

Australian bushfire inquiry: Damage-control, cover-up and a push for military powers

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Confronted by widespread hostility toward his government over its contemptuous and inadequate response to this summer's bushfire disaster, Prime Minister Scott Morrison last week announced a royal commission inquiry into the calamity.

In the first place, this is a desperate act of damage-control—an attempt to divert the ongoing outrage over the catastrophe, which 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 endured weeks of hazardous smoke pollution.

An Australian National University poll published last week, just before Morrison's announcement, showed a precipitous decline in confidence in his Liberal-National Coalition government—down to 27 percent—due to the bushfire catastrophe. The poll also underscored the sheer scale of the inferno's impact. It found more than 15 million people, or 60 percent of the population, were exposed to the fires, either directly or indirectly, and 2.9 million had their property damaged, threatened or had to be evacuated.

At the same time, the inquiry is intended to bury the root causes of the unprecedented crisis—the intensifying impact of global warming, poor infrastructure and chronic under-funding of fire-fighting and other essential civil services.

Morrison flatly rejected the inquiry proposing any action to cut Australia's rate of carbon emissions or otherwise reduce climate change. Instead, he insisted that “hotter, drier and longer summers” were simply inevitable. Echoing the words of the inquiry's terms of reference, he spoke of “practical action” to enhance “preparedness, resilience and recovery.”

Above all, the inquiry is designed to be a whitewash of the culpability of the federal and state governments. The terms of reference say nothing about the criminal lack of

civilian resources—aerial water bombers, modern fire trucks and equipment, professional firefighters and evacuation infrastructure—laid bare by the bushfires.

Just days before Morrison's announcement, the *Australian* reported that volunteer firefighters were dispatched to confront fire-storms with outdated trucks and personal protective equipment, poor radio communications and substandard technological capabilities, despite multiple official reviews recommending urgent upgrades.

While slashing civil services, successive governments, both Coalition and Labor, have poured billions of dollars into boosting the military, both for war and for dealing with domestic social and political discontent. As a result, the military alone possesses the resources needed to deal with large-scale fires and other disasters. This then provides the pretext for internal military mobilisations that seek to condition public opinion to the sight of troops on the streets.

Notably, the terms of reference particularly focus on changing “land management practices,” including “hazard reduction burning.” This mainly means overturning limited restrictions on land clearing by agricultural, mining and industrial businesses, which will exacerbate global warming by reducing tree coverage. As for back-burning, it is increasingly impossible because of the extension of the dangerous “fire season” throughout much of the year.

A group of former emergency service chiefs quickly discredited this agenda. Former Emergency Management Victoria commissioner Craig Lapsley said this year's fires were so severe that areas where hazard reduction burns had been carried out—and even mown lawns—were torched. The group insisted that measures to curb greenhouse gas emissions were “the only way to keep Australians safe.”

Through the royal commission, the government is

seeking to exploit the disaster to push for national emergency powers, including to mobilise the military. Morrison emphasised: “In particular, we need to consider the need to establish new powers for the federal government to declare a national state of emergency to trigger direct federal government responses to national disasters, including the direct deployment of the Australian Defence Force (ADF).”

Morrison said his government had “entered a constitutional grey zone” by unilaterally ordering a military mobilisation, including the first-ever compulsory call out of Reservists. This took place without the approval of the state governments, which are responsible for fire-fighting and other emergency services.

In other words, a central purpose of the inquiry, to be headed by a former chief of the armed forces, is to hand unprecedented powers to the federal government, overturning constitutional constraints on the call out of the military on home soil.

Emergency powers would allow the federal authorities to impose virtual martial law, with authority to tear up basic democratic rights by suspending all existing laws. Under the 1901 Australian Constitution, the federal government has no designated emergency powers. Instead, they are held in the hands of state governments.

The New South Wales (NSW) and Victorian governments activated some of these powers several times during the summer, giving them the authority to override any law, issue orders and directives, and arrest anyone who failed to comply.

Such powers, while invoked in the name of dealing with emergencies, can be utilised to suppress popular unrest including strikes by workers. The Victorian legislation, for example, was introduced under the banner of responding to the “Black Saturday” fires of 2009, which killed 173 people. But it defines “emergency” to include “a hi-jack, siege or riot” or “a disruption to an essential service.”

The government’s proposed new military deployment provisions would be on top of the expanded powers that it pushed through parliament in 2018, backed by the opposition Labor Party, to call out the armed forces to deal with “domestic violence”—that is, civil unrest.

Significantly, the royal commission will be led by ex-Air Chief Marshal Mark Binskin, who was Chief of the Defence Force from 2014 to 2018. In order to find a way around the constitutional “grey zone,” he will be joined by a former Federal Court judge, Annabelle Bennett. The third commissioner, Professor Andrew Macintosh, is

described as “a specialist in climate risk and impact management.”

Throughout the political and media establishment, there has been no criticism of the drive for sweeping emergency and military powers. The Labor Party, which agrees with such powers, backed the inquiry, but said people wanted action on climate change. Likewise, the Greens leader Adam Bandt, who supports declaring a “climate emergency,” was silent on the government’s plan, while saying the terms of reference were “designed to skate over the climate crisis.”

There has been silence too on the *Australian’s* shocking revelations about the conditions facing firefighters. The newspaper reported: “Around the country—from NSW to Queensland, Victoria to South Australia—volunteer firefighters contended with trucks that lacked the latest emergency sprinkler systems and heat-resistant materials, or did not have roll bars and protection against falling tree branches.”

A funding plea from the NSW Rural Fire Service (RFS) to upgrade thousands of outdated trucks, some nearly 30 years old, had been sitting with the state government for months. The most ill-equipped trucks were in rural locations that bore the brunt of the fires.

There were sub-par breathing apparatuses, antiquated IT systems and poor face masks, unable to keep out gas or smoke. Some volunteers paid for their own breathing apparatus. Three volunteer firefighters died in last December’s fires when their trucks rolled over. Geoffrey Keaton and Andrew O’Dwyer, near Buxton, southwest of Sydney and Samuel McPaul near Albury, NSW, died and a further five were injured in the two incidents.

All this is excluded from the inquiry’s terms of reference, setting the framework to absolve the political establishment of any responsibility for the bushfire crisis and to cover up the critical and urgent issues posed by the catastrophe.



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