

A popular poem penned by Sydney-born Dorothea Mackellar in 1904 speaks lyrically of a 'wide brown land' shaped by 'ragged mountain ranges', 'sweeping plains', a 'jewel-sea', a 'gold hush of noon' sun, 'droughts and flooding rains'. My grandmother taught me its lines. I later recited it in primary school and hummed and sang it as a farm boy, rather proudly. The poem *My Country* left lumps in my throat. It taught me to adore the perfume of the local eucalyptus, the exotic flowers and hopping, pouched animals. And, although I didn't quite understand its chilling line about the 'beauty and terror' of the sunburnt country, the poem had humbling effects. It made me feel dependent on the landscape I loved.

Some years later, as my political brain germinated, I understood that Mackellar's 'sunburnt country' had been stolen from peoples who form the oldest continuous civilization on our planet. I learned that the first Australians had managed the country's sun-drenched mountains and flooded plains differently, more modestly and prudently than invading Europeans. They thought of its 'far horizons' and 'sapphire-misted mountains' as their material embodiment. They were its spiritual and physical extension. As custodians of their ancestors and future generations, they acted as the land's guardians and stewards.

### A natural disaster?

Now what they loved has been badly burned. The scale and depth of the unfinished calamity is hard to fathom at a distance. At close range, things look disastrous. Just two months ago, two hundred fires were still burning out of control. Nearly nine million hectares of land were incinerated, a collective area equivalent to the size of Ireland, over ten times what was destroyed in 2018 by the deadliest fires ever recorded in California. Never mind the multibillion-dollar damage to the country's tourism and communications infrastructure; a billion native animals have died and countless others have been maimed and bewildered by their loss of habitat. The infernos have increased the rate of bottom-up species destruction; the chances of ecosystem collapse in several regions have escalated. Not even the native worms, spiders, grasshoppers and other tiny creatures that dwell humbly and honourably at the base of our local biomes are safe. Crops, farm animals and several thousand homes have gone up in flames. Nearly 30 people have lost their lives. A third of the continent's citizens are either suffering ruin or know others whose lives have been damaged.

City-wide water bans have been imposed. Nearby reservoirs were emptied. January temperatures in Sydney's western suburbs reached nearly 50°C, the warmest place on Earth. This was just the beginning of what turned out to be the sunburnt country's second hottest and driest summer ever recorded with temperatures 1.88°C above average. Based on warming trends dating back to 1950, the local Bureau of Meteorology is now forecasting

# A Sunburnt Country: Australia 2020

BY JOHN KEANE

*In the wake of the most serious environmental disaster since colonization, Australia's long-term democratic resilience is now being tested, says John Keane.*



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average temperature increases of up to 4°C by 2100.

The sunburnt country's most extensive and savage bushfires began in September 2019 and since then a dollar-pinching, neoliberal and soft-populist government has largely acted as though the calamity does not exist. It still presumes that the brave energies of volunteer fire fighters—tens of thousands were in action—and the generous donations and strengthened self-belief of Australian citizens in the 'Land of the Rainbow Gold' are all that is required.

In terms of Prime Minister Scott Morrison's media strategy, it has been all mirrors and no smoke. And, in matters of strategy, for months the government has been acting out social and political scientist Karl Deutsch's famous dictum from 1966 that power is 'the ability to talk instead of listen' and 'the ability to afford not to learn'.

### Complacency

The more the situation edged in recent months towards catastrophe, the less Morrison's government seemed capable of acting wisely and decisively. Pleas made by fire commissioners for additional aerial firefighting equipment were repeatedly snubbed. In mid-December 2019, after helping the United States, Saudi Arabia and Brazil derail the COP25 climate talks in Madrid, the Prime Minister packed his bags and went on holiday to Hawaii. His absence coincided with the period when average national temperatures soared to 41.9°C, the hottest ever recorded.

As the infernos worsened, the government offered no additional funding and twice refused to meet

with the Emergency Leaders for Climate Change, a body comprising the most senior experienced former emergency services leaders. Then things changed, or so it seemed.

Gate-keeper journalists and gate-watching social media platforms cried out for leadership, and the government began singing to a different tune. Initially, 500 million dollars had been tabled for bushfire recovery—a pittance in comparison with the near 30 billion dollars granted annually to the local fossil fuel industry. More dramatically, on January 4<sup>th</sup> the government announced that 3,000 army reservists would be called up, without consulting the chief rural fire services commissioner in New South Wales, who learned of the deployment from the news media. And, in mid-January, rather like reaching for condoms in a maternity ward, a plan for establishing a 2 billion dollar-funded National Bushfire Recovery Agency was announced. Hampered by bureaucracy and unspent funds, it has never since functioned properly.

### Opal-hearted citizens

There is rising public awareness that the catastrophe has more than its fair share of entirely local causes. People understand the science behind the fires: eucalyptus oil easily explodes and burns with a fury when vaporized; scorched gum trees explode and fireballs spread flames and ash in all directions; and massive heat-stoked clouds called pyrocumulonimbus trigger lightning bolts that spread the infernos, without delivering so much as a drop of desperately needed rain.

Despite government blather about 'natural disasters', citizens are convinced that there are links, between spiralling carbon emissions, rising temperatures, warming oceans, drought and raging bushfires. People are aware that Australia, when measured per capita, spits more carbon gas into the atmosphere than any other country except the US. They have heard that Morrison's coal and gas-loving government is globally ranked the lowest in matters of climate heating action.

### Normality?

A quick return to normalcy is most unlikely. Vast areas of unburned bush remain vulnerable. Military intervention cannot compensate for government ineptitude and societal hurt. The worst-affected, small-town communities may not recover. Inadequate insurance claim payouts are already being bitterly contested in the courts. Most probably, the current warming and drought trends will worsen. Forecasts predict long-term infrastructural damage. According to University of Melbourne estimates, rising costs of 1.19 trillion dollars will be incurred for failing to meet the Paris Accord target of capping carbon emissions to zero by 2050. And, despite the bush's regenerative capacities, species destruction, including the extinction of much-loved koalas, glossy black cockatoos and native honeybees, is now on the cards.

The Morrison government could well survive and be re-elected with the backing of a Murdoch press that owns nearly three-quarters of the local media and the spread of dis-

information by bots and trolls. A state of disaster emergency, as first declared in Australia by the state of Victoria's management act, might become more widespread, frequent and even permanent.

One thing is certain—in the wake of the most serious environmental disaster since colonization, Australia's long-term democratic resilience is now being tested. Fortunately, the federal election cycle in Australia is short: three years only, which means that Morrison's government will be facing rough music in or before 2022. I very much hope it gets the defeat it deserves.

### Re-imagining democracy

Australian democracy is cursed by complacency. The political class is excessively white, male and heavily unrepresentative of an impressively multicultural society. Indigenous peoples are denied formal political representation. The gap between rich and poor is widening. There is no federal anti-corruption commission. Dark money poisons elections. Public service institutions are under assault. Public service media are legally and financially vulnerable. In a system of compulsory voting, hundreds of thousands of young people have gone missing from the electoral rolls. Well over a million permanent residents are denied the vote. And the entire political system is wedded to a carbon-based capitalism whose bell is now not just tolling but melting.

An energy regime change and a political revolution are needed. A re-definition of democracy is definitely required. During its remarkably long and stormy history, democracy has always functioned as an anthropocentric norm—it supposes that self-governing humans are the rightful masters and possessors of 'nature'. Democratic principles need to become viridescent. In an age of monitory democracy, humans need to embrace popular self-government and acknowledge their obligation to treat the ecosystems in which they live as equals entitled to proper political representation in human affairs. ◀

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