

Royal commission into Australia's bushfires promotes greater use of the military

By Margaret Rees
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The catastrophic “Black Summer” bushfires that ravaged south-eastern Australia from late July 2019 until February this year are currently the subject of a number of official investigations. These include the federal government’s Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements and several state government inquiries.

Described as an unprecedented “ecological disaster,” the bushfires killed 34 people, including nine firefighters on the fire front, and 445 others who suffered premature death from exposure to smoke.

Almost 6,000 homes and buildings were incinerated and close to 13.7 million hectares of land and 3.5 million hectares of natural forest areas burnt. An estimated one billion animals were killed. Almost 120 animal species and 471 plant species are in now serious danger with urgent action required to ensure they survive.

Announcing the federal government’s royal commission in February, Prime Minister Scott Morrison stated that the “inquiry acknowledges climate change, [and] the broader impact of our summers getting longer, drier and hotter.”

Morrison is a long-time advocate of the coal industry. In mid-January and at the height of the catastrophic fires, he told the media these conditions were the “new normal” and that people should get used to it.

The Commission and Morrison’s ‘acknowledgement’ of climate change will not produce any fundamental change in Australia’s environmental policies and fire and emergency responses. It is an attempt to defuse deep-seated popular concerns over climate change seen in mass protests across Australia, prior to and during the bushfires.

Canberra has called this inquiry not in order to protect the population from the increasingly catastrophic bushfires. Rather it is to remove constitutional constraints on the use of the Australian military on home soil and the suspension of democratic rights in response to anything the government deems to be a national emergency.

The three commissioners chosen to head the six-month inquiry reflect this political agenda. Chairman Mark Binskin was the Australian Defence Force chief from 2014 to 2018; Dr Annabelle Bennett is a former Federal Court of Australia judge; and Professor Andrew Macintosh is a climate change

legal expert from the Australian National University.

Nor will the inquiry expose those politically responsible for grossly inadequate response to the bushfires and the decades of government cost-cutting to fire and emergency services.

As Dr Bennett warned participating state government lawyers in an early session, the inquiry “is not a finger pointing Commission.” The inquiry’s “terms of reference” are silent about the gross lack of civilian resources, including the lack of modern fire-fighting equipment, professional firefighters and evacuation infrastructure.

The commission has heard early testimony from several scientific experts, including Dr Karl Braganza of the Bureau of Meteorology and CSIRO senior climate-change research scientists, Dr Helen Cleugh and Dr Michael Grose who outlined the link between climate change and the bushfires.

Braganza explained the climate-change drivers producing longer and hotter summers and flammable bushland in Australia. These included the El Niño Southern Oscillation in the Pacific Ocean, the Indian Ocean Dipole and the Southern Annular Mode westerlies that circumnavigate the Antarctic.

Cleugh pointed out that these climate drivers were impacted by the direct effects of global warming. Grose said greenhouse gas emissions and ozone depletion over the stratosphere around Antarctica were also factors.

The hearing has heard harrowing accounts from some of the survivors who detailed the impossible conditions they endured. Caroline Peterson, a former ranger from Kangaroo Island in South Australia, spoke of “the fire that kept on giving,” which returned three separate times through burnt forest. The fire was so intense that her family home and other asbestos houses exploded in the heat.

Brian Windebank, a retired teacher, was holidaying with his wife at Mallacoota, a small beach resort in South East Victoria with only one access road. The couple and thousands of other holidaymakers and residents were cut off and trapped in the town by the approaching inferno. They were eventually evacuated by sea and air.

The input of survivors, however, has been minimised during hearings which have been dominated by testimony from military chiefs and high-ranking officials from various emergency, police and fire agencies from different states and

territories.

At one point during the hearings commission, chair Binskin offered his thanks, “on behalf of the other commissioners,” for Australian Defence Force help during the fires. This assistance, he declared to witnesses Vice Chief of the ADF Admiral David Johnston and Chief of Joint Operations Lieutenant General Greg Bilton, was appreciated by “all of Australia.”

Admiral Johnston and Lieutenant General Bilton used military advertising films to promote the military’s “Operation Bushfire Assist.” The \$87.9 million military operation involved 8,000 ADF personnel, including the callout of 2,500 reservists and 500 people from Australia’s defence force partners.

Military personnel were involved in clearing fire breaks and road access, repairing fences and transporting animal fodder, fuel, water and other supplies. Three amphibious ships were provided for disaster relief tasks, including the evacuation of residents and holiday makers from Mallacoota, as well as 26 helicopters and 41 fixed wing aircraft.

However, all this could have been carried out by civilian services if governments had expanded existing and created new vital infrastructure or made the advance preparations called for by emergency services experts in scores of previous government inquiries. Moreover, fire and emergency services that are almost entirely dependent on volunteers, have been progressively run down over decades by Liberal-National Coalition and Labor governments.

Like education and health, government funding of emergency services is tailored to the demands of the profit system, where everything, including human life, is determined by the dollar bottom line.

The Australian Defence Force by contrast is not just exempt from cost cutting but is provided vast amounts of money. Last month the Morrison government, backed by the Labor opposition, announced that \$575 billion will be given to the military, including \$270 billion for new military hardware, over the next decade.

When the Commission began its hearings the mainstream media gave coverage to the complaints of the Emergency Leaders for Climate Action (ELCA), a group of 33 former leaders of bushfire agencies, who came together in April 2019.

Alarmed at scientific warnings of a catastrophic bushfire season, ECLA members unsuccessfully attempted to rouse the Morrison government to invest in equipment and take action on climate change.

One member, Greg Mullins, a former NSW Fire and Rescue commissioner, told ABC TV that ECLA warnings to the government in 2019 of a bushfire catastrophe were ignored and that Canberra “was holding back money for [hiring fire-fighting] aircraft, and then it was too late.”

While this question was not directly addressed when Mullins testified at the commission, he said that Emergency Management Australia (EMA) had been subsumed into a federal government home affairs bureaucracy and that the

government responses “during the bushfires was too slow and too late.”

Emergency services, he said, had been diluted “after 9/11 because the focus was on counter-terrorism... We would get about 15 minutes at the end of the meeting to talk about emergency management issues. So it was very much an afterthought in my view.”

Climate change, Mullins explained, was causing the increased frequency and severity of extreme weather events. “We need more help... the enemy being climate change [there are] insufficient resources to deal with this threat,” he said.

In mid-January, respected bushfire science expert Kevin Tollhurst wrote an op-ed comment for the *Conversation* pointing out that there have been 57 formal police inquiries, reviews and royal commissions related to bushfire and fire management since 1939.

“Do we need yet another?” Tollhurst asked, when many of the recommendations made by the 1939 Stretton Royal Commission, and others since, have “still not been fully implemented.”

The current royal commission is no different. It has little to do with combating catastrophic bushfires but is to justify the federal government mobilising the military and give it wide-ranging powers on home soil.

This is already underway since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic with soldiers being mobilised to try to plug holes in grossly inadequate health services. They will also be used to suppress growing opposition to the criminal negligence and back-to-work policies of state and federal governments.

The commission will provide an interim report on August 31 before presenting its final findings to the federal government on October 28.

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