

Climate alarmists are brazen opportunists preying on misery

By Chris Kenny, The Australian, 21 November 2019

Like a struck match in the bush, global warming is the spark that triggers a destructive firestorm in public debate. Heated on emotion, fanned by sensationalist media and fuelled by ideology, it burns through common sense, reason and decency, showing no respect for facts or rational thought.

Climate alarmists are using tragic deaths and community pain to push a political barrow. Aided by journalists and others who should know better, they are trying to turn a threat endured on this continent for millennia into a manifestation of their contemporary crusade.

It is opportunistic, transparent, grisly and plain dumb. Contributions this past week take lunacy to new levels in an ominous sign for public discourse. In this land of droughts and flooding rains — Dorothea Mackellar's "flood, fire and famine" — we now confront an extra injury every time the weather tests us; silly and reckless posturing from climate alarmists trying to prove their point.

History doesn't matter to them, nor the facts. Rather than consider reality they proffer an almost hallucinogenic alternative, pretending their political gestures will deliver cooler, damper summers unsinged by bushfires.

This repugnant rhetoric must be called out; facts and science must prevail. But engaging in this debate must never be interpreted as downplaying the severity of what has occurred — four deaths, hundreds of properties destroyed, lives changed and trauma ongoing. It is only to say this is the perennial horror of our sunburnt country that will bedevil this land long after all of us, our children and our children's children are gone.

Australia's natural history is impossible to interpret without reference to fire; plants evolved to survive bushfire and depend on it for propagation. Indigenous heritage demonstrates an understanding of fire in managing vegetation, protecting kin and hunting animals. Since European settlement our story is replete with the menacing scent of disaster and tragic episodes.

Victoria has suffered most, in 1851 with a dozen people killed, along with a million sheep and five million hectares burned. In 1926, 60 dead; in 1939 there were 71 dead and just five years later at least 15 died. In the 1960s dozens were killed in Victoria in numerous years and just 10 years ago on Black Saturday 173 lives were lost along with more than 2000 houses.

In South Australia and Tasmania there is a similar repetition of tragedy, often during the same heatwaves, only with smaller and sparser populations the casualties are lower. Still, the toll is horrific; 62 people died in the Tasmanian fires of 1967.

Wetter summers and drier winters make the NSW fire season earlier and less intense, with blazes common in late spring. Devastating blazes have been regular, taking multiple lives on multiple occasions in the 1940s, 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s and 90s.

Yet so much coverage and commentary in the past week would have it that the latest tragedy is a new phenomenon. Rare as it is for the rainforests of northern NSW and southern Queensland to burn, it happens.

Back in September, Joelle Geris of the Australian National University's Climate Change Institute wrote in Guardian Australia about how "I never thought I'd see the Australian rainforest burning. What will it take for us to wake up to the climate crisis?" The Climate Council member wrote: "As a scientist, what I find particularly disturbing about the current

conditions is that world heritage rainforest areas such as the Lamington National Park in the Gold Coast hinterland are now burning.”

But such fires predate climate change: “A bushfire in Lamington National Park today swept through a grove of 3000-year-old *Macrozamia* palms,” The Cairns Post reported on October 25, 1951. “These trees were one of the features of the park ... the fire has burnt out about 2000 acres of thick rainforest country.” That is rainforest burning in Lamington National Park 70 years ago.

Journalists, often encouraged by authorities, have written about the “unprecedented” nature of the Queensland fires. Yet newspaper searches tell a different story. Toowoomba’s *The Chronicle* in 1946 reported winter fires in late August: “From Bundaberg to the New South Wales border ... hundreds of square miles of drought-stricken south-eastern Queensland were aflame.” Two years later in *The Central Queensland Herald* there were reports on September 30 of “An 800-mile chain of bushfires fed by dry grass stretched tonight along the Queensland coast from Cairns to Maryborough.”

Earlier this year, former NSW fire commissioner, now climate activist, Greg Mullins told ABC radio: “There’s fires breaking out in places where they just shouldn’t burn, the west coast of Tasmania, the world heritage areas, wet rainforest, subtropical rainforest, it’s all burning — and look, this is driven by climate change, there’s no other explanation.”

