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Australia's Infernal Denial

The greatest horror so far isn't the fires themselves—it's the response to them.

By **AARON TIMMS**

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It was in spring that the frightening laugh of the idiot arrived for Rimbaud. Australia's own season in hell reached its pinnacle of stupidity a little later. Bushfires had broken out across the country's eastern seaboard—where most of the population is clustered—in September. By October, still in the belly of the southern hemisphere's spring season, fires to Sydney's west and south blew out of control, and the cloak of a climate change—stained sky settled over the city. Sitting in New York, I got regular updates from my brother, who relayed photos of

Sydney's ash-thick atmosphere and its effects on his otherwise robust physiology: the stinging eyes and burning lungs, the need to operate at half-speed in open air.

By the time I arrived back in Sydney, a few days before Christmas, the haze over the city had abated, but the smell of smoke as I exited the airport was both powerful and alarming—alarming because the climate had altered but people's lives, apparently, had not. Whether this displayed admirable human adaptability or meek acquiescence before an unconscionable new ecological reality, I couldn't tell. I grew up in Sydney and lived here for almost three decades before moving to the United States. Nothing about this air, this fire season, was normal. On the way out of the airport, I noticed an Australian flag flying at half-mast. With a mawkishness that was only a little self-conscious, I took it as an omen for the country's vital prospects.

In *The Biggest Estate on Earth*, his account of the sophisticated land-management systems indigenous Australians developed prior to the continent's colonization by the British, historian Bill Gammage wrote about how Aborigines used fire "to shape the land. It was a major totem, a friend. Like songlines, fire unified Australia." Today fire has unified Australia once again but in shared suffering rather than as a tool for the common enjoyment of the land. In those first few days back, the stink of the country's incinerating forests hit me every time I walked outside. The worst fires were hundreds of miles away. Death was in everyone's nostrils.

To anyone still refusing to accept the connection between anthropogenic climate change and these unprecedented fires, the simple act of breathing offered a powerful rebuttal. But many in the nation's conservative government remained unpersuaded—as if 2019 being the hottest and driest year on record had little to do with the readiness of the land to ignite.

On December 21, Michael McCormack, the acting prime minister, argued there was "a lot of hysteria about climate change" and that other factors were equally to blame for the bushfires: "There has been dry lightning strikes, there has been self-combusting piles of manure, there has been a lot of arsonists out there causing fire." Self-combusting piles of manure: With that, Australia's leaders called—quite literally—bullshit on the fires, and the curtain was raised on a two-week parade of political idiocy almost as monumental and catastrophic as the fires themselves.

McCormack was acting as prime minister because the real prime minister, Scott Morrison, had skipped off on a family holiday to Hawaii just as the bushfires entered their most destructive phase. Canceling the holiday would have disappointed his daughters,

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Morrison explained; besides, his family had not enjoyed a vacation since May. Meanwhile, vast swaths of the country's southeast were going up in flames: While the prime minister was off doing shakas on the beaches of Hawaii, Australia endured its hottest day ever, with the average temperature across the entire continent, a land mass equivalent in size to the contiguous United States, reaching 41.9 degrees Celsius (107.4 degrees Fahrenheit). On his return, Morrison found a nation engulfed and a population enraged. His response was to carry on as if the fires were nothing out of the ordinary, a bit of summer heat like the heat of any other summer. Among the many violent spectacles of this fire season—the thousands stranded on beaches and long stretches of country road stacked with torched cattle, the birds dropping dead in the middle of the day, the baby kangaroos immolated on farm fences, the fire tornadoes and bloody skies—perhaps the most hellish has been the march of the pyrocumulus clouds, the product of smoke plumes so big they can generate lightning that spreads fire even further. Just as these fires have created their own weather systems, so too Australia's political leaders have created their own kind of reality to address the destruction.

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First there was a studied prime ministerial silence. Then, on New Year's Day, came a pantomime of normality: Morrison recorded a message in which he cheerily assured Australians that “we live in the most amazing country on earth.” Later that day, he hosted the cricket teams of Australia and New Zealand at his Sydney residence and posed, amid the smoke haze still choking the city, for a photo with the players. Those fighting the fires, he said, would be “inspired by the great feats of our cricketers.” Children played in the background on grass turned as gray as a dead man's teeth. By this point, the bushfires were so ferocious that many of them blew through containment lines built up through back-burning, forest-clearing, and other hazard-reduction methods: One firefighter witnessed a fire in an area that had burned only two weeks previously, but “the burnt leaves were burning again.”

The next day, when Morrison finally toured fire-devastated communities south of Sydney, the scale of the destruction—and the depth of people's anger at him—was obvious. The most consistent message he heard from people on the front lines of the inferno that day was “Piss off.” Fronting the cameras after he'd run away from the heckles of one town's inhabitants, Morrison looked genuinely bewildered. What I saw in his eyes was not sympathy or sadness but fear: fear at the full, murderous force of climate change and at the unvarnished fury of

those left behind to battle it. Here was a man utterly unsuited to the challenge, with no idea what to do.

