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This is the age of the megafire – and it’s being fuelled by our leaders

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In the face of the climate disaster it helped create, the Australian government has given us only lies and denial

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The remains of a bushfire near the town of Bumbalong, south of Canberra. Photograph: Peter Parks/AFP via Getty Images

Unprecedented wildfires have recently devastated California, the Amazon, southern Europe, Siberia and Australia. It’s safe to say that we’ve entered the era of the climate-fuelled megafire. But because fire conditions depend on local vegetation, topography and climate, each of these great conflagrations is different.

Australia’s bushfires of the last four months have been true megafires, creating their own weather and becoming so vast in their impact that [more than half](#) of all Australians have been directly affected by them. As I write, fires continue to burn around Canberra, and though rain has begun to fall in northern New South Wales, 17 are “yet to be contained” according to the [fire service](#). Meanwhile, what is traditionally the worst part of the fire season for Victoria and South Australia is just commencing. Conditions have been so severe that firefighters have often been unable to stop fires joining up, generating massive dry thunderstorms that spread fire with thousands of lightning strikes.

So far the fires have burned an area around the size of England, killed [more than 30 people](#) and destroyed about [6,000 buildings](#). They have left deep psychological scars, and while it seems impossible to shift the [government's disastrous climate policies](#), the fires will alter the way that Australians view themselves and their country.

There's a British saying that fire is a good servant but a bad master. But in Australia, with its unique vegetation and climate, fire can also be a terrifying predator. Like all good predators, it remains hidden until it's ready to strike, so even in this fire-plagued year, most Australians have not seen the flames that lurk in the forest, taking life seemingly at random. But many have smelt its stench. Sometimes we wake at night to thickening smoke, and lie there wondering where the beast is prowling. Some mornings we peer out the window and decide that it is not a safe day to be outside.

This year fire struck Australia when its guard was down, trapping tens of thousands of people while they were enjoying their summer vacations. The sight of Australians disembarking from warships on naval regulation gangways reminded us that, in this new Australia, the fiery beast that lurks in the forest can make anyone a temporary climate refugee.

Increasingly, Australian fire harasses its victims for weeks or months before striking. You prepare for its onslaught, only for the flames to turn aside at the last moment. You prepare the buckets, hoses and other equipment again and again, while fire weakens you with its smoke and debilitating heat. It can also trap you, as if you're a mouse in a corner. You wait, with fire all around, and all exits cut, your fate in the hands of the wind. If you are lucky enough to survive, you can remain trapped for weeks as you wait for roads to be cleared and made safe.

When the predator finally does pounce, it does so with extraordinary fickleness. One house is left standing, while all around are smouldering ashes; one fire truck is picked up by a fire tornado and overturned, while nearby no wind is felt. Why me, both the fortunate and unfortunate ask?



change protesters at the 2020 Australian Open tennis tournament. Photograph: Manan Vatsyayana/AFP via Getty Images

The psychological impact of such experiences is profound. I've lost a house to bushfire, and successfully defended another. When I look into the eyes of the fire-hunted, I see the same expression I've seen in the eyes of returned soldiers or traumatised refugees. Bushfire triggers a primeval fear, one that has been plaguing our ancestors since the first ape was plucked from its family, carried away and consumed by a big cat.

Few things matter as much to Australians as their homes and communities. More than [2,000 homes](#) have been destroyed so far by the fires. And even when those affected do have insurance, history shows that [most people are underinsured](#). The fires will doubtless also spark new regulations, which will make rebuilding more expensive.

Some people now face the prospect of leaving or remaining homeless in stricken regional economies. All of us are less resilient to future shock – and future shocks there will be. Natural climate variation might have brought a year as hot as 2019 to Australia [once every 360 years](#), but greenhouse gas pollution has increased that frequency to one in eight. And every day the coalfires burn in Australia and elsewhere, we're shortening those odds – adding to the severity of the fires of tomorrow.

Right now, many Australians are simply exhausted. They have been deprived of their summer vacations and beset by debilitating smoke. And as the immediate trauma slowly fades, other impacts will emerge. [Around a quarter of Australians](#) are already reporting health effects from inhalation of bushfire smoke, and over the longer term more and more consequences will be felt. Some medical researchers fear that the consequences of smoke exposure from this year's fires will be felt for generations.

Any credible response to such a massive national catastrophe needs to be proportionate to the danger. Instead the government response has been risible. It wants to plant more trees to capture carbon, but also wants more coal burned and more forest cleared, so there will be less to catch fire when the next big fire comes. Its previous climate denialism has been revealed as a catastrophic error, but it remains paralysed in the face of a disaster it helped create.

If Australia was being threatened by an external enemy, Scott Morrison's government would be doing everything within its power to recruit allies. It would put the economy on a war footing, and raise arms. But when it comes to climate-fuelled catastrophes, it claims that there's nothing it can do: Australians have to remain among the world's worst greenhouse gas polluters, and keep spoiling international efforts to address the problem. To do otherwise, the government says, would be "economy wrecking". But guess what? There is a solution – burn more fossil fuels, especially gas. To an increasing number of Australians these lies are nauseating. The words of our prime minister sound like the words of a traitor.

What does one do when immense evil is occurring in one's country? As far as swift climate action is concerned, all good choices have gone up in smoke, and only difficult, divisive options remain. Australians marched against the Vietnam war, and prevailed. But they also protested against the horrific treatment of asylum seekers, and so far have failed. Now we shall see how communities, businesses and politicians respond to this crisis in "the lucky country".