But *The South Australian Chronicle* of February 1915 reported lives lost and the “most devastating bushfires ever known in Tasmania sweeping over the northwest coast and other districts. The extent of the devastation cannot be over-estimated.” And in 1982 *The Canberra Times* detailed a “huge forest fire” burning out 75,000ha of dense rainforest on Tasmania’s West Coast.

Terrible as our fires are — often the worst in a generation or more — they are not abnormal in our landscapes, in our climate. A sober discussion in the global warming context might argue that, across time, our endemic bushfire threat could increase marginally rather than diminish with extra rain.

But to suggest the threat is new or can be diminished by climate policy is to pile false hope and mind-numbing stupidity on top of alarmist politicking.

This week, journalists and politicians have wilfully misrepresented claims from NSW fire authorities that they had never confronted so many emergency-level fires at once. An unprecedented number of fires, especially when deliberately lit, has more to do with expanding population than climate.

There also has been much hyperbole about the fire rating of “catastrophic”; a new category added to the rating system after Victoria’s 2009 fires to ensure greater community responsiveness. CNN International went heavy on our fires, saying half of Queensland was facing bushfire emergency.

The US-based broadcaster ran a Nine Network report by Airlie Walsh declaring it was the “first time in history Sydney had been met with such catastrophic conditions”. This was typical of the misleading reporting; it was merely the first time the “catastrophic” category had been invoked since it was introduced a decade ago.

Back in 2009, the ABC reported how the additional category was about raising awareness: “Victorian Premier John Brumby said in the last fire season, only five days would have been classified as code red. The new fire warnings system will provide the community with a better understanding of the level of bushfire threat on any given day based on the forecast weather conditions, he said in a statement.”

CNN also used our fires as the basis for an interview with David Wallace-Wells, author of *The Uninhabitable Earth*. He was asked “how dangerous” it was that our Prime Minister “doesn’t actually want to tackle the problem”. This, in the modern parlance, is fake news.

Wallace-Wells, without resort to science, asserted Australia was already “suffering intensely” from climate change which, according to him, was responsible for our current drought. He also wrongly claimed our government was not taking any “meaningful action” on climate.

One of my favourite books as a child was *Ash Road* by Ivan Southall, about the misadventures of some boys who foolishly started a bushfire. It captured an overbearing dread many Australians can smell as clearly as eucalyptus in the bush.

“It always happened on a day like this,” wrote Southall, “when the north wind raged, the temperature soared and the hills were so dry that they crackled.

“Fire at most seasons of the year was nothing but a flame that water could extinguish; in this season, on a day like this, a little flame in an instant could become a monster.”

This invokes memories of bushfires near home in the Adelaide foothills and trepidations summer days on my uncle’s farm in the incendiary blue gum country of western Victoria. In the country and on the urban fringes, bushfire is part of our national psyche because of hard-bitten experience.

As a national park staffer, and having studied and trained at bushfire management, I experienced one of the Ash Wednesday infernos in 1983. Temperatures well over 40C, tinder-dry bush in the steepest parts of the Adelaide Hills and winds gusting towards 100km/h; this was hell on earth, when fires become a storm and only survival counts.

I missed the worst of it but joined the mop-up — a miserable task amid burned homes, melted cars and the smell of death — before helping to extinguish blazes over following days. No one who was there will ever say they’ve seen worse.

People who have seen bushfires only on television can have no idea, and those who experience the horrors of a firestorm won’t get into silly comparisons. In her nonfiction account of Victoria’s Churchill fire on Black Saturday, Chloe Hooper relays first-person accounts.

“The flames were lying down because the wind was howling through.” “It was basically hailing fire.” “It was like a jet engine, I’ve never heard a noise like it and then the penny dropped — it was the fire coming.” “Trees ignited from the ground up in one blast, like they were self-exploding.”

All of this is so lethal, terrifying and devastating — and always has been. It insults all those who have been lost before to pretend it is worse now.

Heat, wind and fuel are what drive our fire threat, and the worst conditions will involve hot, dry conditions and gale force winds across a heavy fuel load. The only factor we can realistically control is fuel — hazard reduction is crucial but often resisted.

