

DIRTY POWER

BURNT COUNTRY

How the fossil fuel industry, News Corp, and the Federal Government hijacked the Black Summer bushfires to prevent action on climate change

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Greenpeace Australia Pacific

Lead author

Louis Brailsford

Contributing authors

Nikola Čašule

Zachary Boren

Tynan Hewes

Edoardo Riario Sforza

Design

Olivia Louella

Authorised by Kate Smolski,
Greenpeace Australia Pacific, Sydney

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www.greenpeace.org.au



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive summary	4
1. Introduction	6
2. The Black Summer bushfires	7
3. Deny, minimise, adapt: The response of the Morrison Government	9
Denial	9
Minimisation	10
Adaptation and resilience	11
4. Why disinformation benefits the fossil fuel industry	12
Business as usual	13
Protecting the coal industry	14
5. The influence of the fossil fuel lobby on government	16
6. Political donations and financial influence	19
7. News Corp’s disinformation campaign	21
News Corp and climate denialism	21
News Corp, the Federal Government and the fossil fuel industry	27
8. #ArsonEmergency: social media disinformation and the role of News Corp and the Federal Government	29
The facts	29
#ArsonEmergency	30
Explaining the persistence of #ArsonEmergency	33
Timeline: #ArsonEmergency, News Corp and the Federal Government	36
9. Case study – “He’s been brainwashed”: Attacking the experts	39
10. Case study – Matt Kean, the Liberal party minister who stepped out of line	41
11. Conclusions	44
End Notes	45
References	51

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Australia's 2019/20 Black Summer bushfires were unprecedented.

Over a nine month period, 12.6 million hectares of forest burned, killing 33 people, over a billion animals, and destroying thousands of homes. The bushfires produced between 650 million and 1.2 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions: far higher than Australia's annual total from all sources.

Climate change, caused by the mining and burning of fossil fuels, was a key factor driving these fires. 2019 was Australia's hottest and driest year on record, with much of eastern Australia having endured three years of drought leading up to the bushfire season. Experts had widely warned of the heightened fire risk, with climate scientists, former fire chiefs, and the Bureau of Meteorology, unanimous about the danger it posed.

Despite this, the Federal Government appeared unprepared for the crisis. The Prime Minister, Scott Morrison, was forced to return to Australia from a Hawaii holiday on December 21 due to public outrage. When he did return, he and his government were slow to act and initially downplayed the role of global heating in supercharging Australia's fire crisis. Prominent figures in the government continued to deny or minimise the role of climate change, promoting false explanations ranging from arson to hazard reduction burning policy. By January, the official narrative had shifted to admitting climate change was a factor, but arguing that Australia was powerless to stop it, and that 'adaptation' was key.

The push to minimise the role of climate change in the crisis and, therefore, to dismiss the need to take

stronger action to phase out fossil fuels, was aided by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp media empire, and a coordinated campaign of social media disinformation.

News Corp outlets were fertile ground for climate denialism and contested analysis during the fire crisis. News Corp and News Corp-owned APN Newspapers produced 75% of all articles that denied the influence of climate change on the bushfires over summer, despite publishing only 46% of total articles about the bushfires and climate change over the same period. Similar trends played out regarding reporting of the debunked role of arson and hazard reduction burning. This took place despite internal whistleblowers coming out against News Corp's agenda, and public criticism of the company's position on climate change by Rupert Murdoch's son, James.

News Corp's coverage was picked up and advanced on social media, amplifying the denialist message. Greenpeace analysis of online traffic shows that spikes in social media posts using the #ArsonEmergency hashtag, coined explicitly to push the false narrative that arson was behind the majority of Australian bushfires, corresponded to the publication dates of denialist opinion pieces published by News Corp. Posts using the hashtag often exploited these articles to lend credibility to their own message. This campaign eventually went global, with tweets by prominent conservative figures around the world, including Donald Trump Jr. and syndicated US cable news host Sean Hannity, increasing its reach.

The fossil fuel industry pursued a hands-off approach to the crisis over the summer, making some token charitable donations and largely avoiding commentary. However, behind the scenes, business continued as usual. The benefits to the industry from a lack of renewed commitment to climate action were clear. During the fire season, several coal and gas mining projects received final approval or were advanced through the government assessment process, including mining for coal under Sydney's water catchment. The total amount of coal approved to be mined across these projects exceeds 100 million tonnes. The Federal Government also used the crisis to roll back environmental protection laws.

Fossil fuel companies exert significant power over the federal government through a variety of tactics. They are substantial political donors, giving millions of dollars to Australian political parties over the most recent political donation reporting period. The true figures are likely to be much higher than publicly reported due to Australia's weak political donation laws. It is estimated that over \$100 million of 'dark money' donations are made to political parties each year from unknown sources, evading the official reporting process. Power is also exerted through a network of pro-coal influence, spanning the fossil fuel industry, politics, lobbyist firms, and sympathetic media outlets, that acts as a revolving door between these sectors and the offices of government decision makers.

Despite the clear need for action, the cost of speaking out against the fossil fuel industry was firmly demonstrated during the bushfire crisis by its defenders' readiness to attack opposing voices. Former NSW Fire and Rescue Chief, Greg Mullins - perhaps the most prominent voice for the need for climate action to combat the bushfires - was

repeatedly attacked by News Corp opinion writers, with some claiming that his involvement was improper and politically motivated. Attacks even extended to Liberal ministers, when they were seen to step out of line. When Liberal NSW Environment Minister, Matt Kean, stated that climate change was behind the fires and that stronger action was needed, he was similarly taken on, with News Corp's *Daily Telegraph* publishing a front page banner headline story, 'Faux Fighter', that called into question the legitimacy of his volunteering work with the NSW Rural Fire Service.

As the fires subsided during the Australian autumn, communities were left to count the cost and try to rebuild. However, despite the clear role of climate change in driving these fires, the campaign of diversion, disinformation, and influence peddling revealed in this report has meant that significant federal action on reducing emissions and phasing out fossil fuels has not yet taken place, leaving Australians highly vulnerable to another Black Summer bushfire crisis in years to come.





1. INTRODUCTION

Australia's 2019/20 Black Summer bushfires were unprecedented. Over a nine month period, 12.6 million hectares of forest burned, killing 33 people, over a billion animals, and destroying thousands of homes. The bushfires produced between 650 million and 1.2 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions: far higher than Australia's annual total from all sources.

Fossil fuel-driven climate change was a major factor behind these fires, increasing global temperatures and leading to more extreme weather events. 2019 was Australia's hottest and driest year on record, with much of eastern Australia having endured three years of drought leading up to the bushfire season.

Despite this, the end of this horror bushfire season saw no significant change to the Federal Government's position on climate action that may have helped forestall a similar, future crisis. Instead, approvals for fossil fuel projects proceeded as usual, continuing the Morrison's government's legacy of rising carbon emissions.

This report analyses how this situation came to pass.

It begins by recapping the horrific events of last summer, when massive parts of eastern Australia went up in flames and Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra choked on toxic smoke. This report does not repeat the established scientific basis for the role of climate change as the driver of worsening bushfires; this has been done elsewhere.

The response of the Morrison Government is analysed in Section 3, revealing how an initially chaotic response eventually gave way to a campaign to downplay the impact of climate change and distract from the government and fossil fuel lobby's responsibility for the severity of the crisis.

Section 4 assesses how the fossil fuel lobby benefited from this campaign of disinformation by providing a distraction from the urgent need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by ending the burning of coal, oil and gas.

In Sections 5 and 6, the role of the fossil fuel lobby is analysed, including the web of influence that is spread through lobby groups, News Corp and the Federal Government, all the way up to the Prime Minister's office. The corrosive impact of political donations is explored, with the Liberal and National parties receiving over \$1 million from the fossil fuel industry in just one year.

Sections 7 and 8 reveal News Corp's coordinated campaign of disinformation through its publications and explain how this disinformation laid the groundwork for the #ArsonEmergency campaign to go viral on social media.

The report concludes, in sections 9 and 10, by exposing how News Corp and the Federal Government closed ranks against experts and even its own ministers who publicly linked the fires to climate change.

THE BLACK SUMMER BUSHFIRES

2.

The scale and duration of Australia's Black Summer bushfires was unprecedented. Fires began burning as early as July in New South Wales, peaking across eastern Australia over December 2019 and January 2020. The bushfire season in New South Wales was finally declared over on March 31, almost nine months after the first fires.¹

Over the whole of Australia, 12.6 million hectares were burnt, 11.3 million Australians were physically affected by smoke and over 1 billion animals were killed. Tragically, 33 people died.² The bushfires produced between 650 million and 1.2 billion tonnes of CO2 emissions – an amount far higher than Australia's total annual emissions.³

The fossil fuel industry is driving climate change by burning coal, oil, and gas, which in turn is leading to more extreme weather events, including bushfires.⁴ 2019 was Australia's hottest and driest year on record and the spring of 2019 was the driest on record.⁵ With three years of drought conditions across much of eastern Australia,⁶ the Black Summer bushfire crisis was a disaster waiting to happen.

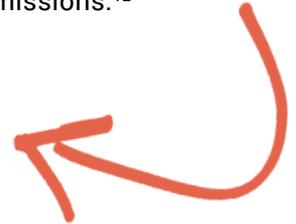
Warnings had been made about the danger of worsening bushfires as a result of climate change. In 2014, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change stated that they had "high confidence that higher temperatures and drier conditions would lead to increased damages to ecosystems and settlements, economic losses and risks to human life from wildfires in most of southern Australia".⁷ The Climate Council warned that "climate change is increasing the frequency and severity of very hot days and is driving up the likelihood of very high fire danger weather".⁸ In 2018, the Bureau of Meteorology explained that there had been "a long-term increase in extreme fire weather and in the length of the fire season across large

parts of Australia since the 1950s...Climate change, including increasing temperatures, is contributing to these changes".⁹

More recently in April 2019, twenty three former fire and emergency chiefs warned the Federal Government that Australia was unprepared for worsening natural disasters that were the result of climate change.¹⁰ In August, the Bushfires and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre stated that "We are also seeing the cumulative amount of fire danger during a fire season going up - the time between these really extreme fire years will get shorter and shorter and shorter. We will see these conditions come around more frequently".¹¹

In November, 11,000 scientists from around the world signed a statement that society faced "untold suffering due to the climate crisis" if more was not done to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.¹²

These warnings were not heeded by the Federal Government.



The first fires began to burn in New South Wales in July, with larger blazes starting in Queensland in September, Tasmania in October, Victoria and South Australia in November. On November 9, Queensland declared a state of emergency and New South Wales followed suit two days later.¹³ New South Wales declared two more states of emergency on December 19 and January 2,¹⁴ while the ACT declared its own state of emergency on January 31.¹⁵ Victoria declared a state of disaster on January 3, which was subsequently extended.¹⁶

Amidst all this, Prime Minister Scott Morrison went on leave to Hawaii on December 16 without any formal announcement. When quizzed by journalists, the Prime Minister's Office denied he was in Hawaii, leading to significant uncertainty about the location of the Prime Minister during this national crisis.¹⁷ He returned on December 21, one day before his holiday was scheduled to finish, after significant public backlash.¹⁸

On January 3, 4,000 people trapped in the Victorian town of Mallacoota by an out of control bushfire began to be evacuated by the Australian Navy.¹⁹ On January 4, the Prime Minister announced that 3,000 Australian Defence Force (ADF) reservists would be deployed to assist with the bushfire recovery, the first time this has occurred in Australia's history.²⁰ The Commissioner of the New South Wales Rural Fire Service was not informed of this decision and first heard about it via media reports.²¹

On New Year's Day, air quality in Canberra was so poor it was considered the worst in the world.²² Sydney experienced the worst possible air quality rating of 'hazardous' throughout much of summer, with 32 days of hazardous air quality due to bushfires in November and December 2019 alone.²³ Melbourne's air quality also reached the worst possible rating over several

days in January.²⁴ On days of hazardous air quality, it is not safe for children, pregnant women and older adults to be outside.²⁵ The polluted air contributed to the deaths of over 400 people and the hospitalisations of over 4,000 people.²⁶

The bushfires only began to seriously abate across eastern Australia in February. In New South Wales record-breaking rainfall provided some relief from February 7 in Sydney, with many sites experiencing their wettest four-day period on record.²⁷ On February 20, the Prime Minister announced a Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements focusing on natural disaster management coordination and Australia's preparedness and response to natural disasters.²⁸



DENY, MINIMISE, ADAPT: THE RESPONSE OF THE MORRISON GOVERNMENT

3.

“If this is the time people want to talk about climate change, they are a bloody disgrace”²⁹

John Barilaro, NSW Deputy Premier and leader of the NSW National Party

The response of the Morrison Government to the catastrophic bushfires was chaotic, characterised by denial, minimisation of the role of climate change, and eventually a focus on adapting to its effects. As inconsistent as government talking points were over summer, they all shared one purpose: shifting blame away from the fossil fuel industry which has turbocharged climate change and worsened extreme weather, and distracted from the urgent need to cut greenhouse gas emissions.

Denial

When New South Wales and Queensland were experiencing serious bushfires in November and early December, the Federal Government went to great pains to emphasise that bushfires are a natural phenomenon that Australia had always experienced, and to claim that there was nothing that Australia could do about it. Those who raised concerns about climate change were heavily criticised.

“Sadly, bushfires are part of the Australian landscape and while we cannot always prevent them, we can prepare for them and ensure that we are responding in the most effective way.”

David Littleproud, Minister for Agriculture, Drought and Emergency Management - 12 December 2019 ³⁰

“What I don’t accept ... is that if Australia adopted higher, more reckless, economy-destroying emissions reduction targets ... then we wouldn’t be having the fire season we’re having now. And that’s just not credible.”

