

# Under the Currawong's Eye: Fire, pandemic and the bridge to hope<sup>1</sup>

DAVID RITTER

Standing quietly one morning under the mature Queensland brush box tree (*Lophostemon confertus*) that grows, wildly out of scale, in the back corner of our tiny inner-city courtyard, I'm joined from nowhere by a pied currawong (*Strepera graculina*).

The bird looks at me, steadfastly, from its target-like eye. With oafish anthropomorphism, I say good morning. The pied currawong continues to stare studiously, moving only slightly. It is assessing, I suppose, whether this loud and brightly clad biped represents an immediate threat or perhaps might be a source of food.

The creature and I continue to look at each other. It is just another uncanny midweek morning in inner western Sydney suburbia, in a year that already feels a decade old. We live under an air route that is now empty of planes, the flight path becoming quickly grown over with clean sky. And like countless others around Australia under pandemic lockdown, I'm working from home today, while our kids attend makeshift school around the dining table.

I feel a surge of gratitude for privilege and I want to share my appreciation of good fortune with the currawong, but I do so soundlessly. I'm grateful to be in employment, I now think in silent secular prayer, and I am thankful for the closeness of wife and daughters whom I not only love, but whose company I cherish. I give thanks for friends and neighbours; for utilities that work; for food and drink that is healthy and readily available; and for peace.

So much has been revealed this year.

In Australia's unprecedented spring and summer of fire more than seventeen million hectares of green was turned to black: an area greater than the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Switzerland and Slovenia combined, or more than five times the size of Taiwan, or more than 16 times the landmass of Lebanon (Oldenborgh et al. 2020). In North Queensland, the third great bleaching of our Great Barrier Reef was the most extensive yet,

erasing brilliant coral colours into a dull white (Slezak 2020). On land and sea, so much vivid life is gone, killed by conditions of planetary heating, created by people primarily by burning coal, oil and gas and cutting down trees (Skea et al. 2019). The chickens of climate inaction came home in bitter and atrocious roost.

In these seismic occurrences, any imagined boundary between social and environmental issues has been graphically erased. Almost 80% of Australians were impacted by the unprecedented climate damage fires of the 2019-20 spring and summer. An extreme environmental phenomenon became a mass societal experience, killing more than 30 people directly, contributing to the early deaths of more than 400 others through extreme toxic smoke inhalation and impacting one way or another the lives of around 80% of Australians (Cockburn 2020; Wu et al. 2020; Biddle 2020). Then another socio-environmental event – the zoonotic transmission and anthropogenic spread of the COVID-19 virus – became a universal experience as the whole of Australia went into protracted lockdown. 'Is our destruction of nature responsible for Covid-19?' asked distinguished environmental journalist John Vidal in *The Guardian*, citing some of the many scientists studying the relationship between ecological destruction and the increase of pandemics (Vidal 2020). The social and the environmental merge: save the diversity of life on earth, save ourselves.

In Australia, we have all of the resources, policy solutions and technology fixes that we need to make the rapid shift to the safety and security of abundant clean energy. The transformation would also be immensely popular, as a very large majority of adult Australians want effective action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (Oldenborgh et al. 2020). One can only presume the margin would be even greater among the kids who will inherit the mess. All that is holding Australia back is a malign complex of vested interests; the fossil fuel order, 'game of mates', united in the exercise of dirty power, twisting our democracy away from the common good (Ritter 2018; Murray and Frijters 2017; Greenpeace Australia Pacific 2020a).

---

Politicians may crave the sugary rewards of short-term political advantage, but the distant eternal eye of the laws of physics and chemistry stares straight through the venal sophistry of the pettiest of humanity. The only choice remaining to the death cult defenders of the fossil fuel industries is to deny truth itself, an option that many have taken as if their Qantas Chairman's Lounge admission depends on it. So, this spring and summer, even as the fires raged and the seas heated, there was a sustained effort by powerful forces to minimise the role played by climate change in creating the conditions for the disaster (Greenpeace Australia Pacific 2020b). It was the fossil fuel order's response to their Chernobyl moment (Ritter 2019; Flanagan 2020). Disinformation was politically weaponised by politicians, amplified by a gallery of pundits, and systematically disseminated via social media, to spread falsehoods and shift culpability away from the coal, oil and gas industries.

