

# Australian PM declares “national emergency” amid mass anger over response to flood crisis

Oscar Grenfell  
9 March 2022

Prime Minister Scott Morrison this afternoon declared that the ongoing flooding affecting large swathes of Australia’s east coast is a “national emergency.”

His declaration is a desperate attempt to stem deep anger over the official response to the disaster, which has seen flood victims abandoned and left to fend for themselves during and after the inundation. It is also a move to allow greater use of the military, including to deal with any social unrest.

Morrison’s announcement was made two weeks after torrential rains began hitting southeast Queensland and northern New South Wales (NSW) and created massive floods affecting hundreds of thousands of people. In the Queensland state capital of Brisbane, and in flood-prone areas of northern NSW, residents were given virtually no warning of the impending disaster.

In the NSW city of Lismore, people were left to rescue one another. In that city and surrounding areas, residents have since been hit by food and water shortages. Two-thirds of Lismore properties that were inundated have been assessed as uninhabitable. Thousands of people have been rendered homeless.

The crisis is far from over, with southeast Queensland again being ravaged by storms. Record-breaking rainfall over the past 48 hours has resulted in extensive flooding in parts of Sydney, including the city’s north, and working-class suburbs in the west and southwest.

In a PR exercise in damage control, Morrison visited Lismore today, where he made the emergency announcement. Such is the widespread fury that Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce said this morning he “would be incredibly surprised” if Morrison “got a happy reception because they’re not happy.”

As a result, Morrison’s visit was largely conducted behind closed doors, with the media explicitly banned from filming. This follows the 2019-20 bushfire crisis, when Morrison belatedly visited the severely damaged

southeast NSW town of Cobargo. Cameras captured local people denouncing him and refusing to shake his hand.

Lismore residents today organised a protest at Morrison’s visit with people wearing Hawaiian shirts and holding fire hoses. This was a reference to his federal Liberal-National Coalition government’s response to the 2019-20 bushfire disaster. The massive blazes killed 34 people directly, and resulted in an estimated 445 other deaths as a result of complications from smoke inhalation.

As the fires were unfolding the government did nothing. Morrison infamously proceeded in secret with a family holiday to Hawaii. When the trip was discovered by the public and provoked outrage, Morrison tried to fend off criticism by saying he was not a firefighter. “I don’t hold a hose,” he declared.

The response to the floods, on the part of both Morrison’s government and the respective Liberal-National and Labor administrations of NSW and Queensland, recalls the contemptuous reaction to the fires.

Last week, Morrison announced a woeful assistance payment to flood victims, capped at \$1,000 for adults and \$400 for children. As many have noted, the funds would barely cover a week of emergency accommodation.

More information continues to emerge about the absence of mitigation measures and preparation. A federal Emergency Response Fund established in 2019 and financed through a \$4 billion cut in research funding has “committed” just \$150 million to disaster mitigation, while earning more than \$800 million in interest.

Lismore, despite being flood-prone and housing a population of 44,000, was excluded from priority access to federal flood mitigation funding. A 2020 application by Queensland authorities for priority funding to upgrade warning systems in that state was also denied.

As a result of a decades-long winding back of government responsibilities in natural disasters, presided over by Labor and Coalition governments, relief and

preparation is largely left to residents, volunteers and local councils.

Under the NSW government's Floodplain Management Grants program, funding is only provided if local councils foot a third of the bill for nominated projects. As a consequence, Lismore's flood levee, designed to protect against "one-in-ten-year" disasters, has not been upgraded since it was designed in 1999, despite having failed to stop flooding in 2017.

Beth Trevan, the co-coordinator of Lismore Citizens Flood Review Group, which has campaigned for improved mitigations, told the *Sydney DailyTelegraph*: "This town has had 138 floods in 152 years. There's a flood every 14 months, and you constantly have reparations at the local level that keep the council in a virtually bankrupt state, so they never have the finances to get any project to shovel-ready stage."

The national emergency declaration will do nothing to address the gutting of funds for flood mitigation. Nor will it resolve the social crisis facing flood victims, many of whom have now been told they must pay for structural engineer's reports before they can return to their damaged homes.

The emergency has been declared under laws passed following the 2019-20 bushfire crisis, with the opposition Labor Party's full support. The legislation allows the federal government to deploy troops domestically, without any invitation by state authorities.

Over the past week, thousands of military personnel have been sent to southeast Queensland and northern NSW. Since their arrival, residents have complained that they have contributed little and have even hindered recovery efforts.

When people needed to be saved from the floods, the army was absent. As well as exposing the lack of civilian emergency forces, the military mobilisation is bound up with government fears of intensifying social and political opposition.

In an open letter to Morrison that went viral on social media, Lismore resident Katie Matthews said the prime minister "can do a tourist walk through the properties and really take in the stench, destruction, damage, filth and heartbreak that every single room has to offer.

"On exiting the property you can see the defeat, sadness, heartbreak and exhaustion on the faces and bodies of these home owners and volunteers, they will offer a story of how one week ago they fought through the most horrific and terrifying night to preserve their own lives.

"As you leave you will feel the determination, grit, mateship and heart of a community who has been abandoned and forgotten by its government and don't forget the insurance companies that are wiping their hand clean of its customers during their darkest hours."

Sydney residents also have condemned the official response to flooding there. Many were given barely any notice, late on Monday night, that their properties were threatened. As of this morning, some 50,000 evacuation orders had been issued. As well as working-class suburbs in the west and southwest of the city, parts of Manly, on the north shore, were also inundated yesterday. There a dam exceeded its capacity, underscoring the lack of infrastructure, planning and preparation.

Sydney has been hit by 821.6mm of rainfall so far in 2022, beating the previous record of 782.2mm in 1956. This points to the impact of climate change, which has made severe weather events more frequent than ever before.

Under these conditions, all the establishment parties, including Labor, have signalled, through their response to the current floods, that they will continue to subordinate the safety and lives of ordinary people to corporate profit interests.

The flood crisis has occurred amid declarations from state Labor and Liberal-National governments, along with the federal Coalition and Labor parties, of the necessity to slash budget expenditure, essentially to pay for the vast sums of money that have been handed to big business during the COVID-19 pandemic.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**