Prime Minister Scott Morrison - 22 November 2019 ³¹

In November, Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormack characterised Australians concerned about climate change as “inner-city raving lunatics”³², while New South Wales Deputy Premier and NSW Nationals leader John Barilaro was offended that anyone would even mention climate change, despite being in the midst of a bushfire supercharged by climate change: “If this is the time people want to talk about climate change, they are a bloody disgrace”.³³

Minimisation

As the bushfires spread further throughout eastern Australia in early December and public pressure on the government to do more on climate change increased, members of the government began to speak out:

“The dryness of the vegetation, particularly in the north of NSW, and the reduced streamflow is creating unprecedented [conditions].... That’s what climate science has told me and I completely agree with it.”

Sussan Ley, Federal Minister for the Environment
- 11 December 2019 ³⁴

“We need to be doing our bit to make sure we mitigate or adapt to these more extreme weather events happening and we do our bit to abate carbon and reduce the impact of climate change.”

Matt Kean, NSW Minister for Energy and Environment
- 11 December 2019 ³⁵

“Matt Kean is right. Climate change is contributing to the fire situation. We need to take practical steps at home, and be ambitious abroad.”

Jason Falinski, Federal MP for Mackellar
- 12 December 2019 ³⁶

In response, the government changed tack. Whilst it was no longer feasible to deny the role of climate change, the government instead began to minimise it, emphasising it was one of just many factors that led to the bushfires.

“We also know that there are many contributing factors that relate to these fires. The drought is obviously - and the dryness of the bush is the biggest factor and we all know, as I acknowledged earlier this year in February, that climate change, along with many other factors, contribute to what is occurring today.”

Prime Minister Scott Morrison - 12 December 2019 ³⁷

Other factors the government repeatedly, and falsely, emphasised as being as important or more important than climate change include the lack of hazard reduction burning, too much fuel load in national parks, overly restrictive laws on land-clearing, poor state government land management, arson and even “a pile of horse-manure that self-combusted”, according to the Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormack.³⁸

“There are also many other issues ... and they’ll all come under scrutiny as we prepare for what needs to happen next time - issues of management in national parks of fuel loads, issues of back-burning and managing native vegetation and building codes and all of these sorts of things.... I mean, there are some fires that have been started by just carelessness. Others sadly have been the result of direct arson. Many have been created by dry lightning strikes.”

Prime Minister Scott Morrison - 22 December 2019 ³⁹

Federal Coalition Government MP, George Christensen, said in January that the bushfires were caused by “man-made arson that, to me, almost borders on terrorism”.⁴⁰ These extreme statements were taken even further by another government MP Concetta Fierrevanti-Wells, who suggested that the fires were an example of “eco-terrorism”, supporting a conspiracy theory that environmentalists had planned and coordinated the bushfires, despite absolutely no evidence.⁴¹

Hazard reduction burning can be an important tool in reducing the risk of bushfires but in a drying climate, there are less opportunities for safe hazard reduction burning. As weather conditions get hotter and windier, hazard reduction burning becomes less effective.⁴² The Chief Officer of Victoria’s Country Fire Authority stated in January that “Some of the hysteria that this [hazard reduction burning] will be the solution to all our problems is really just quite an emotional load of rubbish, to be honest”.⁴³ Hazard reduction burning is primarily the responsibility of state and local governments. Attempts to blame the bushfires on The Greens party ignore the fact that state governments in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland are either Labor or Coalition governments while just a handful of councils in Australia have Greens-controlled councils or mayors.⁴⁴

Land clearing worsens the risk of fires by changing the local climate, increasing surface temperatures by up to two degrees celsius, reducing soil moisture and making droughts hotter. Moreover, land clearing is a key driver of climate change, contributing to hotter temperatures.⁴⁵

Victoria and New South Wales’ fire authorities have stated that the overwhelming majority of bushfires last summer were started by dry lightning strikes, not arson (refer to Section 8 for more details).⁴⁶ All this evidence was available to the government.

Adaptation & resilience

From mid-January, this chaotic range of different explanations for the severity of the bushfires began to give way to a more coherent but equally misleading narrative: climate change is happening but there is nothing we can do about it, so we should focus on adapting to it. This avoids addressing the role of human beings in causing climate change and the power we have to limit climate change by ending the burning of fossil fuels.

“... the climate is changing, the climate has changed and we need to focus on how we are going to adapt, how we are going to mitigate those risks and how we are going to become more resilient.”

Karen Andrews, Minister for Industry, Science and Technology - 15 January 2020⁴⁷

“But we must also look further ahead and prepare for and adapt to the environment and the climate we are going to be living in, and acknowledging what that is.”

Prime Minister Scott Morrison - 29 January 2020⁴⁸

These various misleading narratives all had a common goal: to distract from the urgent need to cut greenhouse gas emissions and replace coal, gas and oil, with renewable energy. The following section will explain how the Federal Government’s misleading explanations benefit the fossil fuel industry.



WHY DISINFORMATION BENEFITS THE FOSSIL FUEL INDUSTRY



The Federal Government's attempts to blame the severity of the bushfires on anything but climate change directly benefited the fossil fuel industry. The fossil fuel industry has been driving climate change for decades and Australia is the world's third biggest exporter of greenhouse gas emissions from coal, oil and gas.⁴⁹

Australia is the only OECD and G20 country that still sources over half of its electricity from coal power stations and just nineteen of these coal power stations are responsible for over a quarter of Australia's total greenhouse gas emissions.⁵⁰ Australia's fossil fuel industry is uniquely responsible for the climate change-driven extreme weather events that Australia has experienced in recent years.

While Australia burned during the Black Summer, the fossil fuel industry was comparatively quiet publicly. But behind the scenes, it was business as usual with coal and gas projects continuing to be approved while News Corp and the Federal Government continued to protect the fossil fuel industry from criticism.

During the crisis, some of Australia's biggest climate polluting companies behaved cynically, including coal miner Glencore, which donated 0.0005% of its reported revenue to bushfire relief.⁵¹ Glencore is one of the 100 companies responsible for 71% of global emissions between 1988 and 2005, and has a history of hostile lobbying against climate change policies over many years (see below).⁵²

One coal baron, the executive chairman of Hancock Prospecting, Gina Rinehart, argued that climate change was not the "true cause" of the bushfires, a sentiment that would be echoed by the Prime Minister in the weeks to come:

"(Mrs Rinehart) is most concerned that the true causes of this sad devastation are tackled, rather than missed in the rush to blame climate change. In particular, restrictions on building dams are lifted, the dangerous restrictions on allowing adequate fire breaks and restrictions on land clearing...."

Spokesperson for Gina Rinehart - 8 January 2020 ⁵³

"What is action on climate change? Building dams. What is action on climate change? Hazard reduction in these areas. It's native vegetation management. It's land clearing laws."

Prime Minister Scott Morrison - 20 January 2020 ⁵⁴

Rinehart is well connected to the Federal Government and her joint venture GVK Hancock has plans for new coal mines in the Galilee Basin, where the controversial coal miner Adani is attempting to build the Carmichael coal mine.⁵⁵ If Adani is successful in opening up the Galilee Basin with rail access, then Rinehart and other coal miners will benefit by sharing the infrastructure to transport coal to the Abbot Point coal terminal for export.⁵⁶ Strong action on climate change would include a ban on new coal mines and would likely derail these projects. Rinehart has a strong interest in preserving the status quo.

Business as usual

Behind the scenes, business continued for the fossil fuel industry as usual, with the climate change-driven bushfires presenting no barrier to the expansion of the coal and gas projects. As the bushfires raged between December 2019 and March 2020, a number of coal and gas projects received government approval:

- Lobby group the Queensland Resources Council called for the state government to approve New Hope's New Acland coal mine project on December 2 and 3.⁵⁷
- In March 2020, the New South Wales Independent Planning Commission (IPC) approved an expansion to Glencore's Glendall coal mine, enabling an additional 2 million tonnes of coal to be burnt.⁵⁸
- Less than two weeks later, the IPC approved another coal mine expansion allowing Peabody's Metropolitan coal mine to expand under Greater Sydney's water reservoirs. This is the first time a coal mine has been approved under Sydney's reservoirs in two decades.⁵⁹
- These approvals followed the New South Wales Department of Planning approving further coal extraction from South 32's Dendrobium coal mine. This approval occurred in late December at the height of Australia's bushfire crisis.⁶⁰

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- On December 23, during the height of the bushfires and just before Christmas, the Federal Government announced that it would support the construction of two new polluting gas power stations in Victoria and Queensland.⁶¹
 - Coal miner Shenhua began exploratory drilling for coal in mid-January as part of its Watermark coal project.⁶²
 - The Queensland Government opened up 7,000km square of new land for coal, gas and oil exploration in February,⁶³ while at the time of writing, the New South Wales Government is considering whether to open up two new thermal coal fields for exploration.⁶⁴

Most shockingly, in October the IPC released a decision approving a 21-year mining lease for Bloomfield Group's Rix's Creek coal mine before public submissions had closed. This strongly suggests that the public consultation was merely a box-ticking exercise, as the IPC had already drafted the approval decision in advance of all submissions being received. Just hours later, the approval was retracted to enable submissions to continue.⁶⁵ Unsurprisingly, the mine was then re-approved six days later, enabling an additional 25 million tonnes of coal to be extracted and burnt.⁶⁶

The total amount of coal approved to be mined across these projects exceeds 100 million tonnes.

The Federal Government also used the crisis to roll back environmental protection laws.

Protecting the coal industry

Australia's emissions have steadily risen for four years and Australia has a long way to go to meet its weak target to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 26-28% by 2030 (compared to 2005 levels).⁶⁷ Despite this, the Federal Government continued to defend the coal, oil and gas industry over the summer. There was unprecedented public pressure for the government to change its climate change policy and end support for the coal industry but the government refused to budge:

“What we are doing is taking real and meaningful action to reduce global emissions without shutting down all our industries.”

Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormack
- 11 November 2019⁶⁸

“The market for Australian coal will continue to grow.”

Matt Canavan, then-Resources Minister
- 18 December 2019⁶⁹

“We should be proud of our climate change efforts.... it isn't acceptable to pursue emission reduction policies that add substantially to the cost of living, destroy jobs, reduce incomes and impede growth.”

Angus Taylor, Minister for Energy and Emissions Reduction
- 31 December 2019⁷⁰

“We don't want job-destroying, economy-destroying, economy-wrecking targets and goals, which won't change the fact that there have been bushfires or anything like that in Australia.”

Prime Minister Scott Morrison - 10 January 2020⁷¹

“I think if you go down that path [setting a net zero emissions target], what you're going to do is send factories and industries offshore, send manufacturing jobs offshore. That's not the Australian way.”

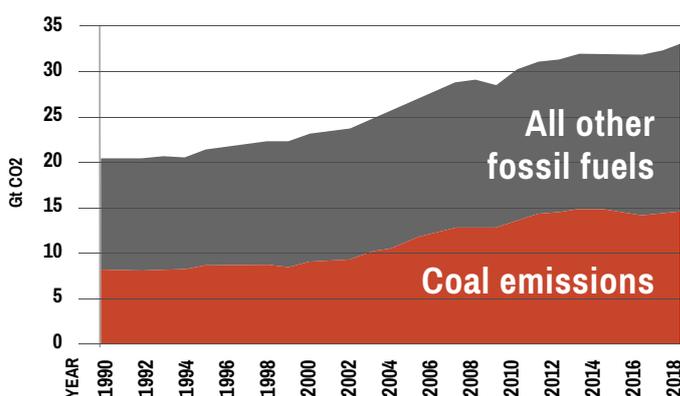
Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormack
- 17 February 2020⁷²

The Federal Government's attempts to falsely shift blame for the fires to state governments and bureaucrats (for letting fuel loads build up and insufficient hazard reduction burning), environmentalists (for opposing land-clearing and hazard reduction burning), and arsonists, protected the fossil fuel industry from being held accountable for its role in driving climate change. These are false allegations. Land clearing has been shown to worsen the risk of fires while contributing to worsening climate change.⁷³ Hazard reduction burning can be a useful tool in reducing fire risk but climate change is reducing its effectiveness.⁷⁴

The overwhelming majority of the most serious bushfires last summer were started by dry lightning strikes, not arson.⁷⁵

By focusing on the need to adapt to the effects of climate change rather than reducing emissions, the Federal Government was able to distract from its own inadequate climate policies that have seen Australia's emissions continue to rise.⁷⁶

Global carbon dioxide emissions 1990-2018



Source: IEA Global Energy & CO2 Report 2019. Accessed at: <https://www.iea.org/reports/global-energy-co2-status-report-2019>

Australia's current, weak climate and energy policies directly benefit the fossil fuel industry by not forcing them to meaningfully reduce emissions:

- 
- The renewable energy target, a policy that encourages investment in wind and solar energy, was cut by 20% in 2015 and will not incentivise any further investment after 2020.⁷⁷ No new renewable energy policy has been introduced to replace it.
 - The Emissions Reduction Fund (ERF) involves paying polluters to reduce emissions, but participation is voluntary. It has cost taxpayers \$2.3 billion yet has had little impact on greenhouse gas emissions.⁷⁸ Fossil fuel companies have generally not participated.⁷⁹
 - The safeguard mechanism, part of the ERF, is theoretically designed to reduce emissions from industrial polluters including gas and oil companies but contains so many loopholes that it has had little impact on emissions. Emissions limits have been repeatedly loosened and penalties are rarely applied.⁸⁰
 - In December 2019 under the first round of the 'Underwriting New Generation Investments' program, first announced in 2018, the Federal Government committed to underwriting the construction of two new gas power stations.