Meanwhile, in umpteen stricken country towns, flaming valleys and day-dark backroads, and around the kitchen tables in the cities, we Australians remembered ourselves, that we are a society of people, held together by common bonds of land and sea, road and sky, kinship and friendship, communality, interdependence and fate.

In the era of neoliberalism, we have been force-fed the slow poisonous untruth that people are selfish self-maximisers, aspiring *homo economicus*, worth no more than our use-value and our contribution to the gross domestic product; only as good as our own efforts in self-marketing and owing nothing to anyone, unless by dint of binding contract or slick communications strategy (*Homo economicus* nd). Such a hollow and transactional representation of the human condition was never true and the fires burned away those lies for any who were looking. Volunteer firefighters turned out with no thought of reward; professional first responders were on the frontlines of danger as a matter of vocation; people cared for one another and for animals too, rescuing, hugging, sharing, baking, witnessing, taking in and giving comfort. The piggy banks of Australia were put to the hammer as we searched our souls and found charity. Then, during COVID-19, overwhelming numbers of us acted together to embrace the inconvenience of constraint, for the common good.

Every rational-minded observer now asks the obvious question (Peled 2020). Why won't Australia's politicians respond to the climate emergency in the same way they reacted to the COVID-19 crisis? After all, the Morrison government listened to the scientific and medical experts and acted prudently, in the public interest, to halt the pandemic (Australian Government 2020). Can we just have the same again on the climate emergency, please?

The answer is a tantalising 'maybe'.

First, the inertia. The science writer Ketan Joshi has observed that while it may feel as if the pandemic has changed everything, the brute facts of institutional corruption remain unaltered (Joshi 2020; Lessig 2013).

The first point is that the same people are in power, and they exist within the same power structures:

There has been no alteration to the bonds of kinship that form a glistening web between fossil fuel executives, industry lobby groups, conservative journalists and politicians in major parties. These people are still in each other's phone books. The second reason is that there is a pre-existing, bespoke rhetorical assumption Australia's fossil fuel industry can easily slip into the largely-unquestioned mythology of economic prowess (Joshi 2020).

And so it is that oil-and-gas-man Nev Power is handpicked by the Prime Minister to lead the National COVID-19 Coordination Commission (NCCC), an appointment that threatens to cruel prospects of a new clean energy beginning (Morgan and Long 2020). In the Senate Committee on COVID-19, Power says he can't guarantee that none of the commissioners will benefit financially from the Commission's gas-fired recovery planning (COVID-19). The same people. The same power structures.

A leaked NCCC Commission report revealed that they recommend Australian taxpayers underwrite a massive expansion of the domestic gas industry – including helping open new fields and build hundreds of kilometres of pipelines (Morton 2020). The report did not consider alternatives to gas, or mention the existence of the climate emergency, and the financial risk of investing in fossil fuel as emissions are cut in our desperate race against time. Instead, the report called for government agencies to partner with companies to accelerate development of new fields such as the Northern Territory's vast Beetaloo Basin and pushed for states to introduce subsidy schemes for gas-fired power stations. It is a strategy of acceleration towards the chasm.

Australia is already the world's largest liquefied gas exporter (Toscano 2020). Australian gas projects and facilities using gas in industrial processes emitted approximately 81 million tonnes of climate pollution in 2018-19 (ACF 2020). Gas production creates greenhouse gas emissions at every stage of the production supply chain, even before being burned. There is no rational case for gas, unless the object is to enrich vested interests on the fast road to wholesale planetary disaster.

There is an unruly momentum that is building because of what we have collectively lived through. This is our opportunity to come together and recreate the foundations of a just society that holds resilience, prosperity and care at its core. Out of the rolling crises we have a unique opportunity to shape our economic, cultural, and political recovery in a way that both safeguards our future and improves our daily lives. For Australia, 2020 must be about looking after each other and the planet we depend on, and prioritising the flourishing of people and planet over multinational corporations and vested interests. This is a historic opportunity to build back better. Renewables already service 26% of the mix in the National Electricity Market and are set to take over black coal as our biggest energy source in 2023 (Blakers 2020). Solar and wind electricity already cost much less than energy from a new coal or gas station (Blackers 2020). The technology and the policy solutions are there; all that stands in the way is the institutional corruption wrought by the fossil fuel order.

