

Australia is remarkably exposed to climate change and remarkably unwilling to do much about it. Conditions keep getting worse. Yet climate policy in Australia has been treading water or backpedalling for years, as I discussed in an earlier [post](#).

Let's start with the temperature. The [Guardian](#) reports that in the year up to July 2019, Alice Springs (in the interior) had 55 days above 104 °F. On New Year's Eve of 2018, it set a new record of 113 °F. In December 2019, the [Washington Post](#) reported, temperatures soared to 104° (40° Celsius) in most of the nation's major cities, with inland areas of Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia possibly eclipsing 122 degrees (50 Celsius)." December 17, 2019, became the [hottest day](#) in Australian history, with an average high temperature across country of 105.6°. Two days later, the new record was shattered as the average temperature reached 107.4°. This Saturday, the Sydney area set an all-time record, with one town hitting 120°.

There has also been an ongoing drought. Last November, National Geographic [reported](#) that "large swathes of New South Wales are in danger of having no water available with the state's rural storage capacity at 31 per cent and heading down fast." According to the [Australian Broadcasting Company](#), "farmers are facing ruin across New South Wales and Queensland in what some are calling the worst drought in living memory, with costs of stock feed and transport spiralling."

Heat and aridity make for wildfires. Unprecedented fires burned in the past several months near Sydney and in other areas that have not been threatened in the past. According to [one expert](#), burned areas included "rainforests, wet eucalypt forests, dried-out swamps and organic matter in the soil where the water table has dropped." You know you're in trouble when the dirt catches fire. Besides the direct damage, the fires caused an air pollution crisis in Sydney. The Gospers Mountain fire was burning over a million acre span in December.

And yet . . .

Australia *still* has one of the highest per capita emissions rates in the world. It's the world's largest exporter of coal. And Australia's Conservative Party government *still* refuses to take climate change seriously.

The Prime Minister has reacted to the fires the way U.S. conservatives respond to mass shootings, by offering "thoughts and prayers." Also like his U.S. counterparts, he argues that it's important that that in the face of disaster people should "focus on coming together and not seeking to drive issues of conflict and issues that can separate Australians at a time when we all need each other." I suppose he probably hires the same political consulting

firms as Mitch McConnell. His Deputy Prime Minister has [brushed aside](#) possible links with climate change as the ravings of “inner-city lefties.” A prior Conservative prime minister, Tony Abbott, recently spoke on Israeli radio, calling climate science a “cult.”

If you’re wondering why the conservatives won’t act, the reason is Australia’s booming coal industry. Taking climate change seriously would mean challenging a major industry. A coal mining magnate, Clive Palmer, provided major funding for the Conservatives in the last election.

A common response to complaints about Australia’s lack of climate action is that it has only a small share of global emissions. But according to [US EPA](#), about 30% of global emissions come from countries whose individual contribution shares are small (under 4%.) National boundaries are just lines on a map in terms of where carbon emissions are located and how much they need to be reduced. When you think about it, a coal-fired plant in Australia is just as much of a problem as a similar plant in China or the US; Australia just happens to have fewer of them. If you’re going to exempt Australia, you might as well exempt Texas, which has about the same population. A ton of carbon does the same amount of harm, whether it’s emitted in a small country or a big one.

Hopefully, at some point the public will get upset enough to demand action. But so far that hasn’t happened. In the meantime, Australia is a cautionary tale for the rest of us, a glimpse at what the future may look like if we don’t take strong action.