At the time of writing, a coal power station upgrade from Liberal party donor Trevor St Baker remains on the shortlist for potential funding in future rounds.⁸¹

- The Federal Government has repeatedly stated as recently as January this year that funding for energy projects in each state is contingent upon state governments lifting bans on gas exploration,⁸² effectively holding essential state funding to ransom. After years of pressure, Victoria finally caved during March 2020, lifting its onshore gas exploration ban and opening the state up to gas companies.⁸³ This decision was celebrated by oil and gas lobby group APPEA, one of the Coalition's largest fossil fuel donors.⁸⁴
- The Federal Government is reviewing Australia's environmental reviews process in the resources sector, with the goal of reducing barriers to new fossil fuel projects. The review was welcomed by prominent coal lobby group, and major Coalition donor,⁸⁵ the Minerals Council of Australia (MCA).⁸⁶

Blaming environmentalists for the bushfires by incorrectly suggesting they oppose hazard reduction burning is part of a strategy pursued to reduce the credibility of environmental and community groups. Local community and environmental groups consistently challenge the rush to extract more fossil fuels. Successfully blaming these groups for the bushfires may be an effective way of silencing those who call for an end to the burning of fossil fuels based on the scientific evidence that it is the only way to avoid dangerous climate change.

Coal mining companies have been exposed pursuing this strategy in recent years, including Glencore, who bankrolled a pro-coal disinformation campaign in Australia that targeted environmental groups, and Cloud Peak Energy who helped fund similar campaigns in the United States.⁸⁷

The repeated attempts by senior government figures to blame the bushfires on arsonists will be addressed in Section 8.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE FOSSIL FUEL LOBBY ON GOVERNMENT

5.

Greenpeace's 2019 [Dirty Power Report](#) revealed how the tentacles of the coal industry have entangled the Federal Government, all the way up to the Prime Minister's office.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison's office is filled with former members of the coal lobby and News Corp:

- The Prime Minister's Chief of Staff is a former Deputy CEO of the pro-coal Minerals Council of Australia (MCA).
- The Prime Minister's Senior Advisor (International - Trade and Investment) is the former CEO of the MCA.
- The Prime Minister's Principal Private Secretary is a former employee of conservative political consultants Crosby Textor.
- The Prime Minister's speech writer is a former journalist at News Corp-owned The Courier Mail.
- The Prime Minister's Head of Communications & Media - Press Secretary is the former Chief of Staff of News Corp-owned The Daily Telegraph.⁸⁸

The coal lobby has successfully infiltrated the offices of several current and former environment, energy and industry ministers, as well as the office of former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull:

- Malcolm Turnbull's Senior Adviser for Energy, Climate Change, Resources and Northern Australia, previously worked for the MCA as head of environment and climate policy.
- An advisor to then-Minister for the Environment Greg Hunt later went on to work for the MCA on environment and climate policy.
- Before entering politics, former Minister for the Environment Melissa Price worked for a subsidiary of coal miner Mitsubishi Development.
- Minister for Energy and Emissions Reduction Angus Taylor wrote a report for the MCA prior to entering politics, stating that wages were too high across the mining industry, including coal, and defending the diesel fuel tax rebate, a subsidy for the fossil fuel industry.⁸⁹
- Former Minister for Industry and Science Ian MacFarlane became the CEO of the Queensland Resources Council (QRC), a mining and coal lobby group, after retiring from politics.

For more details on the tangled web linking the fossil fuel lobby and the Federal Government, read Greenpeace's 2019 [Dirty Power Report](#).

The close relationship between the fossil fuel industry and the government continued in the wake of the bushfires. When the Minister for Resources Matt Canavan resigned from Cabinet in February this year, the pro-coal QRC (the CEO of which is a former government minister) thanked Canavan for “his unrelenting support of the resources sector” and noted he had been “a passionate and unrelenting advocate of the resources sector”.⁹⁰

The complex relationships and career trajectories that propel people from the fossil fuel industry into the federal government and back again give fossil fuel companies unprecedented access to the most powerful members of the government. This gives them an unrivalled ability to influence government decision-making in areas that affect their interests.

Public knowledge of government meetings is very limited. The Federal Government does not disclose ministerial diaries, so Australians have no oversight as to who has access to ministers.

In 2018, it was revealed that the Federal environment department had met with representatives of coal mining company Adani 40 times over a six-month period, averaging one meeting every five days.⁹¹ Adani is a coal miner planning to build the huge Carmichael mine in the Galilee Basin in Queensland. The mine is one of a number of coal mines proposed for the Galilee Basin, which contains so much coal that burning it all would more than double Australia’s greenhouse gas emissions.⁹² Adani representatives also met with Minister for Energy and Emissions Reduction Angus Taylor and then-Minister for the Environment Melissa Price.⁹³ Without the release of ministerial diaries, the number of meetings between the fossil fuel industry and Federal Government ministers will continue to be opaque.

In contrast, both the New South Wales and Queensland Governments (along with the ACT) publicly reveal whom they meet, and it paints a disturbing picture.

Over the bushfire season, when over one billion animals were killed, Queensland Government ministers met with fossil fuel companies and lobbyists on 28 occasions over a five-month period (October 2019 and February 2020).⁹⁴ This is an average of once every five days. New South Wales Government ministers met with the fossil fuel industry on fourteen occasions between October and December 2019.⁹⁵ This is an average of once a week.

These meetings are not minuted and only include some of the meetings these state politicians have; personal meetings do not have to be included, for example.

The corrosive impact of this access can be seen in recent events regarding Santos’ proposed coal seam gas project in Narrabri, New South Wales. In the last three months of last year, gas producer Santos met with New South Wales Government ministers three times, including the Planning Minister twice and the Treasurer once.⁹⁶ Executives from Santos, along with Glencore, also met with Prime Minister Scott Morrison and other senior ministers in November. One of the agenda items for this meeting was potential funding for new coal power stations with carbon capture technology.⁹⁷

On January 31 2020, the NSW and Federal Governments announced a \$2 billion energy deal, a core part of which was a commitment to source an extra 70 petajoules (PJ) of gas from NSW.⁹⁸ 70PJ is suspiciously similar to the amount of gas that will be produced in Santos’ highly controversial Narrabri coal seam gas project.

Despite the NSW Government denying that the deal was specifically intended to allow coal seam gas extraction from Narrabri,⁹⁹ which at that time had yet to complete the environmental approvals process, it was reported on March 12 that the NSW Government was advancing the project through the final stages of approvals.¹⁰⁰

In a 2018 integrity scorecard, the Grattan Institute gave the Federal Government the lowest score possible for transparency and the lowest score on accountability of any of Australia’s eight state and territory governments.¹⁰¹

It is not a coincidence that the Federal Government has some of the worst transparency and accountability laws in the country. Weak political donations laws enable the fossil fuel industry to influence government decisions with money. Poor transparency laws allow this influence to be wielded in secret. This influence had real-world implications for how the government responded to the Black Summer bushfires and its refusal to take action on climate change. The next section will examine the extent of fossil fuel industry political donations.

Table 1.

A summary of Queensland and New South Wales Government ministerial meetings with the fossil fuel lobby and News Corp during the bushfires (covering the period October 2019 to February 2020 for Queensland; October 2019 to December 2019 for New South Wales). This list of meetings only shows part of the picture of fossil fuel government access. It only includes scheduled meetings with external persons. It does not include personal, party or electorate meetings.

Organisation	Number of meetings with QLD Government ministers	Number of meetings with NSW Government ministers	Total meetings
Queensland Resources Council	5	0	5
News Corp	5	0	5
Santos	1	3	4
BHP	3	0	3
Australian Institute of Petroleum	1	1	2
Malabar Coal	0	2	2
BHP Mitsubishi Alliance	2	0	2
NSW Minerals Council	0	2	2
Mitsubishi	2	0	2
Glencore	2	0	2
APLNG	2	0	2
St Baker Energy Innovation Fund	2	0	2
Rio Tinto	1	1	2
Arrow Energy	1	0	1
Institute of Public Affairs	0	1	1
CT Group	0	1	1
AGL	0	1	1
Australian Gas Infrastructure Group	0	1	1
QCoal	1	0	1
South32	0	1	1
New Hope Group	1	0	1
Shell Australia	1	0	1
Origin Energy	1	0	1
Energy Australia	1	0	1
Queensland Minerals and Energy Academy (partnership between QLD Government & QRC)	1	0	1
Total	33	14	47

Source:

NSW Government (2020) Ministers' Diary Disclosures. Accessed at: <https://www.dpc.nsw.gov.au/publications/ministers-diary-disclosures/>

Queensland Government (2020) Ministerial Diaries. Accessed at: <https://cabinet.qld.gov.au/ministers/diaries.aspx>

POLITICAL DONATIONS AND FINANCIAL INFLUENCE



Money and connections give the fossil fuel lobby access to the highest levels of government. It then uses this access to get favourable government decisions that advance the interests of its members.

Australia's political donations system is broken. The Grattan Institute in its 2018 integrity scorecard gave the Federal Government the lowest scores for transparency and accountability, and the equal lowest score on campaign finance limits of any of Australia's eight state and territory governments.¹⁰² That 2018 report emphasised that Australia has very weak donations laws, with no limits on spending, no limits on the amount of money that individuals and corporations can give to political parties and a very high threshold for disclosure that enables many businesses and individuals to donate in secret.¹⁰³

Weak federal laws contrast with much more rigorous state laws. New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland and the ACT require all donations above \$1,000 to be publicly declared. During election campaigns, these public declarations must be made within 7 to 21 days of the donation being received.¹⁰⁴

This is not the case for the Federal Government. Federal political parties are only required to publicly disclose donations over \$13,800. And if a party receives multiple donations – for example, ten donations of \$10,000 – they do not have to be aggregated for the purpose of the party's reporting, in practice circumventing the reporting requirement.¹⁰⁵

The deadlines for disclosure are even weaker. Political donations are revealed by the Australian Electoral Commission just once a year around February and only include donations for the previous financial year. This leads to a huge lag of up to nineteen months from when the donation is made and when it is publicly declared.¹⁰⁶

Most recently, donations made between July 2018 and June 2019 were disclosed in February 2020 – a delay of seven to nineteen months.¹⁰⁷

More than \$100 million in donations given to the major parties in 2018-19 have an unknown source.¹⁰⁸ This vast sum of 'dark money' is 50 times larger than the total disclosed donations from the fossil fuel industry.¹⁰⁹

The fossil fuel industry is a major donor to the Coalition (refer to Table 2). Over \$1 million of declared fossil fuel money went to the Coalition, and by far the largest donor was coal miner Adani, which handed over almost a quarter of a million dollars (\$247,000).¹¹⁰ This is not the full extent of fossil fuel industry donations - they are likely to be significantly higher.

These disclosures and rules only apply to income classified as a donation. Political parties are required to categorise incoming money as donations or 'other receipts' and the definition of what constitutes a 'donation' and what constitutes 'other receipts' is murky. If income is classified as 'other receipts', then the political party does not need to disclose the source of the income. This often includes events like fundraising dinners or business forums.¹¹¹ 'Other receipts' are a vast pool of money of unknown origin.

While it is rarely possible to directly and ultimately link political donations with government decisions, time and again political donations lead to ministerial access, which in turn leads to favourable policy outcomes. In 2017, the MCA admitted that it provided donations to political parties to gain access to politicians.

"The MCA makes the political contributions detailed above because they provide additional opportunities for the MCA to meet with members of parliament... The MCA uses these opportunities to update members of parliament about ... the policy priorities of the MCA."¹¹²

Inadequate donations laws are compounded by the absence of a federal anti-corruption body to investigate allegations of corruption and the hidden web of connections between the fossil fuel industry and government.

The Federal Government is unique in lacking an anti-corruption commission. All states and territories in Australia have anti-corruption or integrity commissions to hold the government and public sector to account and to investigate reports of corruption and improper conduct.¹¹³

For years the Federal Government has resisted the idea of a federal anti-corruption body but it changed

its tune in late 2018. The Federal Government has proposed establishing a Commonwealth integrity commission, but the proposal has been widely criticised by integrity advocates as “weak-kneed”, as it will not allow public hearings and its investigatory powers will be restricted.¹¹⁴ Eighteen months after it was first announced, the government is yet to produce legislation for this proposed commission.¹¹⁵

Without a complete overhaul of Australia’s political donations laws and the establishment of a strong federal anti-corruption body, the fossil fuel industry will continue to wield insidious influence across all levels of government.

Table 2.

Fossil fuel companies that donated to the Federal Government in 2018-19 (including donations to the Liberal Party, National Party and Liberal-National Party).

Donor	Description of donor	Disclosed donations in 2018-19
Adani	Coal miner	\$247,300
Woodside	Gas producer	\$147,940
Mineral Resources	Mining construction and infrastructure service providers	\$105,000
APPEA	Oil and gas industry group	\$84,192
Santos	Gas producer	\$78,854
Minerals Council of Australia	Coal, gas and oil industry group	\$71,444
Chevron	Oil and gas producer	\$70,085
Origin Energy	Energy utility, coal and gas power station owner	\$50,165
Alinta	Energy utility, coal and gas power station owner	\$45,000
The Trustee for St Baker Family Trust	Trust of coal power station owner Trevor St Baker	\$44,000
Australian Pipelines & Gas Association	Gas pipeline infrastructure peak body	\$27,500
The Chamber of Minerals & Energy of WA	Resources industry body, including coal, gas and oil producers	\$25,000
Whitehaven Coal	Coal miner	\$17,500
Caltex Australia	Oil producer	\$16,106
Total	-	\$1,030,086

Source: Australian Electoral Commission (2020) AEC Transparency Register. 3 February 2020. Accessed at: <https://transparency.aec.gov.au>. Both donors and political parties are required to disclose donations over \$13,800. Where donor and party disclosures differ, this table includes the disclosure of highest value.

NEWS CORP'S DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN



This section analyses News Corp's systematic attempts to downplay the role of climate change by blaming the bushfires on hazard reduction and arson, and demonstrates how this lit the spark under one of the biggest social media disinformation campaigns of recent times.

News Corp and climate denialism

News Corp is Australia's largest news organisation. It owns major papers throughout the country, including the *Herald Sun* in Melbourne, *The Daily Telegraph* in Sydney, *The Courier Mail* in Brisbane and *The Advertiser* in Adelaide. It owns national masthead *The Australian*, more than 100 community and suburban publications, as well as news.com.au and 65% of Foxtel, including Sky News.

