

Australia Burns: Fireworks, Bush Fires and Denial

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As 2020 approached, the sense that the barbarians were not only at the gates but had breached the walls of indifference had come to the fore. But these were not conventional human forms; rather, they were the agents of conflagration, driving people to the sea, forcing them from homes and consuming territories the size of small countries. Australia was burning.

Then it became clear that the barbarians might have been among us all along, the dedicated wreckers of the biosphere, the climate change denialists who cling to a tradition highlighted by the smug authors of Genesis 1:26: that the non-human world is there for the conquest of humanity. Unfortunately for the smug scribblers of the Bible, the earth has not been too compliant in this regard.

As the continent scorched, the annual, exorbitant display of Sydney's fireworks that mark the opening of the new year seemed a touch vulgar. This was not a time to be solemn or mournful; the bread and circuses had to continue coming. The presenters of the ABC's New Year's Eve show attempted to put on a brave face, turning it to a donations run for those who had suffered loss in the bush fires. Even as they did, a floating haze was evident; Sydney could not escape from the reality that it was surrounded by flames.

Australian towns are starting to sound like besieged forts and desperate holdouts. The Victorian seaside town of Mallacoota has been elevated to something like a First World War Verdun against the onslaught of fire. Thousands had gathered on Tuesday at the boat ramp. Pictures of a blood red sky have been taken, most notably that of Allison Marion's [picture of her son](#), Finn. But will the flames pass? The question is never far away from those engaged. For those directly fighting the flames, deaths are accumulating. Men like Sam McPaul of the Morven Rural Fire Brigade have become the fallen warriors of hoses and salvation.

The Morrison government, despite the calamities, would not let up in its boastful assertions on environmental soundness. Energy minister Angus Taylor, who is Australia's de facto environment minister (that portfolio has little relevance in Australia, except for granting mining approvals) took to *The Australian* [to claim](#) that the country had a record that should make people proud. "Australia meets and beats its emissions-reduction targets, every time." The Kyoto targets were outdone by 129 million tonnes; the 2020 targets will be met by 411 million tonnes.

But the technique of such praise is always slanted; Australia was positively virtuous in climate change policy, yet was only "responsible for only 1.3% of global emissions, so we can't single-handedly have a meaningful impact without the co-operation of the largest

emitters such as China and the US.”

Australia had been fighting climate change as dedicated troopers against the odds. Pity that the odds were themselves compounded by his government’s own scepticism at the very idea that disastrous burning events might be an effect of climate change. Selective accounting is the panacea sought in this regard, and Taylor does so by picking figures that exclude, for instance, emissions from the fossil fuels Australia digs and exports. Like an arms exporter with an amoral compass and a mind for the selective, the claim here is that Australia cannot be responsible for what *others* do with the earth’s loot, despite actually providing them in the first place.

Those actually versed with export and production figures tend to raise their eyebrows when Taylor takes to the podium of praise. Frank Jotzo, director of the Centre for Climate and Energy Policy at the ANU Crawford School of Public Policy, [was politely damning](#). “I would characterise [Taylor’s article] as a selective use of statistics that make Australia’s emissions trajectory look good, when in reality it does not look good at all.”

A [study](#) by Climate Analytics published in July 2019 does much to shred the Taylor worldview in this regard. As the authors [note](#) with severity, “Australia is the world’s largest coal (thermal + metallurgical) exporter, accounting for 29% of traded coal globally in 2016 and will soon be the world’s largest natural gas (LNG) exporter. As a consequence, Australia’s global carbon footprint is very significant, with exported fossil fuel emissions currently representing around 3.6% of global emissions.”

Hardly insignificant, and even more damnable considering that Australia is in the big league when it comes to per capita emissions of carbon, including exports. China, for instance, [is surpassed](#) by a factor of 9; the US by 4, India by 37.

The prime minister is proving unconvincing in his efforts to fight the storm. A [tweeted statement](#) from Scott Morrison gave the impression that this was merely another housekeeping exercise to complete, the fires manageable interruptions to the perfect Australian life. “Federal Government, especially our Defence Forces, are working together with the Victorian Government to respond to Victorian bushfires. VIC CFA are leading the response.” He noted how both he and the Victorian premier had been in “regular contact” admitting that, “Reports of persons unaccounted for are very distressing.”

His new year address sank like an unprized lead balloon. He [conceded](#) that 2019 had not been without difficulties. “But the one thing we always celebrate in Australia is that we live in the most amazing country on earth and the wonderful Aussie spirit that means we always overcome whatever challenges that we face that we always look optimistically into your future.” Australia remained exemplary as a “place to raise kids”. The disasters, on the other hand, have not been singular. “Whatever our trials, whatever disasters have befallen us, we have never succumbed to panic.” A true man of advertising, to the last.

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