COVID-19 has vividly shown that extraordinary things are possible with bipartisan cooperation acting on the basis of expert advice, with the imperative of putting people first. In the midst of the climate emergency, all our state and federal politicians should apply this urgent same rationale to carbon pollution. So, the contest is on. There is the abiding metastasis of lies and vested interests that hold the nation to tortured ransom, versus the democratic spirit and the twinned beauty of sober truth and abiding hope; the latter charged with the renewed energy of our shared recent history, and driven always by the open possibilities of the deep future.

The currawong watches, waiting to see what will happen next.

## References

- ACF 2020 The Australian Conservation Foundation Report, 'Gaslighting Australia: why the gas industry is an emerging climate and environmental disaster' [https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/auscon/pages/17466/attachments/original/1591146417/2005\\_GaslightingAustraliaReport\\_v3sml.pdf?1591146417](https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/auscon/pages/17466/attachments/original/1591146417/2005_GaslightingAustraliaReport_v3sml.pdf?1591146417) (accessed 9/06/2020).
- Australian Government 2020 'Coronavirus Covid-19 Resource Page' <https://www.australia.gov.au/> (accessed 9/06/2020).
- Biddle N. 2020 'Nearly 80% of Australians affected in some way by the bushfires, new survey shows', *The Conversation*, 18 February <https://theconversation.com/nearly-80-of-australians-affected-in-some-way-by-the-bushfires-new-survey-shows-131672> (accessed 4/06/2020).
- Blakers A. 2020 'Really Australia, it's not that hard: 10 reasons why renewable energy is the future', *The Conversation*, 29 May, <https://theconversation.com/really-australia-its-not-that-hard-10-reasons-why-renewable-energy-is-the-future-130459> (accessed 9/06/2020).
- Cockburn P. 2020 'Six RFS volunteers suffer injuries after water tanker rolls on NSW South Coast', ABC, 24 January <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-01-24/rfs-says-loss-of-c-130-will-be-felt-but-crews-will-adapt/11895212> (accessed 2/06/2020).
- COVID-19 – 04/06/2020 09:50:00 Official Recording of Senate Committee Proceedings from the Australian Parliament [http://parlview.aph.gov.au/mediaPlayer.php?videoID=503411&operation\\_mode=parlview](http://parlview.aph.gov.au/mediaPlayer.php?videoID=503411&operation_mode=parlview) (accessed 4/06/2020).
- Flanagan R. 2020 'Australia Is Committing Climate Suicide', *The New York Times*, 3 January <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/03/opinion/australia-fires-climate-change.html> (accessed 3/06/2020).
- Greenpeace Australia Pacific 2020a Dirty Power: Burnt Country <https://www.greenpeace.org.au/burntcountry> (accessed 09/06/2020).
- Greenpeace Australia Pacific 2020b 'New coal and News Corp: report and documentary reveals extent of disinformation and climate-destroying projects approved during Black Summer bushfires', 13 May <https://www.greenpeace.org.au/news/new-coal-and-news-corp-report-and-documentary-reveals-extent-of-disinformation-and-climate-destroying-projects-approved-during-black-summer-bushfires/> (accessed 9/06/2020).
- Homo economicus, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095943203> (accessed 9/6/2020).
- Joshi K. 'Fossil 2020 fuel web leading Australia to deadly recovery', *Renew Economy*, 25 April <https://reneweconomy.com.au/fossil-fuel-web-leading-australia-to-a-deadly-recovery-82812/> (accessed 9/6/2020).
- Lessig L. 2013 'Institutional Corruption Defined', *Journal of Law, Medicine and Ethics*, 41, 3 <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2295067> (accessed 9/6/2020).
- Morgan E. and Long, S. 2020 'Coronavirus economic recovery committee looks set to push Australia towards gas-fired future', ABC News, 13 May <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-13/coronavirus-recovery-to-push-australia-towards-gas-future/12239978> (accessed 9/6/2020).
- Morton A. 2020 'Leaked Covid-19 commission report calls for Australian taxpayers to underwrite gas industry expansion', *The Guardian*, 21 May <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/may/21/leaked-covid-19-commission-report-calls-for-australian-taxpayers-to-underwrite-gas-industry-expansion> (accessed 9/6/2020).
- Murray C. and Frijters P. 2017, *Game of Mates: How Favours Bleed the Nation*, e-book.
- Oldenborgh, G., Krikken, F., Lewis, S., Leach, N., Lehner, F. Saunders K. van Weele M. Haustein K. Li S. Wallom D. Sparrow S. Arrighi J. Singh R. van Aalst M. Philip S. Vautard R. and Otto F. 'Attribution of the Australian bushfire risk to anthropogenic climate change' *World Weather Attribution*, March 2020, [https://www.worldweatherattribution.org/wp-content/uploads/WWA-attribution\\_bushfires-March2020.pdf](https://www.worldweatherattribution.org/wp-content/uploads/WWA-attribution_bushfires-March2020.pdf) (accessed 4/06/2020).
- Peled D. 2020 'Australia listened to the science on coronavirus. Imagine if we did the same for coal mining', *The Conversation* <https://theconversation.com/australia-listened-to-the-science-on-coronavirus-imagine-if-we-did-the-same-for-coal-mining-138212> (accessed 9/6/2020).
- Ritter D. 2018 'Why Australia needs a Magnitsky Law', *Australian Quarterly Magazine*, 89, 4, October-December.
- Ritter D. 2019 'Australia's politicians face a crisis of legitimacy as fire and smoke chokes the country',