With a large number of publications throughout the country, News Corp is one of the most influential organisations in Australia. Every month 16 million Australians consume news produced by News Corp.¹¹⁶ It is also one of the least trusted news organisations in Australia, owning none of the top ten most trusted media brands, while *The Daily Telegraph* and *Herald Sun* are the least trusted newspapers in Australia.¹¹⁷

News Corp uses its publications to advocate for a number of political causes, in particular climate change denial.¹¹⁸

Recent studies have quantified the extent of climate change disinformation in News Corp publications. Of all media articles about the 2019-20 bushfires that denied the influence of climate change, a disproportionate number were located in News Corp publications, according to a Monash University study (refer to Table 3 and Figure 1).¹¹⁹

Over the summer, 59% of all climate denialist articles were published in News Corp papers, despite News Corp only publishing 39% of all articles related to climate change and bushfires overall. In contrast just 19% of denialist articles were published in Nine Entertainment (including former Fairfax) publications, while Nine Entertainment published 31% of all articles on bushfires and climate change.¹²⁰

APN Newspapers, primarily regional and local newspapers owned by News Corp, produced 16% of all climate denialist articles despite publishing just 7% of all articles on climate change and bushfires. In contrast, SBS featured just one denialist article and the ABC featured none.¹²¹

News Corp and APN Newspapers combined produced 75% of all climate change denialist articles over the summer.

Table 3.

News Corp and News Corp-owned APN Newspapers produced 75% of all articles that denied the influence of climate change on the bushfires over summer. This is in spite of publishing just 46% of total articles about the bushfires and climate change.

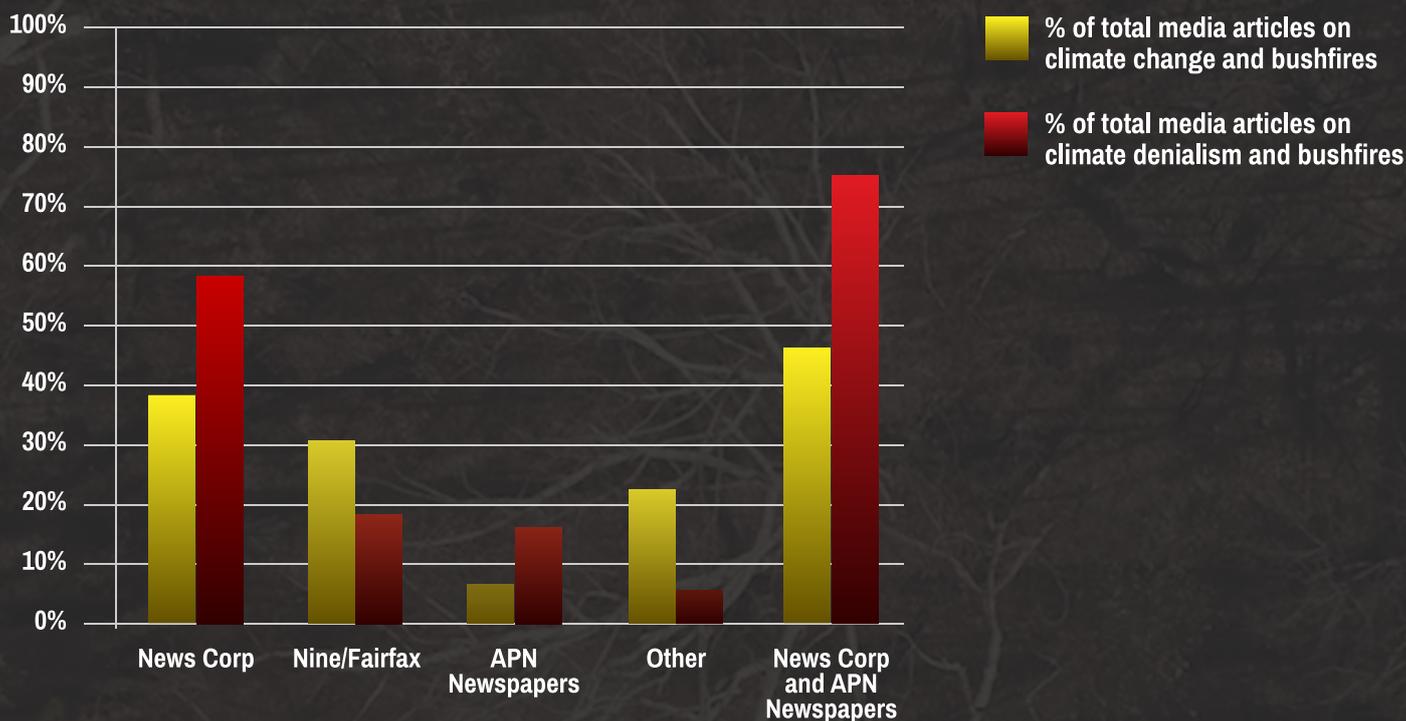
Publication	% of total articles on climate & bushfires	% of articles on climate denialism & bushfires
News Corp	39%	59%
APN Newspapers	7%	16%
Nine Entertainment/Fairfax	31%	19%
News Corp and APN Newspapers combined total	46%	75%

Source: Burgess T, Burgmann JR, Hall S, Holmes D and Turner E (2020) *Black Summer*. Australian newspaper reporting on the nation's worst bushfire season. Monash Climate Change Communication Research Hub, Monash University, Melbourne. Accessed at: <https://www.monash.edu/mcccrh/research/black-summer-australian-newspaper-reporting-of-the-nations-worst-bushfire-season>

Figure 1.

This graph shows bushfires and climate change coverage by media organisation. The yellow column shows the proportion of total media coverage devoted to climate change and bushfires by media organisation. The red column shows the proportion of total media coverage devoted to climate change denial and bushfires by media organisation. Climate denialism is significantly over-represented at News Corp and APN Newspapers.

Comparing climate change bushfire coverage to climate denialism coverage by media organisation



Source: Greenpeace 2020 using data from: Burgess T, Burgmann JR, Hall S, Holmes D and Turner E (2020) Black Summer: Australian newspaper reporting on the nation's worst bushfire season. Monash Climate Change Communication Research Hub, Monash University, Melbourne. Accessed at: <https://www.monash.edu/mcccrh/research/black-summer-australian-newspaper-reporting-of-the-nations-worst-bushfire-season>

Greenpeace analysis of major media publications came to similar conclusions, revealing the true extent of News Corp's denialism.¹²² News Corp consistently produced more articles attributing the bushfires to a lack of hazard reduction burning and arson than other media organisations.

There is no evidence to suggest that arson was a significant reason that the Black Summer bushfires were so catastrophic. Bushfire arson offences in both Victoria and New South Wales were comparable to or lower than previous years:¹²³

"There is currently no intelligence to indicate that the fires in East Gippsland and the North East have been caused by arson or any other suspicious behaviour."

Victoria Police spokesperson - 15 January 2020 ¹²⁴

“I can confidently say the majority of the larger fires that we have been dealing with have been a result of fires coming out of remote areas as a result of dry lightning storms.”

NSW Rural Fire Services Inspector Ben Shepherd
- 11 January 2020 ¹²⁵

Yet News Corp repeatedly cited arson in relation to the Black Summer bushfires. In December 2019, *The Australian* published a higher number of arson bushfire articles than all other media publications included in this analysis. News Corp owned five of the top six publications producing arson bushfire articles that month (refer to Table 4). News Corp’s bushfire arson disinformation would end up sparking an even bigger disinformation campaign on social media (refer to Section 8).

News Corp also gave more attention to the role of hazard reduction burning than other publications, with five of the top six publications producing hazard

reduction bushfire articles owned by News Corp (refer to Table 5).

News Corp was less inclined to explain the role of climate change, despite giving high amounts of coverage to both arson and hazard reduction as the cause of the bushfires. News Corp publications overall gave a significantly lower proportion of coverage to climate change and bushfires than *Nine Entertainment*, *The Guardian* and the *Daily Mail Online* (refer to Table 6). The exception was *The Australian*, which devoted a similar proportion of coverage to climate change and bushfires as *Nine Entertainment* publications. However, this coverage was significantly more likely to deny the role of climate change and bushfires (refer to Table 3).

The Australian gave the second lowest amount of coverage to the bushfires overall (the lowest was WA-based *The West Australian*, unsurprising as many of the worst bushfires this summer were on the east coast).

Table 4.

Publications ranked by the number of arson and bushfire articles that were published from December 1 to 31 2019. News Corp-owned publications dominated arson coverage.

Publication	No. of arson bushfire articles	Owner	Total bushfire articles (proportion of all bushfire articles including arson)
The Australian	12	News Corp	276 (4%)
Daily Mail Online	9	News Corp	844 (1%)
Herald Sun	7	News Corp	720 (1%)
The Courier-Mail	7	News Corp	733 (1%)
The Advertiser	7	News Corp	703 (1%)
The Daily Telegraph	7	News Corp	761 (1%)
The Guardian - Australia News	5	Guardian Media Group	288 (2%)
Sydney Morning Herald	3	Nine Entertainment	520 (1%)
The Age	2	Nine Entertainment	513 (<0.5%)
The West Australian	2	Seven West Media	150 (1%)

Source: Greenpeace 2020

Table 5.

Publications ranked by the number of hazard reduction and bushfire articles that were published from December 1 to 31 2019. News Corp-owned publications gave hazard reduction burning more attention than other publications.

Publication	No. of hazard reduction bushfire articles	Owner	Total bushfire articles (proportion of all bushfire articles including hazard reduction)
The Daily Telegraph	13	News Corp	761 (2%)
The Courier-Mail	11	News Corp	733 (2%)
Herald Sun	10	News Corp	720 (1%)
The Advertiser	10	News Corp	703 (1%)
Sydney Morning Herald	10	Nine Entertainment	520 (2%)
The Australian	8	News Corp	276 (3%)
Daily Mail Online	8	DMGT	844 (1%)
The Age	7	Nine Entertainment	513 (1%)
The Guardian - Australia News	2	Guardian Media Group	288 (1%)
The West Australian	0	Seven West Media	150 (0%)

Source: Greenpeace 2020

Table 6.

Publications ranked by the number of climate change and bushfire articles that were published from December 1 to 31 2019. News Corp-owned publications provided significantly less coverage of the role of climate change than other media organisations.

Publication	No. of climate change bushfire articles	Owner	Total bushfire articles (proportion of all bushfire articles including climate change)
Daily Mail Online	143	DMGT	844 (17%)
The Age	142	Nine Entertainment	513 (28%)
Sydney Morning Herald	141	Nine Entertainment	520 (27%)
The Guardian - Australia News	104	Guardian Media Group	288 (26%)
The Courier-Mail	91	News Corp	733 (12%)
The Australian	78	News Corp	276 (28%)
The Advertiser	78	News Corp	703 (11%)
The Daily Telegraph	77	News Corp	761 (10%)
Herald Sun	75	News Corp	720 (10%)
The West Australian	14	Seven West Media	150 (9%)

Source: Greenpeace 2020

Despite their later denials, News Corp publications like *The Australian* were explicit in their rejection of the influence of climate change on the bushfires at the height of the crisis, as its editorials make clear:

“Experts keep telling us there is no direct link between climate change and bushfires; we know many fires are lit by arsonists.”

Editorial, *The Australian* - 21 December 2019 ¹²⁶

“How else to make sense of the hysteria around Scott Morrison’s vacation, loony claims his government has abandoned national leadership during the bushfire crisis and that “Australia is burning”, climate change is causing it and we can fix it by slashing our emissions now.”

Editorial, *The Australian* 19 December 2019 ¹²⁷

“Angus Taylor’s pragmatic assessment of the global climate change challenge provides a welcome contrast to the shrill catastrophisation that dominates much of the public debate.”

Editorial, *The Australian* - 1 January 2020 ¹²⁸

The Australian would change its tune slightly on January 11, stating they had “accurately” reported the issues, apparently forgetting the editorials above:

“The evidence of global warming since the Industrial Revolution is clear. More intense fires are an observed reality consistent with the predictions of climate change science ... Bushfire experts have also pointed to the interrelated build-up of very dry forest fuel loads. We have reported this accurately.”

Editorial, *The Australian* - 11 January 2020 ¹²⁹

In January, News Corp reporting was more subtle, with significantly more mentions of climate change, despite continuing to downplay its role in the bushfires.¹³⁰ This corresponded with the Federal Government’s change in messaging in mid-January, with an acknowledgement that climate change played a role in the bushfires but focusing on the need to adapt to its effects, rather than reduce greenhouse gas emissions (refer to Section 3). News Corp continued to devote plenty of coverage to arson and hazard reduction but coverage of these issues also increased in non-News Corp publications, albeit as

part of an effort to counter social media disinformation (refer to Section 8).

News Corp’s continued focus on arson and hazard reduction contributed to high levels of misinformation on social media. News Corp didn’t just deny the role of climate change this summer – at times it downplayed and even buried bushfire coverage.

On New Year’s Eve, as the catastrophic bushfires were peaking, the *Herald Sun* pushed the bushfires story to page four, while *The Daily Telegraph* attacked the Bureau of Meteorology for inaccurate weather predictions. On the same day, *The Australian* ran a double page spread with the headline “History of disasters shows there is nothing new about nation’s destructive blazes”.¹³¹

On January 2 2020, *The Australian* ran a front page with “an upbeat picture story about the New Year’s Day picnic races at Hanging Rock” with no photos of the catastrophic fires until page four.¹³²



Even some individuals connected with News Corp criticised the organisation's coverage of the bushfires this summer, including both an employee who recently quit News Corp, and Rupert Murdoch's son James and his daughter-in-law Kathryn:

"I have been severely impacted by the coverage of News Corp publications in relation to the fires, in particular the misinformation campaign that has tried to divert attention away from the real issue which is climate change to rather focus on arson (including misrepresenting facts),"

Emily Townsend, former News Corp employee
- 10 January 2020¹³³

"Kathryn and James [Murdoch's] views on climate are well established and their frustration with some of the News Corp and Fox coverage of the topic is also well known. They are particularly disappointed with the ongoing denial [of the role of climate change] among the news outlets in Australia, given obvious evidence to the contrary."

