of Australians have been assessed to be under threat," the prime minister

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said.

In reality, the "community expectation," reflected in large protests led by school students, is for the complete reorganisation of the economy to address climate change. Global warming stems overwhelmingly from the subordination of production to short-term corporate profit-making, which has prevented the necessary planning and marshalling of resources and technology to stem emissions and deal with the threats to life, health and the future of the planet itself.

Morrison's vague reference to emergency declarations "where the life and property of Australians have been assessed to be under threat" points to the far-reaching powers envisaged. His words were not confined to so-called natural disasters.

Under the 1901 Australian Constitution, the states retained authority over police and emergency services, giving them the frontline access to invoke police-state powers. The legislation activated by the New South Wales and Victorian governments several times in recent months allowed state premiers and/or police chiefs to override any law, including supposed human rights protections, issue whatever orders and directives they deemed necessary, and arrest anyone who failed to comply.

They can also enter or take possession of property, shut down essential utilities, including electricity, gas, oil and water, close roads and order evacuations. Anyone who "obstructs" or "hinders" the exercise of these powers can be jailed. No-one can sue the government or any official for any resulting damage, loss, death or injury.

These powers can be utilised to suppress popular unrest and outlaw strikes. The Victorian legislation's definition of "emergency" specifically includes an "act of terrorism," "a hi-jack, siege or riot" and "a disruption to an essential service." Under the legislation, the government can proclaim any service to be "essential."

Morrison's proposed national emergency declarations would place such powers in the hands of the prime minister and the military, intelligence and federal police apparatus. This would be on top of the expanded powers that the Liberal-National Coalition pushed through parliament in 2018, backed by the Labor Party, to call out the armed forces to deal with "domestic violence"—that is, civil unrest.

Morrison said the military's structure and "posture" must change in line with its new internal focus. He stressed his government's pledge to raise military spending to 2 percent of gross domestic product. This outlay will amount to about $40 billion in 2020-21—inevitably at the expense of public schools, hospitals and other essential social spending, including civil disaster programs.

Significantly, not one of the journalists assembled at the National Press Club questioned, let alone criticised, Morrison's emergency powers call. The Labor Party opposition has previously stated its in-principle support. No less than the Coalition, Labor's leaders are acutely aware and fearful of rising social and political discontent.

Apart from his emergency proposal, Morrison's speech contained nothing new of any substance. Instead it was a belligerent defence of his government's record on every front, even on the abuses and lengthening waiting times for aged and disability services.

Morrison provocatively asserted that the government was "taking climate action now," yet insisted that he would allow no action that would affect the national economy, that is, corporate profits. Instead, he called for "resilience" and "adaptation" to climate change, echoing his recent declaration that people had no choice but to accept this "new normal." In fact, he demanded that state governments remove limits on mining companies' ability "to get the gas from under our feet," another form of fossil fuel.

During question time, Morrison brazenly defended the now fully-documented and notorious use of a sports grant scheme to hand out cash to try to secure votes in "marginal" and "targeted" electorates before the May 2019 election, in illegal defiance of official guidelines. He asserted that politicians had the right to overturn departmental grant recommendations, dispensing with merit criteria, because "we are in touch with our communities."

At the same time, Morrison refused to state categorically that he had no part in the pork-barrelling. Instead, he claimed that his office simply "provided information" to the then sports minister, deputy National Party leader, Senator Bridget McKenzie. Morrison is contemplating whether to sack McKenzie and make her the scapegoat for the worsening scandal, which has engulfed the government for more than two weeks.

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