Within a day, that bewilderment was gone, replaced by a prime-ministerial horniness for the macho business of disaster recovery. First Morrison gave Australia what it really needed: an ad boasting of the government's emergency response. Next came some vague concessions to the idea that global warming was a factor in the fires, with the obligatory caveat that now was not the time to play politics. Finally, the announcement of a 2 billion Australian dollar (\$1.4 billion) bushfire recovery fund, with assistance from the Australian military. Morrison could present himself as the nation's first responder in chief, a man of belated action, while avoiding the messy business of doing anything about the climate change that caused the fires. Short-term action has provided cover for long-term inaction. "Whatever it takes, whatever it costs, we will ensure the resilience and future of this country," Morrison told the press earlier this week. Whatever it takes, that is, except the action most necessary: shifting Australia's economy away from fossil fuels and providing global leadership on climate stabilization.

Denial, obfuscation, concession, inaction: In the space of two weeks, Scott Morrison has laid out the emergency-response playbook for pat-earthers everywhere. This is how we should expect conservatives to treat Patient Earth as the climate emergency worsens: as the site of successive wounds to be treated reactively and in isolation, rather than a sick organism in need of urgent, holistic preventive care. These isolated disaster-recovery efforts will continue until, guess what? It will be too late to do anything. And by then, the planet will be lost to us.

I watched Australia burn from my parents' house in leafy, untroubled inner Sydney, where I lay on my bed, each day, scrolling through never-ending social media catalogs of human and natural misery with the air conditioning turned down to 19 degrees C (66 degrees Fahrenheit). In this callous way, I contributed to the continuing emissions-borne destruction of the planet. On trips out of the house, I found myself getting pissy at friends, even my best and oldest ones, and becoming the type of too-good-for-it expat I'd always despised. Where was their rage? In the face of climate catastrophe, a smug liberal amiability reigned. A friend working in human rights told me he'd never heard of disillusioned intellectual historian Samuel Moyn or his social justice-oriented critique of the human rights movement. Another friend, when I mentioned I was thinking of writing about Ezra Klein's forthcoming book on political polarization, questioned why I would ever "dunk" on Ezra, who "seems so nice" and

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has a “great podcast.” At a house party on New Year’s Eve, at which everyone seemed hungover and unhappy, someone told me that it would be wrong to cancel Sydney’s famous midnight fireworks, whatever the tastelessness of their spectacle in the middle of a national catastrophe, because “they contribute \$100 million to the local economy.” Had people here always been this ignorant and unquestioning, or was I simply blinded in the past by affection for those close to me?

Contradiction and absurdity haunt many countries in the climate change era, but each country has its own flavor of destructive denialism, and Australia is no exception. It’s long astonished and distressed me that a land with so much intelligence, energy, and wit—a place of such charm and easy charisma—could simultaneously be so unadventurous, self-satisfied, and lazy. Clive James, the Australian writer who recently died after a decades-long run as perhaps the English-speaking world’s sharpest and funniest critic, was also a climate change denier. Paradoxes abound in Australia, especially when it comes to natural resources policy: The country is the largest net exporter of coal in the world but has massive reserves of lithium and solar energy potential, placing it among the prospective powerhouses of a global renewable energy future. Whatever the moral and ecological imperatives for climate change action in Australia today—and they are overwhelming—the economic case is also compelling. However good the country’s present is, the future could be so much better. All the resources needed for a just transition to a low-carbon economy are staring Australia in the face. But so are the elements keeping the country inert, tied to a planet-wrecking prosperity: a conservative political establishment unconvinced by the need for decarbonization; powerful fossil fuel interests; and a News Corp–saturated media happy to push the poisonous lie that global warming is a libtard con. The country’s promise is vast, like its paralysis.

Already the talk, even among the conservative grandees wheeled out to pay lip service to anthropogenic climate change, is of the role drought, fuel loads, and arsonists—anything but the changing climate—have played in stoking the fires. Former conservative Prime Minister John Howard said recently that the “quiet Australians”—those undemonstrative middle-class voters who delivered Morrison a surprise win in last May’s federal election, despite polls consistently favoring Labor—want “balance” in the “debate” about bushfire solutions. But the “quiet Australians” who pose the greatest danger to the country are not the ones voting for climate inactivists like Morrison out of ignorance or misinformation. They are the Australians who should be loud but can’t be bothered to raise their voices—those who know better, who understand the consequences of doing nothing on climate change, but have succumbed to the apathy of prosperity and are content to let a vote for the Labor or Green parties, or the occasional spicy tweet, define the limit of their moral courage. (And to be clear, I count myself among this group: What have I contributed to efforts to combat climate change? To date, essentially nothing.)

Even with months left to run in the Australian summer, things will, of course, return to some semblance of what we used to call “normality”: The heat will relent; it will rain, although probably not enough; winter will come. Then, before long, another catastrophe will be upon us. My hope, like the hope of many around me, is that these fires will be a catalyst for Australians everywhere—to permanent climate rage, and to an unceasing commitment to rapid, equitable, planetwide decarbonization. We are in the contest of our lives.

This moment in history is obviously an end. If we are industrious and lucky, it will be merely the end of the fossil fuel era, rather than of human civilization itself. Whether this moment also prefigures a beginning is up to us. What’s happening to our Earth is not normal and not acceptable. But resisting the temptation to merely recalibrate and go on as before will not be easy. By Monday of this week, as I came to start work on this piece, I pulled my laptop from its place on the desk in my room, where it had sat mostly undisturbed, near an open window, for days. The laptop was covered in ash. Smoke from the fires was still in the air, but I couldn’t smell it anymore.

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