Spokesperson for James and Kathryn Murdoch
- 15 January 2020¹³⁴

News Corp's campaign of disinformation, downplaying the impacts of climate change while highlighting the importance of hazard reduction burning, had an effect on public opinion, despite the public statements of firefighting experts:

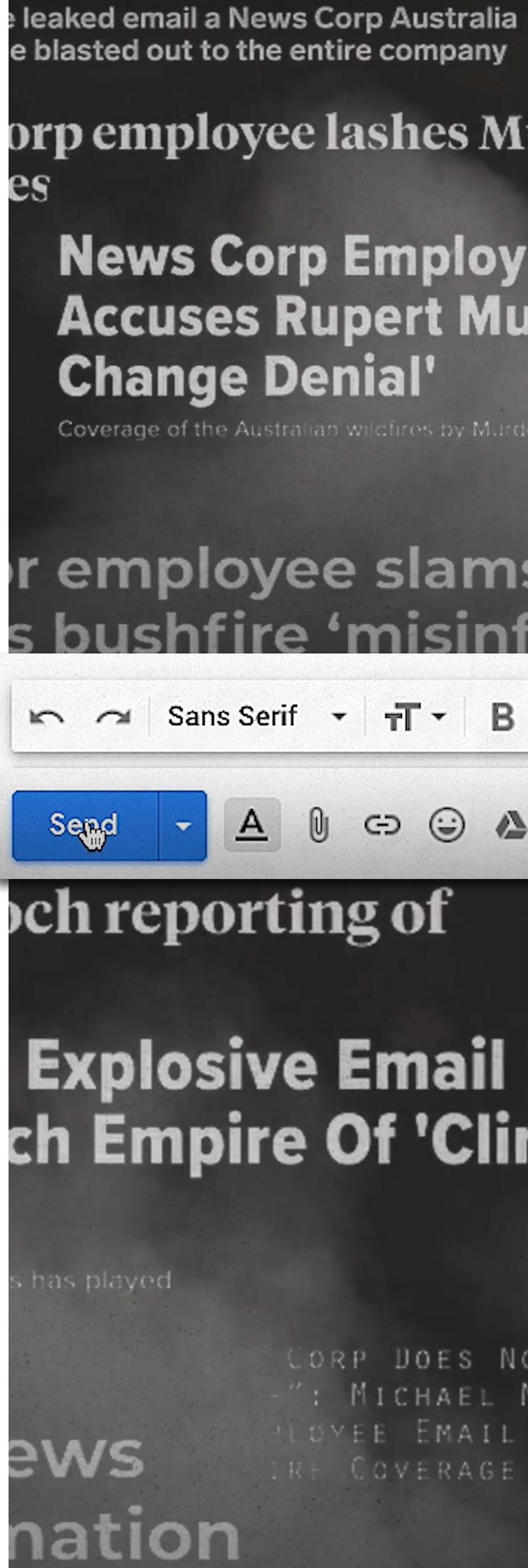
"Some of the hysteria that this [hazard reduction burning] will be the solution to all our problems is really just quite an emotional load of rubbish, to be honest."

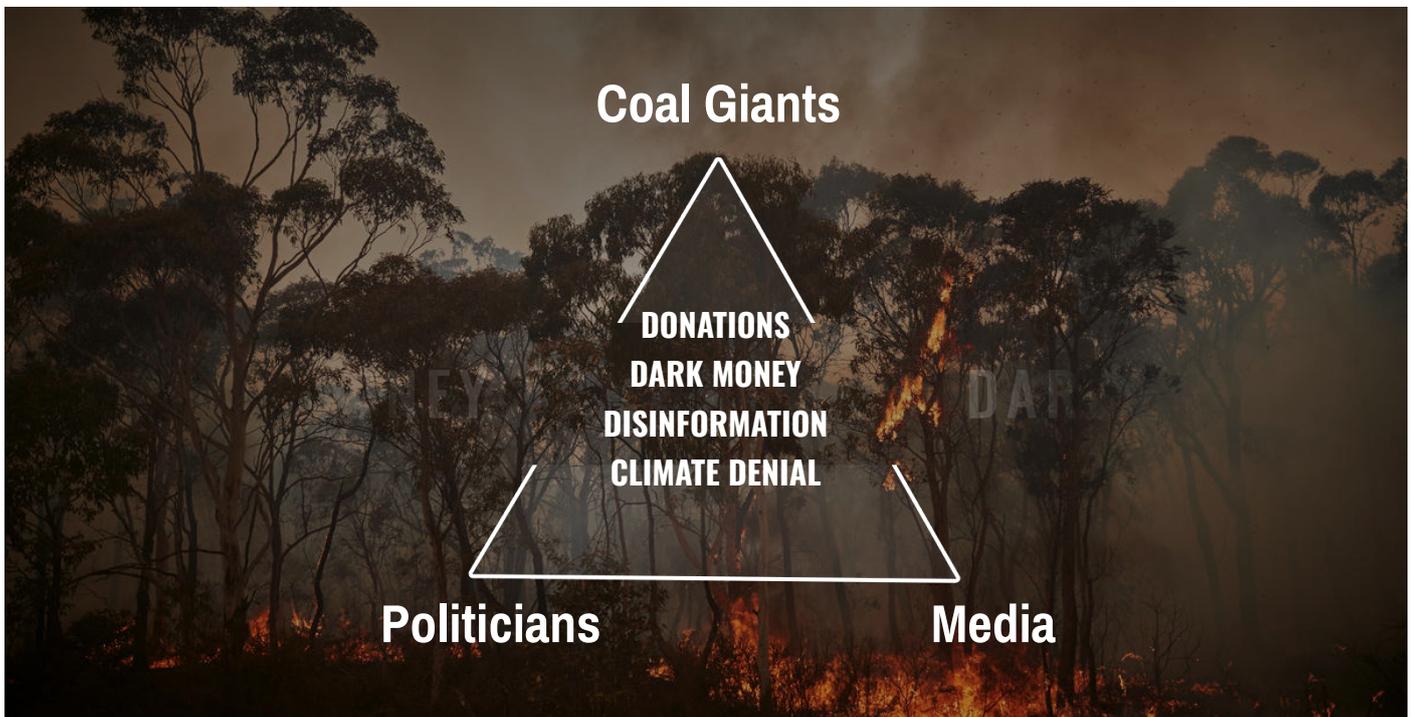
Steve Warrington, Chief Officer of Victoria's
Country Fire Authority - 7 January 2020¹³⁵

"When you're running fires under severe, extreme or worse conditions, hazard reduction has very little effect at all on fire spread."

Shane Fitzsimmons, Commissioner of New South Wales
Rural Fire Service - 8 January 2020¹³⁶

News Corp may not be trusted by the community at large but with such a large readership, a persistent campaign of disinformation can sway public opinion.





News Corp, the Federal Government and the fossil fuel industry

News Corp is well connected to both the Federal Government and the fossil fuel industry. By blaming the bushfires on a lack of hazard reduction burning and arson, News Corp diverted attention away from the role of the Federal Government and fossil fuel-driven climate change as major factors in the bushfire crisis, towards issues that don't threaten the fossil fuel lobby's interests.

Former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has explained how News Corp's goal is to prevent strong action on climate change:

"If you go to any of the right-wing think tanks or you read the Murdoch press, it's just full of climate denialism and it's, it is designed to deflect from the real objective which has to be to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions."

Former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull
- 22 January 2020 ¹³⁷

Turnbull has also claimed that the Coalition Government in the past has provided strategic leaks to News Corp in return for favourable coverage, with then-Prime Minister Tony Abbott accused of making cabinet

decisions available to News Corp reporters before they had been finalised. Then-Treasurer Scott Morrison regularly briefed Simon Benson, the national affairs editor at *The Australian*. Turnbull has stated that the editor of *The Australian* "could rightly feel they had a hand in running the country".¹³⁸

The web of connections between News Corp, the Federal Government and the fossil fuel industry runs deep. Prime Minister Morrison's office includes two former News Corp employees:

- The Prime Minister's speech writer, Matthew Fynes-Clinton, was formerly deputy chief of staff and an editor at *The Courier Mail*.
- The Prime Minister's press secretary, Andrew Carswell, was formerly chief of staff at *The Daily Telegraph*.¹³⁹

Even the office of former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull was not immune, with his former top media advisor a former editor of *The Australian*.¹⁴⁰

Rupert Murdoch is directly involved in the fossil fuel industry. He has purchased equity stakes in Genie Oil and Gas, a fossil fuel company focused on oil and gas exploration in the Middle East. The CEO of Genie Oil and Gas has implied that Rupert Murdoch has many connections with the fossil fuel industry, stating that he has “access to the expertise of the oil and gas industry and to the financial markets” and that he is “connected to leaders in these sectors”.¹⁴¹

Lachlan Murdoch, Rupert Murdoch’s son and co-chairman of News Corp, is the co-chair of the American Australian Association, which includes a number of fossil fuel companies as corporate members. Lachlan met with Prime Minister Morrison in the United States in September 2019 and again in Sydney on December 5.¹⁴²

The close relationship between News Corp and the Federal Government can also be seen in the way it responded to the bushfire crisis over summer. News Corp commentators and government figures often seemed to be echoing the same talking points, emphasising that bushfires are natural and pointing to hazard reduction and arson as the chief causes, while at the same time downplaying climate change:

“The fact none of these bushfires were in any way extraordinary compared to not just the last 50 years but indeed the last 150 years was an ‘inconvenient truth’...”

Terry McCrann, *The Australian*
- 18 November 2019 ¹⁴³

“Sadly, bushfires are part of the Australian landscape...”

David Littleproud, Minister for Agriculture, Drought and Emergency Management - 12 December 2019 ¹⁴⁴

“Remember, these bushfires were lit by human beings.”

Sky News - 10 December 2019 ¹⁴⁵

“We have reached an absurdity when people blame governments for deliberately lit fires and the smoke they produce. Apart from rampant arson, the reason NSW’s fire season is bad is the drought.”

The Australian - 14 December 2019 ¹⁴⁶

“There’s been a lot of hysteria around climate change. Climate change isn’t the only factor that has caused the fires....there have been a lot of arsonists out there causing fires.”

Deputy Prime Minister Michael McCormack
- 22 December 2019 ¹⁴⁷

“... it is the culmination of both the savage drought together with many other impacts, not least being the impacts of arson, and the number of arsonists we have seen through this fire season.”

Prime Minister Scott Morrison
- January 4 2020 ¹⁴⁸

News Corp’s bushfire disinformation had another effect: it sparked one of the biggest social media disinformation campaigns of recent times.



#ARSONEMERGENCY: SOCIAL MEDIA DISINFORMATION AND THE ROLE OF NEWS CORP AND THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

8.

Over summer, a large social media disinformation campaign, peaking in early January, sought to cast doubt on the cause of the bushfires by blaming arsonists, including through the use of the Twitter hashtag #ArsonEmergency. This section will outline the origins of this campaign and how it was propelled by News Corp reporting and Federal Government statements.

The facts

There is no evidence to suggest that arson was a significant reason that the Black Summer bushfires were so catastrophic. Bushfire arson offences in both Victoria and New South Wales were comparable to or lower than previous years.¹⁴⁹ Fire and police authorities were unequivocal:

“There is currently no intelligence to indicate that the fires in East Gippsland and the North East have been caused by arson or any other suspicious behaviour.”

Victoria Police spokesperson
- 15 January 2020 ¹⁵⁰

“I can confidently say the majority of the larger fires that we have been dealing with have been a result of fires coming out of remote areas as a result of dry lightning storms.”

NSW Rural Fire Services Inspector Ben Shepherd
- 11 January 2020 ¹⁵¹

Yet on social media, the bushfires were widely blamed on arsonists, especially in January as the #ArsonEmergency hashtag began trending.



#ArsonEmergency

As far as we know, #ArsonEmergency originated on November 19. According to analysis by Greenpeace,¹⁵² it had its first mini-surge on November 21 after it was used in the following tweet (pictured), which led to over one hundred re-tweets.

Tweet 1.

This was the first use of #ArsonEmergency by an account with a large following:



For a long period it percolated at very low levels, including seventeen days where #ArsonEmergency was not used at all. Between 19 November and 17 December, there were only three days when it attracted more than 10 mentions – on November 21, 22 and 26.

From December 18 to December 30, it began to gain more attention and reached a couple of higher peaks on December 18 and 22 (refer to Figure 2). Overall mentions were still very low.

Then from December 31, it began to rise exponentially. It first peaked on December 31, then again on January 2 and January 4, with each new peak significantly higher than the last. Finally on January 7, #ArsonEmergency broke through into the mainstream – the number of mentions increased by 700% compared to January 6 and it increased further on January 8 (refer to Figure 3).

Over the following days it began to drop away but was still used over 1,000 times a day until January 12. The hashtag experienced a final small surge on January 24 before entering its demise. It would not achieve more than 60 mentions on any day after January 25.¹⁵³

Figure 2.

#ArsonEmergency originated on November 19 and had a number of small spikes in mentions before increasing significantly from late December. This graph shows #ArsonEmergency mentions from November 10 to January 6.