*The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/dec/13/australias-politicians-face-a-crisis-of-legitimacy-as-fire-and-smoke-chokes-the-country> (accessed 9/6/2020).

Ritter D. 2020 'Corona and Climate: The Pandemic Has Changed Everything and Nothing' Sydney Environment Institute, <http://sydney.edu.au/environment-institute/opinion/the-pandemic-has-changed/> (accessed 9/6/2020).

Skea E. Buendia C. et al. 2019 'Climate Change and Land: an IPCC special report on climate change, desertification, land degradation, sustainable land management, food security, and greenhouse gas fluxes in terrestrial ecosystems', IPCC <https://www.ipcc.ch/srccl/> (accessed 3/6/2020).

Slezak M. 2020 'Great Barrier Reef found to be coral bleached from north to south for first time', ABC News, 7 April <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-07/great-barrier-reef-most-widespread-coral-bleaching-on-record/12107054>, (accessed 3/6/2020).

Sydney Environment Institute, D., 'Corona and Climate: The Pandemic Has Changed Everything and Nothing', 15 May 2020,

Toscano N. 2020 'Australia tops Qatar as world's biggest LNG exporter', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 January <https://www.smh.com.au/business/the-economy/australia-tops-qatar-as-world-s-biggest-lng-exporter-20200106-p53p5h.html> (accessed 9/6/2020).

Vidal J. 2020 'Tip of the iceberg': is our destruction of nature responsible for Covid-19?', *The Guardian*, 18 March <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2020/mar/18/tip-of-the-iceberg-is-our-destruction-of-nature-responsible-for-covid-19-aoe> (accessed 9/06/2020).

Wu X. Nethery R. Sabath B. Braun D. and Dominici F. 2020 'COVID-19 PM2.5: a national study on long-term exposure to air pollution and COVID-19 mortality in the United States', 24 April <https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/covid-pm> (accessed 9/6/2020).

#### End Notes

1. This commentary is developed from a submission that appeared in part on the website of the Sydney Environment Institute as 'Corona and Climate: The Pandemic Has Changed Everything and Nothing'.

#### Author

David Ritter has been the Chief Executive Officer of Greenpeace Australia Pacific since 2012. He worked as an academic and lawyer before joining Greenpeace in London in a senior campaigns position. His most recent book is *The Coal Truth: The Fight to Stop Adani, Defeat the Big Polluters and Reclaim our Democracy* (2018).

#### *The electoral hour*

So long ago, one might remember  
with a dramatic sense of the act,  
the colonnade on the hill, a just cause

and citizens beaten back in the rain,  
but it was just a mild night with a heart of stone,  
and a young cop keeping steps to himself.

Then as now, you could argue the angles  
on Ryan's guilt. But the timed calculation  
was political to the hilt.

No commute, but no sky exclaiming fire.  
to make an example only required  
the hubris of platitude and power.

Are you safe in your own skin?  
Worthy of any tweet today –  
shave, shit 'n' shower.

As Victorian Premier, Henry Bolte led the executive decision not to commute Ronald Ryan's mandatory death sentence for murdering a Pentridge prison officer. Asked what he was doing at the moment of Ryan's execution in February 1967, he replied, 'One of the three Ss'.

DUGALD WILLIAMSON  
ARMIDALE, NSW