



# A Continent Aflame: Ethical Lessons From the Australian Bushfire Disaster

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The havoc wreaked by the disastrous Australian bushfires has caused great pain but has also generated some critical lessons. The damage has been unimaginable: over the course of three months more than seventeen million hectares of forest have been burnt (Gunia and Law 2020; Chapman 2020; Noble 2020), two dozen lives have been lost (Fife-Yeomans 2020), more than two thousand homes have been destroyed (SkyNews 2020), and around a billion animals have been killed (Reality Check Team 2020; Snape 2020; Elsworth 2020; The University of Sydney 2020). Unknown numbers of rare indigenous species of plants and animals have been rendered extinct (Bevege 2020). Vast areas of Eastern Australia, including the entire Alpine area, have been evacuated (Wahlquist et al. 2020). In addition to

the suffering, loss of life, and property damage, the entire country has experienced massive disruption to infrastructure and the economy and unprecedented levels of air pollution (Australian Associated Press 2019; Pengilley 2020; ABC News 2020a).

The sheer extent and ferocity of the fires has been stunning. Never before has a large part of an entire continent gone up in flames. However, it is the nature of the fires that has been so truly terrifying. With gale force winds and tornado fireballs producing their own thunder and lightning, they have behaved like evil science fiction monsters, ruthlessly annihilating everything in their paths (Lavoipierre 2019).

The entire country is in shock and mourning. While the horror of the terrible events—evocatively described by one bushfire victim as an “apocalyptic nightmare”—will undoubtedly resonate for generations, the damage already runs deep. Once a place where the bush and the outback could represent an endless expanse of harmony and peace, the all-pervasive threat of bushfires has produced a cultural reversal. From now on, the bush cannot be separated from threat and danger.

The national trauma has provoked vigorous reflection and debate, along with some anger and recriminations, about the causes, mistakes, and omissions that gave rise to the catastrophe. The smoke haze engulfing almost the entire country has come to symbolize the blindness and lack of vision of Federal Government policies. Despite mounting awareness of the effects of climate change over many years, successive governments have responded

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only with denials and unabated support for coal mining (Karp 2018). At the COP25 meeting in Madrid and elsewhere Australia has repeatedly joined with the United States to prevent any meaningful outcome (Chang and wires 2019). Opportunities to build an alternative, forward-looking sustainable energy industry have been ignored. Community concerns have been dismissed with derision and contempt. A former Prime Minister described climate change as “crap” (Mathiesen 2017) and the current Prime Minister once famously brought a large piece of coal into the Federal Parliament to prove how safe it was (Murphy 2017)!

These positions have been justified on the basis that in the global scheme of things Australia’s contribution to global warming is small compared to those of China and the United States, ignoring the fact that while Australia releases 1.3 per cent of the world’s greenhouse gases, this is more than four times its share of the world population (Department of Environment and Energy 2019). More importantly, however, the scale of the present destruction has itself generated a profound boost to planetary carbon emissions with its consequences for human health around the world (Johnston 2009).

The deficiencies of the Government, and the lessons to be learnt from the current crisis, can be understood in ethical terms. The behaviour of the Prime Minister and his Government may be considered to be ethically questionable for multiple reasons. The official responses have been widely recognized as inauthentic and stage-managed, for personal rather than public benefit. These responses have been executed in a manner that has lacked respect for political colleagues, experts in climate science and fire-management, and individual Australians caught up in and affected by these bushfires. Senior government members have failed to demonstrate key qualities of leadership, such as compassion, personal courage, humility. Whereas Premiers of various States have engaged directly with communities and victims of the disaster, the Australian Prime Minister not only has been largely invisible but actually departed for an overseas holiday at the most crucial moment (ABC News 2019).

Despite multiple pronouncements, there has been no evidence that the Prime Minister or the Government have listened to, let alone heard, experts in climate science, fire management and critical services and, most disturbingly of all, the people—like Cobargo resident, Zoey Salucci McDermott, who had her hand forcibly grabbed and then dropped when she started to speak about her terrible, painful loss (Truu 2020). Their

policies have consistently undermined the fire and emergency services on whose heroism we are now so critically depending (Grattan 2019). And in place of factual data, science, and a rich understanding of community concerns and perspectives, what has been offered are no more than crude vested interests and ideology, political spin, and glib reassurances.

In this time of despair and sadness and this tragic failure of the political process, however, some glimmers of hope have emerged. As a nation we have learnt three strong ethical lessons that hopefully will help support a future, more constructive set of policies. The first lesson is the most positive. It is that despite government neglect the strength and resilience of communities remains intact. The heroism of voluntary firefighters, the countless stories of generosity, kindness, and love, have inspired awe (McPhee 2020). We have watched with gratitude and admiration as overseas firefighters, mainly from the United States, have arrived on our shores and moved resolutely to take up posts in disaster areas (ABC News 2020b). Shopkeepers have opened their doors to victims in country areas, and passers-by have donated whatever skills they have to provide care for those suffering around them (Grewal 2020).

The second lesson is that we need to trust those with genuine expertise and knowledge. Scientists have been warning about the mounting dangers of climate change for nearly fifty years. Australian Indigenous communities had effectively managed the environment, using sophisticated conservation techniques, for thousands of years before colonization (Boyce 2011–2012). We know now that both ancient and modern knowledge has to be taken seriously if we are to avert an even more terrible disaster than the present one.

Lesson three is perhaps the most fundamental: it is the key realization that we need to move from an assumption that the natural environment can be exploited and expended without limit to an understanding that we are no more than its custodians, with the responsibility to preserve it for future generations. The long tradition of the ruthless destruction of nature, driven by greed, money, and power has to be replaced by a new ethic of nurture, sustainability, and respect.

These three lessons, brought together with the ethical failure of the public sphere, highlight the challenge we now confront. We face the question of how we—not just as a single nation but as a world community—can move forward to avert what we in Australia are experiencing today being translated

onto a global scale. How can we reconstruct our institutions to mobilize the ethical insights above and discharge our responsibility to future generations?

We in Australia hope that the vision of our continent aflame may stimulate people elsewhere in the world to do whatever is possible to prevent further such catastrophes in the future. We must agree to limitations on emissions, to a transition to renewable energy generation, responsible resource management and effective conservation practices, and to a reliance on the knowledge of Indigenous cultures and scientific research (United Nations n.d.-a; United Nations n.d.-b).

Perhaps the ultimate lesson is the one we have taken too long to learn: in the age of globalization no continent “is an island entire of itself.” The bell is tolling for all of us; this time we must take heed.

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