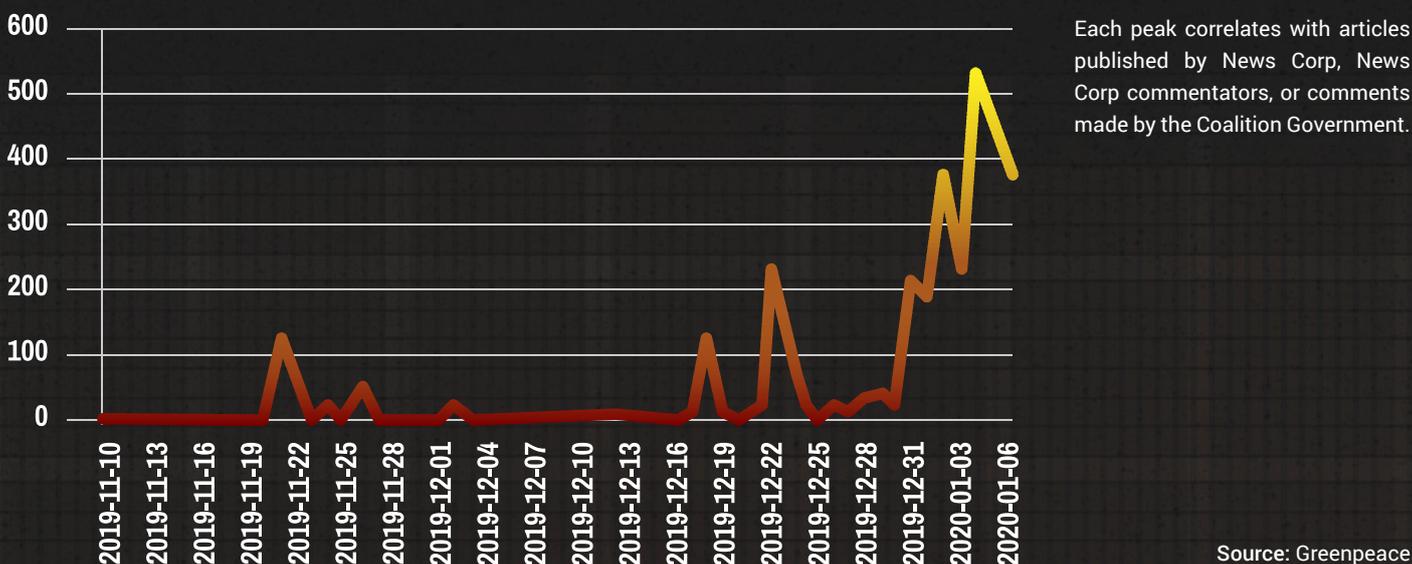
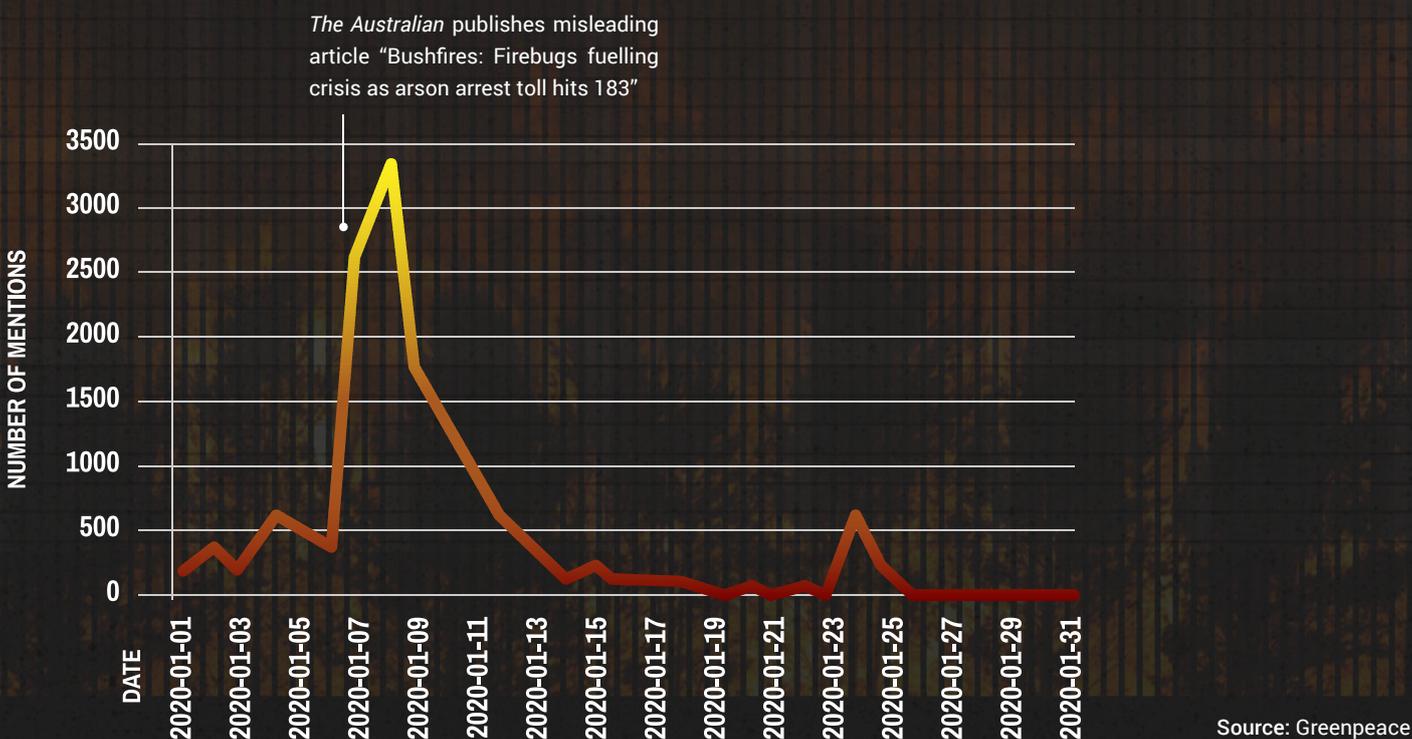


Figure 3.

Going viral: After bubbling away at fairly low levels for weeks, #ArsonEmergency went viral on January 7, peaking on January 8. This graph shows #ArsonEmergency mentions from January 1 to 31. Note the significant increase in mentions (y-axis) compared to Figure 2.



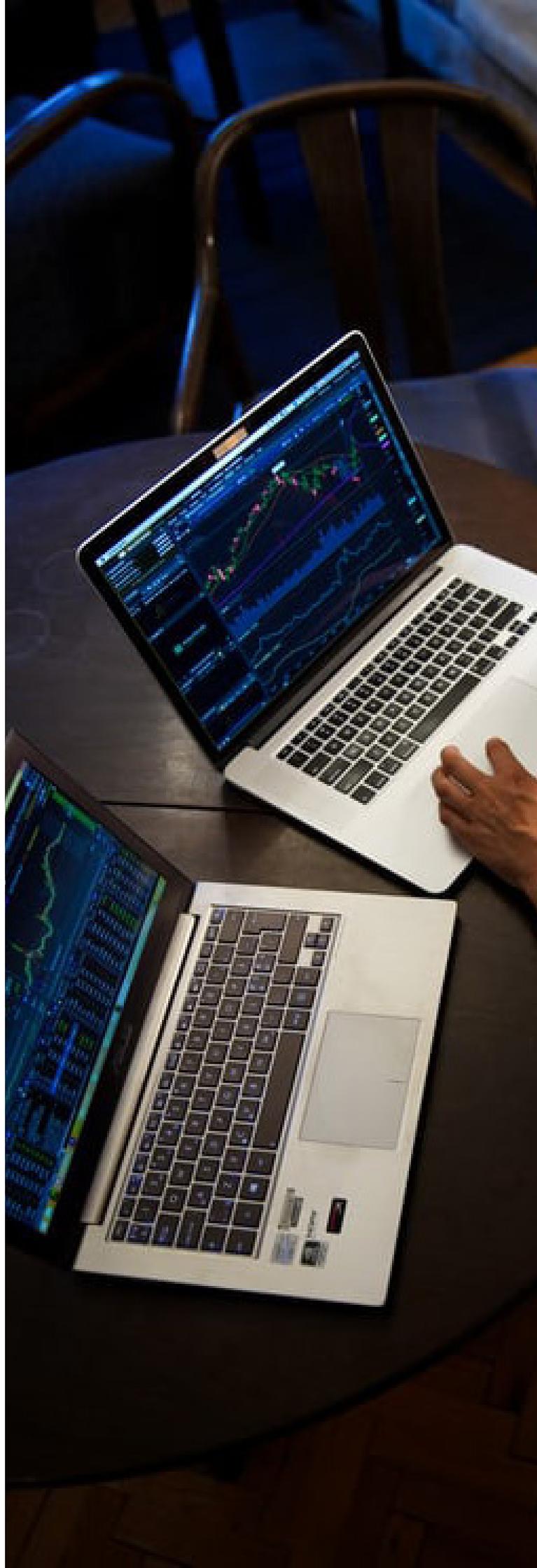
It is clear that some of the Twitter accounts using #ArsonEmergency were trying to make it go viral. One anonymous account used #ArsonEmergency in 31 different tweets in November and December alone, well before it had reached a wider audience, suggesting a deliberate campaign.

Analysis by digital media experts at the Queensland University of Technology has found that the hashtag gained traction in early January as part of “a sustained effort by about 300 accounts”. They found that many of these accounts were suspected bots – that is, inauthentic accounts run by software.

“Accounts peddling #ArsonEmergency carried out activity similar to what we’ve witnessed in past disinformation campaigns, such as the coordinated behaviour of Russian trolls during the 2016 US presidential election.... The accounts tried to get #ArsonEmergency trending to drown out dialogue acknowledging the link between climate change and bushfires.”

Timothy Graham and Tobias R. Keller in *The Conversation*
- 10 January 2020 ¹⁵⁴

Interest in #ArsonEmergency closely tracked coverage of arson in the mainstream media, especially News Corp.



Explaining the persistence of #ArsonEmergency

News Corp coverage of arson and the bushfires had a crucial role in providing fodder for the #ArsonEmergency disinformation campaign. News Corp articles helped to sustain social media disinformation by providing credibility to otherwise baseless statements and by casting doubt on official explanations. The elevation of arson as a significant factor in the bushfires occurred repeatedly in News Corp articles and programs on Sky News long before it went viral on social media.

Analysis conducted using data from Meltwater Media Intelligence shows that the many peaks in #ArsonEmergency mentions over summer were not

random: they closely coincided with news articles in the mainstream media, especially News Corp articles on arson.

Table 7 lists the various peaks in mentions of #ArsonEmergency since it first emerged and outlines how many of these peaks coincided with mainstream news articles on arson, as well as statements from government figures. Many Twitter accounts using #ArsonEmergency included links to mainstream news articles in their Tweets or re-tweeted news organisations directly.

Table 7.

#ArsonEmergency experienced peaks at various times since late November. This table lists those peaks and identifies relationships with arson coverage in the mainstream media and the government.

Time period	Average no. of mentions per day	Days where mentions peaked and number of mentions	Possible explanations for peaks
Phase 1: 19 November – 17 December	9	21 November: 115 26 November: 45	21 November: N/A – This was the first use of #ArsonEmergency by a Twitter account with a large number of followers. 26 November: N/A – Same Twitter account as above uses #ArsonEmergency again.
Phase 2: 18 December – 30 December	53	18 December: 127 22 December: 232	18 December: <i>The Australian</i> publishes article headlined “NSW bushfires: police set to charge a dozen with arson”. ¹⁵⁵ This article was shared widely with #ArsonEmergency (refer to Tweet 2). 21 December: <i>The Australian</i> publishes op-ed, stating that “Experts keep telling us there is no direct link between climate change and bushfires; we know many fires are lit by arsonists”. ¹⁵⁶ 22 December: Deputy Prime Minister McCormack states that “there have been a lot of arsonists out there causing fire”. ¹⁵⁷

Table 7. (cont.)

Time period	Average no. of mentions per day	Days where mentions peaked and number of mentions	Possible explanations for peaks
Phase 2: (cont.) 18 December – 30 December	53	18 December: 127 22 December: 232	22 December: Prime Minister Morrison mentions arson in press conference: “I mean, there are some fires that have been started by just carelessness. Others sadly have been the result of direct arson”. ¹⁵⁸
Phase 3: 31 December – 6 January	340	31 December: 210 2 January: 366 4 January: 538	31 December: Major News Corp publications in different states publish article headlined “Terrifying suburban fire might be work of an arsonist”. ¹⁵⁹ 2 January: No connection identified 4 January: <i>The Spectator</i> , edited by Sky News commentator Rowan Dean, publishes article headlined, “We don’t just have a bushfire crisis. We have an arson crisis, too”. ¹⁶⁰ This article was posted on Twitter by The Spectator with #ArsonEmergency. 4 January: Prime Minister Morrison states that the bushfires are “the culmination of both the savage drought together with many other impacts, not least being the impacts of arson, and the number of arsonists we have seen through this fire season”. ¹⁶¹ 4 January: Coalition Senator Eric Abetz states that there have been “unprecedented” levels of arson. ¹⁶²
Going viral: 7 January	2,641	7 January: 2,641	<i>The Australian</i> publishes an article with the headline “Bushfires: Firebugs fuelling crisis as arson arrest toll hits 183”. ¹⁶³ This article is shared widely both Australian and overseas accounts. Coalition MP Craig Kelly states that with “the majority of these fires, we’ve had unprecedented numbers of people being arrested and charged with arson offences. The arson is not caused by climate change”. ¹⁶⁴
Going viral: 8 January	3,323	8 January: 3,323	Widespread domestic and international media coverage of arson as a result of <i>The Australian’s</i> article from the previous day creates a vicious cycle of increasing coverage and use of #ArsonEmergency. Prime Minister Morrison says that he is “disappointed by the disgusting behaviour of seeing arsonists active in a season like this as any other Australian. It just makes your skin crawl, frankly. State governments have been taking that up and have been arresting people”. ¹⁶⁵
Final peak: 24 January	542	24 January: 542	<i>The Daily Telegraph</i> publishes an article headlined “267 charged over bushfire as police announce crackdown”. ¹⁶⁶ This article is then tweeted by One Nation Senator Malcolm Roberts with the comment “#ArsonEmergency not #ClimateEmergency”. In actuality, just 55 people have been charged with allegedly deliberately starting a bushfire since August 2019.