While drought can limit the fire threat in some areas by inhibiting grass and shrub growth, the big dry has turned the forests of northern NSW and southern Queensland into tinderboxes. This situation is directly linked to the drought, so the critical question is whether there is a connection between the drought and climate change.

The most authoritative assessment of this came in June from the director of the Centre for - Climate Extremes, Andrew Pitman. (I have inserted an additional word, in brackets, that Pitman and his centre later said should have been included.)

“This may not be what you expect to hear but as far as the climate scientists know there is no (direct) link between climate change and drought.

“Now, that may not be what you read in the newspapers and sometimes hear commented but there is no reason a priori why climate change should make the landscape more arid.

“And if you look at the Bureau of Meteorology data over the whole of the last 100 years there’s no trend in data, there’s no drying trend, there’s been a drying trend in the last 20 years but there’s been no drying trend in the last 100 years and that’s an expression of how variable the Australian rainfall climate is.”

Pitman is no climate sceptic. These are just the scientific facts. Yet his comments are fastidiously ignored by most media except to deliberately reinterpret them.

Mostly preferred are unfounded prognostications from people such as businessman cum green campaigner Geoffrey Cousins telling Radio National Breakfast “everyone in this country now understands the link between climate change and these fires”.

Or Greens leader Richard Di Natale telling the Senate that global warming is “supercharging these megafires”.

What a confluence: media eager to elevate a sense of crisis; political actors exaggerating to advance a cause; horrendous threats that require no embellishment; public fascinated by weather patterns; and information from official authorities feeding the frenzy (revised fire danger categories; weather bureau rainfall records starting only from 1900, therefore eliminating the first five years of the Federation drought; historical temperature readings revised downwards so that this January a record capital city maximum was declared in Adelaide despite a maximum one full degree higher being recorded in January 1939).

When cold, hard analysis of facts is required, we see wild claims constantly made and - seldom tested.

Di Natale and fellow Greens Adam Bandt and Jordon Steele-John stoop so low as to blame these fatal fires on the government, dubbing it “arsonists”. Former fire chiefs gather to suggest, with straight faces, that some additional climate change action from government could have quelled these fires. It is as offensive as it is absurd, but it is seldom called out by a complicit media.

Even Chief Scientist Alan Finkel has conceded that if we were to eliminate all our nation’s greenhouse gases (about 1.3 per cent of global emissions) it would do “virtually nothing” to the climate.

The real situation is even more hopeless, of course, because global emissions continue to rise dramatically. So, the first crucial furphy perpetrated daily by the virtue signallers is that Australian action can control the climate.

It is too ridiculous to be repeated yet it is, seriously, and daily. We also constantly hear, as we did on CNN, claims Australia is doing nothing; this ignores our Paris commitments, energy upheaval and the latest report from ANU experts Andrew Blakers and Matt Stocks. They found the country is on track to meet its Paris emissions reduction targets, investing 11 times the global average in renewable energy.

This has not, and will not, cool our summers or quell our bushfires. Still, even if we magically could freeze the climate — setting it permanently at whatever it was in the 1950s, 1850s or 1750s — we know we would still face catastrophic fire conditions in many, if not most, fire seasons.

Many commentators this week have done what they often do when the green left overreaches; they say the debate has gone too far at either end.

This is intellectually dishonest; one side of this argument urges getting on with the hard task of battling our brutal and ever-present bushfire threat, the other side is playing inane and opportunistic politics.

No one has cut through the nonsense and sanctimony better than The Weekend Australian's cartoonist, Johannes Leak. He has given us the brattish little arsonist sitting on his mother's lap being told, "Don't blame yourself darling, that bushfire you lit was caused by climate change."

Then there was "Total Fire Bandt" who was fighting bushfires by installing solar panels while others confronted the flames. And Leak showed the Greens sacrificing the economy in a pointlessly pagan attempt to appease an ominous blaze.

The overwhelming majority of Australians, who comprehend the omnipresent bushfire threat, would agree with these points. But our debate is shaped by a media/political class far removed from practical realities, more afraid of the chill winds of the zeitgeist than a blistering hot northerly.