

Australian PM in flood-hit Lismore: People are on their own in natural disasters

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In his first public appearance since leaving COVID isolation, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison yesterday visited Lismore, a working-class town in northern New South Wales (NSW) devastated by flooding a fortnight ago.

The visit was extraordinary in both form and content. It summed up the government's contempt for ordinary people and its intense fear of mounting popular anger. Amid a deepening crisis of the Liberal-National Coalition government, intense inner-factional conflict and a federal election due in May, Morrison cast the figure of a political leader whose days are numbered.

While publicly announced, the visit had the character of a secret mission. The operation, overseen by the prime minister's staffers and police agencies, was aimed at ensuring that the tens of thousands of people who have been left homeless and destitute by the floods and the criminally-negligent government response did not get anywhere near Morrison.

The spectre of the southeastern NSW town of Cobargo loomed large. Morrison visited there in January 2020, amid mass anger over his government's response to that summer's bushfire crisis. The government had done nothing while large sections of the country burnt, and Morrison secretly went on a family holiday to Hawaii. He was greeted in Cobargo by dozens of angry locals, who denounced him in front of media cameras and refused to shake his hand.

Lest the same occur, Morrison hardly met with anyone in Lismore. It is confirmed that he spoke with a farmer, who lost hundreds of cattle in the flood. He was also scheduled to speak with Special Emergency Service (SES) personnel, but no details have been provided. In other words, it appears likely that the number of Lismore residents Morrison interacted with could be counted on one or possibly two hands and were hand-picked and vetted.

The media was not given the details of Morrison's meetings beforehand. But they did receive an explicit instruction from Morrison's staff that all journalists were banned from attending.

When Morrison arrived in the center of Lismore in the afternoon, up to 150 police officers were there to shield him from protesters. The demonstrators denounced the government's lengthy record of climate change denial and its refusal to address the environmental crisis. Some carried fire hoses and wore Hawaiian shirts in reference to Morrison's response to the 2019–20 bushfire crisis.

Despite the government's best efforts to suppress the popular sentiments, they found limited expression in a string of critical questions from reporters during a press conference.

One journalist sharply outlined what had unfolded when the floods hit. As homes were being inundated, virtually nobody could get through to the emergency services by calling triple-zero. The SES, primarily staffed by volunteers, was overwhelmed within minutes. It was unable to answer calls promptly, was hamstrung by a lack of personnel and the fact that it had only two boats to cover a city of 44,000 people.

If residents had not rescued one another, in their own boats and even kayaks, the reporter noted that there would have been a mass casualty event, with hundreds or even thousands of people dead. Who should people blame, the reporter asked.

Not the government, Morrison insisted. He contemptuously declared that it was necessary to be "realistic." "In any natural disaster, we don't have those resources that are just waiting around the corner," he said.

Morrison more or less explicitly stated that people are on their own in floods and other disasters, with governments washing their hands of any responsibility. "In any natural disaster, everyone has a role to play," he said. "And the suggestion that it is only the governments that are involved in an emergency response, I don't think the community agrees with that by the way." It was and would be necessary for there to be a "community response" during such events.

It did not matter, Morrison said, whether a flood occurred "in the most advanced economy in the world or a developing country," the impact would be the same. The clear message

was that the government would do nothing to prevent further calamities.

Morrison touted various existing federal initiatives, including the Emergency Response Fund established in 2019. Established through a \$4 billion cut in research funding, it has provided just \$150 million to flood mitigation efforts in three years while amassing over \$800 million in interest. An application to improve mitigation in Lismore was rejected last year, as were projects for warning systems in the northeastern state of Queensland, which has also been battered by the storms.

It was necessary, Morrison insisted, to “get flood mitigation sorted.” But the federal government would do nothing and instead the state administrations and local councils had to bear the burden. All of the states have major budget deficits, while many councils in affected areas are on the verge of bankruptcy. Urgent flood mitigation works in Lismore, including the upgrade of a flood levy that has now failed twice since 2017, have been stymied by the demand of the NSW Liberal-National government that councils foot a third of the bill for any flood projects.

Morrison declared that residents would be provided with two additional payments of \$1,000 for adults and \$400 for children over the next fortnight. Under conditions in which tens of thousands are homeless and they must pay \$1,000 to an engineering assessor to even enter their properties, the money will do nothing to resolve their problems. The payments only cover the Lismore, Richmond Valley and Clarence Valley councils areas, meaning three other affected areas have been arbitrarily excluded.

Amid food and water shortages, the government pledges just \$25 million for emergency relief. Other promises were even more pitiful. Just \$4.7 million was provided to primary health providers in the area and \$800,000 to extend a small business support package.

While in Lismore, Morrison declared a “national emergency.” The measure, under 2020 legislation, is touted as a means of freeing up resources by getting around “red tape.” The pitiful funding announcements made clear this is not the real purpose. Instead, the declaration provides for the expanded deployment of the military.

The number of Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel in the flood-hit regions stands at close to 5,000. Locals have stated that the soldiers, who are not trained for such emergencies, have provided little help and in some cases have hindered recovery efforts. The deployment is aimed at justifying the lack of any civilian disaster response force and at normalising the presence of the military in everyday life, amid mounting social and political anger.

While he outlined a pittance for flood victims, Morrison today unveiled the largest increase to the defence force since

the Vietnam War. Speaking in Brisbane, the Queensland capital, also hit by the floods, Morrison said the number of ADF personnel would be boosted from around 60,000 to 80,000 over the next 20 years.

The expansion will cost \$38 billion, in addition to further defence procurements and on top of already record funding for the military. The aim is to prepare the country to play a frontline role in the US-led confrontations with Russia and especially China, aimed at ensuring the global hegemony of American imperialism and shoring-up the strategic and economic interests of Australian capitalism.

In other words, there are almost limitless funds for war, but nothing for working people, including those facing destitution in a flood emergency. The indifference towards ordinary people highlights the fraudulent character of the “humanitarian” claims used to justify military intervention, including the provision of \$70 million in military aid to the right-wing US-backed government in Ukraine.

There is not a shred of difference between the Liberal-Nationals and the opposition Labor Party, on war or any other issue. Today Labor leader Anthony Albanese outlined his own planned increases to military spending if he is elected in May. He pledged that defence spending would be over 2 percent of annual GDP under a Labor government and outlined plans for the acquisition of further offensive weaponry.

Previous Labor governments have overseen a similarly negligent response to natural disasters, including the 2009 bushfires and the 2011 floods in Brisbane and nearby regions, including the Lockyer Valley. Similarly, in the COVID crisis, Labor and the Coalition insist that ordinary people must “live with the virus,” amid unprecedented infections and deaths, to ensure that full corporate profit-making activities can proceed.



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