Source: Social media data analysis conducted by Greenpeace; media articles analysed by Greenpeace using data from Meltwater Media Intelligence.

There were only three news articles blaming the bushfires on arson that received more than 1,000 direct webpage shares on both Twitter and Facebook between January 1 and 6 (refer to Table 8). One of these articles (from Seven News) is mainly focused on the impact of the bushfires and only mentions arson at the end.

The other two articles by *The Spectator* (“We don’t just have a bushfire crisis. We have an arson crisis too”) and *The Australian* (“Bushfires: Firebugs fuelling crisis as arson arrest toll hits 183”) on January 4 and 6 respectively both presented inaccurate and misleading

arguments on the impact of arson this summer and both received significant pick-up on social media. *The Australian’s* article was shared 52,916 times on Twitter and 183,541 times in Facebook. *The Spectator*, edited by Sky News commentator Rowan Dean, even used #ArsonEmergency when it tweeted out the article.

Based on this analysis, it is clear that these two articles played a significant role in legitimising #ArsonEmergency amongst a wider audience, setting the spark for it to go viral.

Table 8.

There were three articles posted by news organisations attributing the bushfires to arson that received more than 1,000 direct webpage shares on both Twitter and Facebook between January 1 and 6. This was the week before #ArsonEmergency went viral. These articles are listed in this table, including an analysis of the article’s content.

Date	Publication	Twitter	Facebook	Headline	Analysis
3 January	Seven News	2,186	485,396	Distressing image shows the heartbreaking reality of Australia’s bushfire crisis	Mostly accurate article about bushfires, with one inaccurate line about arson being the primary cause at the end of the article. ¹⁶⁸
4 January	The Spectator	9,785	54,605	We don’t just have a bushfire crisis. We have an arson crisis too.	Article attributing Australia’s bushfire crisis primarily to arson. ¹⁶⁹
6 January	The Australian	52,916	183,541	Bushfires: Firebugs fuelling crisis as arson arrest toll hits 183	Article attributing Australia’s bushfire crisis primarily to arson. ¹⁷⁰

Source: Greenpeace 2020

THE AUSTRALIAN 
Friday, January 10, 2020 Today's Paper Mind Games

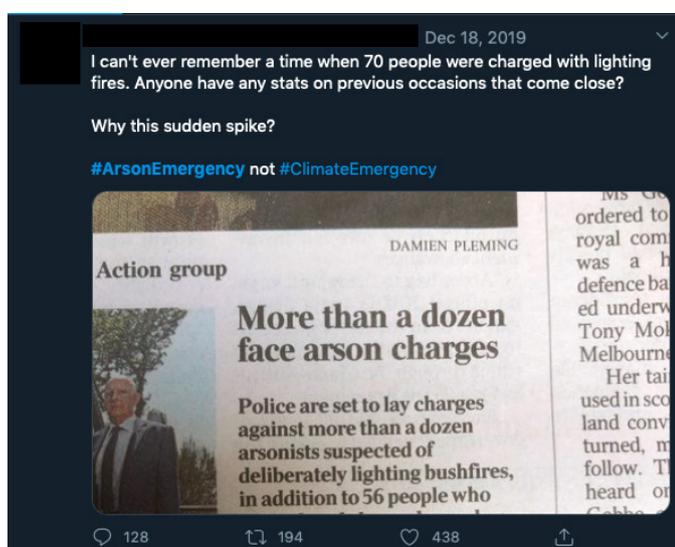
Bushfires: Firebugs fuelling crisis as national arson toll hits 183

Timeline: #ArsonEmergency, News Corp and the Federal Government

On December 18, the day #ArsonEmergency reached its then-highest peak, The Australian had earlier published an article headlined “NSW bushfires: police set to charge a dozen with arson”.¹⁷¹ This article was widely shared by the main backers of #ArsonEmergency (pictured).

Tweet 2.

The Australian’s arson article on 18 December is used as evidence of an arson emergency.



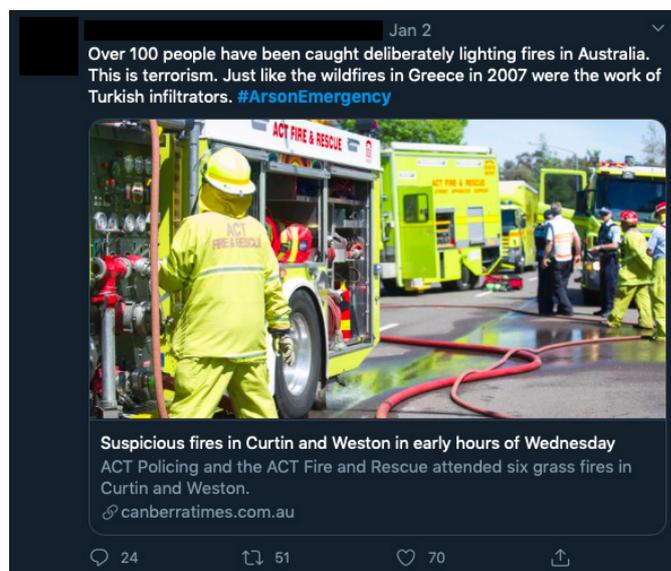
On December 21, The Australian published an op-ed stating that “we know many fires are lit by arsonists”,¹⁷² while on December 22 Deputy Prime Minister McCormack stated that “there have been a lot of arsonists out there causing fire”.¹⁷³ The Prime Minister also mentioned arson in a press conference. #ArsonEmergency hit a new peak that day.¹⁷⁴

On December 31, major News Corp publications in New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland and South Australia published an article headlined “Terrifying suburban fire might be work of an arsonist” as #ArsonEmergency climbed up to a new peak.¹⁷⁵ At the time of writing, there have been no reports of any arson charges being laid with regards to this fire.

By New Year’s Day, #ArsonEmergency was consistently getting a few hundred tweets per day. Now any mention of arson in the media began to be used to reinforce the narrative that arson was out of control (pictured).

Tweet 3.

From the start of January, any mention of arson in the media, came to be cited as proof of out of control arson. Some Twitter accounts began to suggest the fires were coordinated by “terrorists”.



#ArsonEmergency peaked again on January 2 and 4. On January 4, The Spectator published its widely shared arson article headlined “We don’t just have a bushfire crisis. We have an arson crisis, too”, and posted it on Twitter with #ArsonEmergency (pictured).¹⁷⁶ Both the Prime Minister (“not least being the impacts of arson, and the number of arsonists we have seen through this fire season”) and Government Senator Eric Abetz (“unprecedented” levels of arson) suggested that arson was a major problem in contrast to climate change.¹⁷⁷

Tweet 4.

The Spectator used #ArsonEmergency in this tweet, driving a new spike in mentions.



Oddly, on January 6, the NSW Police Force tweeted that they had “taken legal action against 183 people” for “bushfire-related offences” (pictured). This total included just 24 people who had been charged with deliberately starting bushfires but it was quickly misrepresented on Twitter. *The Australian* then published an article with the headline “Bushfires: Firebugs fuelling crisis as arson arrest toll hits 183”.¹⁷⁸ At the time of writing, this incorrect headline can still be viewed on *The Australian's* website.

This article was shared extensively on social media – 52,916 shares on Twitter and 183,541 shares on Facebook directly from *The Australian's* webpage.

January 7 was a turning point. Finally armed with “evidence” from *The Australian*, #ArsonEmergency went viral over the next two days, attracting the attention of Donald Trump Junior and Fox News in the United States.¹⁷⁹ Conservative American video producers PragerU made a video based on *The Australian* article that claimed arson was responsible for half of the country’s bushfires, which was eventually seen by two million people before Facebook flagged it as false.¹⁸⁰

#ArsonEmergency would peak on January 8, before gradually falling away between January 9 and 12. It would briefly resurrect on January 24 after *The Daily Telegraph* published an article headlined “267 charged over bushfire as police announce crackdown”.¹⁸¹ This article was then tweeted by One Nation Senator Malcolm Roberts with the comment “#ArsonEmergency not #ClimateEmergency” (pictured). In fact, just 55 people were charged with allegedly deliberately starting a bushfire over the preceding six months.¹⁸²

Tweet 5.

NSW Police tweeted that 183 people had been arrested for “bushfire-related offences”. This was incorrectly misinterpreted by many Twitter accounts, including *The Australian* (below).



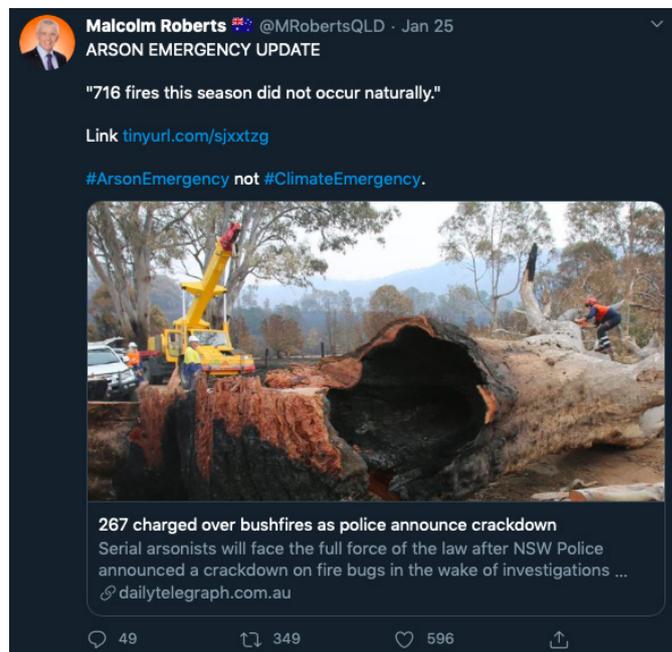
Tweet 6.

The Australian's infamous and erroneous article was widely shared on social media. It can still be viewed on its website.



Tweet 7.

One Nation Senator Malcolm Roberts briefly revived #ArsonEmergency in late January.



While #ArsonEmergency was driven by bots and a small number of persistent Twitter accounts, it is clear that the media and politicians had an important role in legitimising the false arson narrative, especially in December. For weeks, News Corp downplayed the role of climate change in causing the bushfires and elevated the role of arson, citing it in numerous articles and editorials, especially in *The Australian* and on Sky News.

Politicians, including the Prime Minister, repeatedly mentioned arson, elevating it alongside or above climate change. This strategy to muddy the waters, casting doubt on science and the experts, created an opening for those intent on spreading misinformation on social media. Without the arson narrative being tacitly and explicitly condoned by elements in the traditional media, it is possible #ArsonEmergency would never have left the fringes of Twitter and broken into the mainstream.

The last two sections of this report have shown the different facets of the disinformation campaign

pursued by News Corp, the Federal Government and social media. The big winner from all this was the fossil fuel industry, which was saved from the scrutiny it deserved for its role in causing climate change.

There is no evidence to suggest that arson was a significant reason that the Black Summer bushfires were so catastrophic, with bushfire arson offences in the worst affected states comparable to previous summers.¹⁸³ Yet that didn't stop News Corp, social media accounts and politicians repeating otherwise.

It is perhaps a cautionary tale, that when the mainstream media let the misinformation genie out of the bottle, it is impossible to put it back.

“It started because somebody lit a match. I mean there are 250 people as I understand it, or more, that have been charged with arson. That’s not climate change.”

Peter Dutton, Minister for Home Affairs
- 5 February 2020 ¹⁸⁴



CASE STUDY – “HE’S BEEN BRAINWASHED”: ATTACKING THE EXPERTS



During the 2019/20 summer, News Corp ran a concerted campaign to discredit a group of former fire chiefs who argued that the Black Summer bushfires had been driven by climate change.

The Emergency Leaders for Climate Action (ELCA), formed by 23 former fire and emergency service leaders from across Australia with 600 years combined firefighting experience, had warned back in April 2019 that Australia was unprepared for worsening extreme weather, including bushfires, driven by climate change. These warnings had been ignored in the lead-up to Black Summer, with the Prime Minister turning down opportunities to meet with them on at least two occasions.¹⁸⁵

In an op-ed on November 11 and an interview on November 14, Greg Mullins, a former Commissioner for Fire & Rescue NSW and member of ELCA, stated:

“We saw it coming. We tried to warn the government.”

“It [the bushfire] is not normal, it hasn’t happened like this before. We can’t fix the past so let’s start now and fix the base cause, which is the burning of coal and gas.”

Greg Mullins, former Fire & Rescue NSW Commissioner
- 14 November 2019 ¹⁸⁶

“We felt we had a duty to tell people how climate change is super-charging our natural disaster risks. I wish we were wrong, but we’re not.”

Greg Mullins, former Fire & Rescue NSW Commissioner
- 11 November 2019 ¹⁸⁷

The united public calls for action on climate change by the ex-fire chiefs was a serious threat to the pro-fossil fuels narrative News Corp had been running – namely, that it was only inner city voters and environmentalists who cared about climate change and that these bushfires were entirely normal. The former fire chiefs also noted that focusing on hazard reduction burns without taking climate change into account missed the point, a comment in direct conflict with the argument News Corp had been advocating.

It warranted a full frontal attack from a number of News Corp outlets:

“There are, for instance, the retired fire chiefs today who actually claimed...The real problem, it seems, was that the Morrison government hadn’t magically turned down the world’s temperature by cutting Australia’s tiny emissions.”

Sky News - 14 November 2019 ¹⁸⁸

“The ABC were at it again last week, fawning over 23 former fire and emergency leaders who commented, outside their area of expertise, about an alleged relationship between bushfires and climate change.”

The Daily Telegraph – 19 November 2019 ¹⁸⁹

“...[Greg Mullins] he’s joined a cult. He’s been brainwashed.”

Peter Gleeson, 2GB and Sky News commentator
- 14 November 2019 ¹⁹⁰

But Greg Mullins and ELCA were not deterred. They continued to appear in the media and on 17 December, ELCA announced it would hold a national bushfire summit after the bushfire season had ended in response to the “federal government’s leadership vacuum”.¹⁹¹

News Corp doubled down and upped the ante, seeking to attack the credibility of these experts even further. Over the next two days, several prominent commentators took turns attacking the fire chiefs on Sky News.¹⁹²

“They [the fire chiefs] looked like they were auditioning for a role in politics”.

Sky News - 18 December 2019 ¹⁹³

Meanwhile in *The Australian*, Brad Norington ran a series of articles targeting the fire chiefs’ credibility:

“Climate activist Tim Flannery is the force behind a band of former state fire and emergency chiefs accusing Scott Morrison of abandoning bushfires across the nation and demanding an immediate end to the burning of fossil fuels.”

Brad Norington, *The Australian* - 17 December 2019 ¹⁹⁴

“Former NSW fire chief Greg Mullins has been scolded by some colleagues for singling out climate change as the “driving force” behind intense bushfires, ahead of high combustible fuel loads and other problems linked to land management.”

Brad Norington, *The Australian* - 18 December 2019 ¹⁹⁵

“Former premier Campbell Newman has blasted a prominent former fire chief for blaming intense bushfires on climate change...”

Brad Norington, *The Australian* - 20 December 2019 ¹⁹⁶

The Australian even devoted space in an editorial to countering ELCA’s arguments:

“Emergency Leaders for Climate Action ... attacked the Morrison government for a failure of “moral leadership” when it came to the bushfires. Former NSW Fire and Rescue commissioner Greg Mullins said: “Australia was burning while we turn a blind eye to the driving force, which is climate change and a warming planet.”...Experts keep telling us there is no direct link between climate change and bushfires; we know many fires are lit by arsonists.”

Editorial, 21 December 2019 ¹⁹⁷

News Corp’s campaign was ultimately unsuccessful in trying to silence ELCA. The former fire chiefs continued to regularly appear in the media over summer and their message connecting the bushfires with climate change is now acknowledged, even reluctantly by *The Australian*.

It is nonetheless a clear demonstration of the lengths News Corp will go, especially *The Australian* and Sky News, to silence and discredit those who threaten its pro-coal, pro-fossil fuel agenda.



CASE STUDY – MATT KEAN, THE LIBERAL PARTY MINISTER WHO STEPPED OUT OF LINE

News Corp and the Federal Government launched an unprecedented attack during Black Summer on one of their own, when he acknowledged the link between bushfires and climate change and the need to rapidly reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This demonstrates the lengths the government will go to silence its own members who don't follow the pro-fossil fuels script.

Matt Kean, Liberal MLA for Hornsby and Minister for Energy and Environment in the New South Wales government, is a prominent member of the Coalition government in Australia's largest state. On December 11, in the midst of the violent bushfires sweeping through the state and eight days before New South Wales would declare its second state of emergency that summer, Kean appeared on ABC Radio and argued that Australia needed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions:

"We've got to stop making climate change a matter of religion and we've got to start making it a matter of science and the science says that we need to reduce the impact of global warming by 2°C and in order to do that we need to get to net-zero emissions by 2050."

Matt Kean, NSW Minister for Energy and Environment
- 11 December 2019 ¹⁹⁸

This followed a statement he had made the day before:

"If this is not a catalyst for change, then I don't know what is. This is not normal and doing nothing is not a solution. We need to reduce our carbon emissions immediately, and we need to adapt our practices to deal with this kind of weather becoming the new normal."

Matt Kean, Minister for Energy and Environment
- 10 December 2019 ¹⁹⁹

A day later, federal Liberal MP Jason Falinski backed him:

"Matt Kean is right. Climate change is contributing to the fire situation. We need to take practical steps at home, and be ambitious abroad."

Jason Falinski, Federal MP for Mackellar
- 12 December 2019 ²⁰⁰

The Federal Government had governed for years without implementing a credible plan to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and Prime Minister Scott Morrison had managed to govern for a year with no climate policy at all. Now, in the wake of the Federal Government's bungled response to the catastrophic bushfires, members of its own side were calling for more action.

The dam seemed to be breaking. It prompted an immediate response, not just from News Corp but also from other Coalition ministers:

"I don't think the NSW government can change the temperature of the globe... Too often state governments are using the bogeyman of climate change to distract from their shortcomings in managing our land."

Matt Canavan, then-Federal Resources Minister
- 11 December 2019 ²⁰¹

“NSW Water Minister Melinda Pavey also accused her government colleague [Matt Kean] of playing politics with an issue that had seen six people killed and more than 720 homes destroyed. “Everyone on the ground knows that this is simply caused by a lack of rain,” Ms Pavey said.”

Melinda Pavey, NSW Minister for Water, Property and Housing quoted in *The Australian* - 11 December 2019 ²⁰²

“What is different now is that climate change is being blamed, even by people who should know better. Like Mr Kean, they are playing political parlour games and inevitably taking the focus away from victims and people risking their lives to fight bushfires.”

Editorial, *The Australian* - 11 December 2019 ²⁰³

“NSW Environment Minister Matt Kean has been unable to identify a single new initiative his department has introduced to combat the deleterious effect that climate change has had on bushfire management – despite blaming it for the devastating blazes ravaging the state this summer.”

Kieran Gair and Olivia Caisley, *The Australian* - 12 December 2019 ²⁰⁴

“Nationals deputy leader Bridget McKenzie has blasted an “irrational” state colleague [Matt Kean] for daring to link the NSW bushfires to climate change.”

Bridget McKenzie, then-Federal Minister for Agriculture quoted in *The Canberra Times* - 13 December 2019 ²⁰⁵

“Matt Kean’s climate change rant all smoke and mirrors”

Tim Blair, *The Daily Telegraph* - 11 December 2019 ²⁰⁶

“NSW Environment Minister Matt Kean blamed the fires on climate change – without evidence. Rather than explain what his department had done or failed to do to reduce fuel loads in national parks and forests ... he promised more action on carbon emissions reductions policies that, of course, can and will never do anything to reduce or alleviate the bushfire threat.”

Chris Kenny, *The Australian* - 13 December 2019 ²⁰⁷



Environment Minister a rural firey 'hose poser' FAUX FIGHTER

CLARISSA BYE
THE state environment minister who sparked a Coalition Cabinet rift with his comments linking climate change to the fire crisis, has never fought a bushfire despite signing up as a Rural Fire Service volunteer three years ago.
Hornsby MP Matt Kean (pictured), who went through induction in 2016 and says he's up to date with all his annual training, said he signed up to "make sure I was available to support the community if there was a fire."
"I'm ready to go if needed." While he has posted videos of himself doing the training on Facebook, some unkind locals have dubbed him the "fairweather" firefighter, compared to former PM Tony Abbott, who has been actively deployed many times with the RFS. Asked why he hadn't been out fighting fires, Mr Kean said: "I haven't had a chance to get out there, touch wood. There hasn't been a fire in Hornsby."
But his Hornsby brigade is active. Last week they were helping out on the firefront on Loggiers Mountain.
The revelations came amid warnings the NSW economy would be "harnessed into the sick man of Australia" under his climate change policies.
FULL REPORTS PAGES 10-11



The *Daily Telegraph* even devoted a whole front page to an attack on Kean on 13 December, accusing him of being a fake fire-fighter.



Despite this criticism, Kean would not be silenced. On January 16 and 20, Kean again called for stronger action on climate change and suggested that some federal cabinet ministers wanted stronger policies.²⁰⁸ This led to extraordinary criticism from the Prime Minister and other colleagues, one of whom said he should be removed from his portfolio:

“Matt Kean doesn’t know what he’s talking about. He doesn’t know what’s going on in the federal cabinet. Most of the federal cabinet wouldn’t even know who Matt Kean was.”

Prime Minister Scott Morrison - 20 January 2020 ²⁰⁹

“He [Matt Kean] seems to have taken this opportunity to go all out and spruik a whole heap of messages that I don’t believe is representing of the whole of government...I’ve got a lot more to say about Matt and his comments but I’m not interested today...”

John Barilaro, NSW Deputy Premier and Nationals leader
- 20 January 2020 ²¹⁰

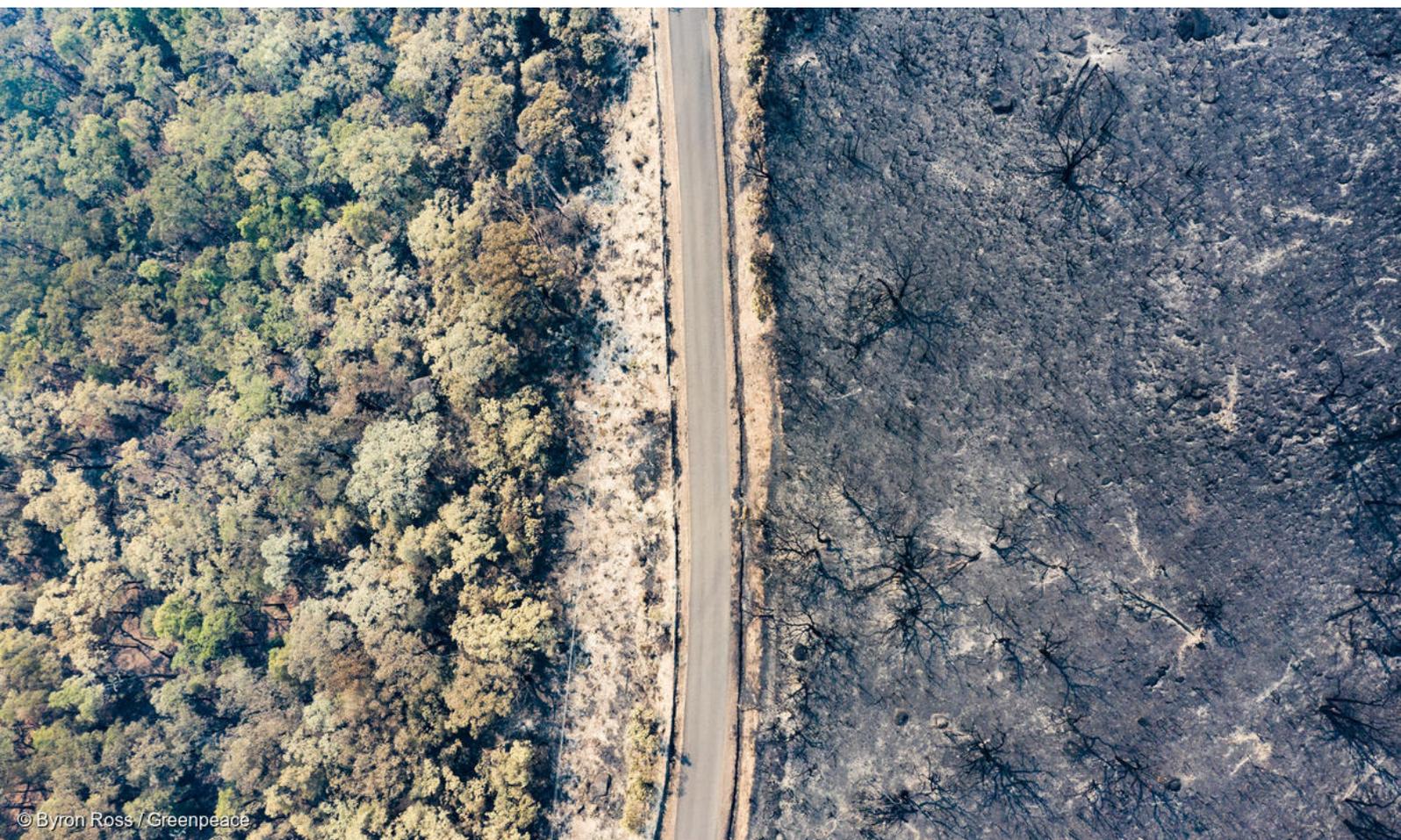
“Let’s give the [environment] portfolio to someone that actually has some experience and knows what they are talking about and has land management experience rather than a lifetime of being a political hack.”

Michael Johnsen, NSW Parliamentary Secretary for
Agriculture and Resources - 21 January 2020 ²¹¹

Sky News commentators took the cue, with Rowan Dean calling on Kean to resign,²¹² while Tony Abbott’s former chief of staff Peta Credlin and former Queensland Premier Campbell Newman both criticised Kean in the following days.²¹³

This campaign failed to silence Kean but this climate-denying backlash seems to have been successful in preventing federal policy change. As of writing, the Federal Government is no closer to adopting a credible policy to tackle climate change than it was six months ago.

The experience of Minister Kean shows the significant risk attached to publicly speaking out on climate change and the need to reduce emissions, even if you are a senior Coalition cabinet minister. Loyalty to the fossil fuel industry, it seems, is stronger even than the Coalition’s loyalty to its own members.



11. CONCLUSIONS

The central role of fossil fuel-driven climate change in exacerbating the 2019/20 Black Summer bushfire crisis is clear.

Yet despite the catastrophic loss of life, property, and environmental destruction, Australia is no closer at the time of writing to having a credible federal climate change policy or plan of action than it was when koalas burned alive and Australians huddled on ash-stained beaches, waiting to be evacuated to safety by the Royal Australian Navy. Australia's greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise, and the fossil fuel industry persists with its plans for new projects as if nothing had happened. The Federal Government is missing in action.

Our investigation has shown that this is no accident. The influence of the fossil fuel industry, through money and connections, has secured policies and actions that put the mining and burning of coal, gas, and oil above all else. During an unprecedented crisis, misinformation was used as a tool by the Morrison Government and its allies in News Corp to downplay the impact of climate change and elevate falsehoods that shifted blame for the severity of the season away from the coal, oil and gas industry. Dissenting voices were attacked in an effort to silence them. And social media was weaponised to send that campaign global, cementing falsehoods in the minds of Australians and the world.

It is clear that until the grip of the fossil fuel industry over Australia's government and media is broken, federal action on climate change will remain elusive, putting Australians at greater risk of facing another Black Summer in years to come.



END NOTES

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