

‘The Trouble With Normal’

The Australian Canary in the World’s Climate Change Coalmine

The recent Australian bush fires were the worst on record, and widely attributed to climate change. Gordon Preece charts the weight of scientific evidence against the slowness of governments to take action, and then draws attention to the biblical messages of stewardship of the earth and the hope that by seeking the peace of the city these disasters give opportunity for us to do good. Finally, he looks at some signs of change, such as the Transition Movement, and the call by major institutions to invest in non-carbon entities.

I. Introduction: Does Climate Always Get Worse?

This summer, conversing with friends self-mockingly about Melbourne’s normal four seasons in one day, we

soon switched subject to the acrid smoke and poor air quality pervading our cities. I tried to motivate my mates towards climate action by saying ‘the trouble is, it’s the new normal’. But I’ve

been corrected by Canadian Christian Bruce Cockburn who sings ‘the Trouble with Normal is it Always Gets Worse’.¹ These 1983 lyrics ring true today. The Jeremiads who are the scientific prophets of doom have proved accurate.



House destroyed by the bush fires

Photo: Peter Parks

Australia's average temperature rise in 2019 - more than two degrees above the 1960-90 baseline - was 'extraordinary', according to Professor Mark Howden, Vice-Chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The effects are:

- * Half of the Great Barrier Reef's corals were killed by underwater heatwaves
- * Not only tropical Townsville, but many cities along the eastern seaboard were decimated by massive floods
- * The Southeast agriculture zone was crippled by intense drought
- * Western Sydney had record-breaking heat and Sydney itself is increasingly tropical, not temperate

* A South Australian town fell fractionally short of 50°C

The list goes on, continent-wide. But there is worse to come...

Firstly, these impacts occurred within a rise of 1°C in global average temperatures. Yet the world is heading to an unimaginable 3°C heating, according to Prof. Will Steffen of

Australian National University - a third degree disaster. 'For Australia, a 3°C world means much harsher fire weather than today, more severe droughts, more intense rainfall, more prolonged and intense heatwaves, accelerating sea-level rise and coastal flooding, complete destruction of the Great Barrier Reef, and a large increase in species extinctions (100 of which have become endangered due to the fires, and an estimated billion animals have died). All this adds up to the demise of an ecosystem in a tough continent that is difficult to survive in, let alone thrive...

Secondly, 'tipping points' are features of a climate system appearing stable but they could fundamentally change, perhaps irreversibly, with a bit more human pressure - as in a kayak. Likely tipping points include the Arctic and Antarctic sea ice (with 20°C record temperatures in February 2020), the Greenland ice sheet, coral reefs, Amazon rainforest, Siberian permafrost and Atlantic Ocean circulation.

Australia's capital Canberra, Prof. Steffen's home, averaged seven days p.a. over 35°C in 1981-2010. Climate models projected that this extreme heat would more than double to 15 days per year by 2030. Yet in 2019 Canberra experienced 33 days over 35, massive fires which threatened the suburbs, and

Professor Howden sees the above effects of climate change including 'extreme fires' accelerating 'under the current emission commitments and actions taken ... globally.... There will be little time to adapt to this hotter, drier environment.' 'In a constantly changing environment, there is no new normal. The new normal is continuous change'.² Scientists, futurist writers and song writers sing from the same song-sheet.

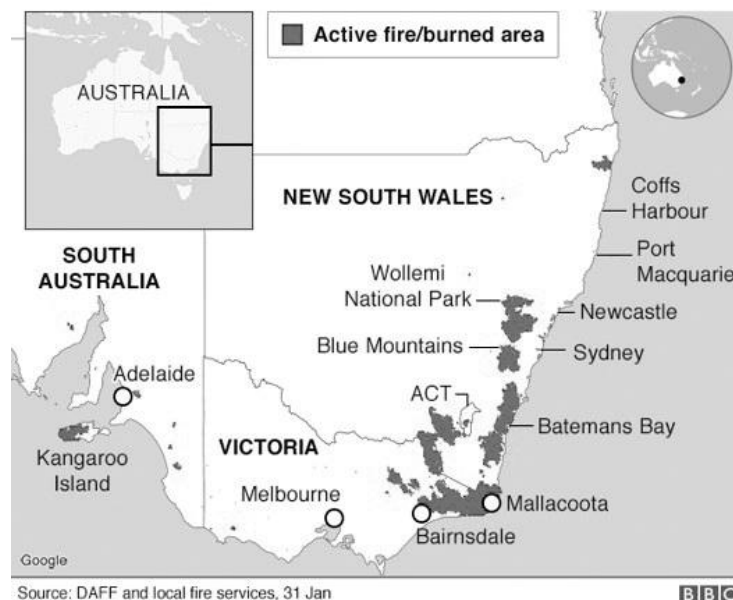
There is growing public awareness of Climate Change as 60% of Australians agree that 'global warming is a serious and pressing problem and [requires] taking steps now even if it involves significant costs' (Lowy Institute 2019).

That figure is likely to be considerably higher this year given 33 deaths nationally due to bushfires. These are estimated as having affected about 80% of Australians directly or indirectly.

But still a stubborn section of the public remains suspicious or in denial of climate science, including many Christians. Many (c. 55%), even of the above 60% of Australians taking climate change seriously, swallow partial or simplistic solutions such as more vegetation

management by burn-offs, despite fire experts recognising the limits of these in facing rising temperatures and an increased fire-season making burn-off timing difficult. Many coalition government ministers and parliamentarians, including Prime Minister and prominent Pentecostal Scott Morrison, still minimise the effects of human-caused climate change through carbon emissions. The scale of these fires is unprecedented in Australian history. Only a tiny percentage are caused by firebugs; most have been caused by dry-lightning due to climate change.

Major bushfires in Australia



some of the world's worst air quality for weeks.

In 2008 the prophetically accurate Garnaut Climate Change Review said projections of fire weather 'suggest that fire seasons will start earlier, end slightly later, and generally be more intense. This effect increases over time, but should be directly observable by 2020'. This was ignored by a Federal Liberal government whose Prime Minister Morrison was scandalously in Hawaii on holiday when the National Bushfire Emergency arrived, right on time.



Firefighters in New South Wales, 31st December 2019

Photo: Saeed Khan/AFP/Getty

II. Apocalyptic Images, Insecurity, Inequality and Illusion

Apocalyptic optics similar to 9/11 are forcing us to realise that the real terror does not come from the skies or terrorists, but is terrestrial and domestic. It has led to a new charred black humour: R. Flake's New Yorker cartoon (on Jan.13, 2020, p. 39) shows a young family with real estate agent outside a leafy house. The male says sagely: 'I know the schools are great, but is this really the house we want to ride out the apocalypse in?'

As the emotions of climate emergency dominated this bumper of a summer, Maslow's hierarchy of needs reminded us of the fundamental need for security. Our first emotional reactions, as Cockburn sings, are 'Security Comes First'. Not just personal or individual but group or tribal security as social psychologist Jonathan Haidt shows. We metaphorically gather around the campfire or at Carols by Candlelight and sing 'the hopes and fears of all the years' for our kids and grandkids,

mindful of lost summer holidays. As we try to make emotional and relational sense of lost security and innocence we need to know that these emotional extremes 'are met in Him tonight', even as daylight turned to night.

For if we only repeat our trauma stories without hope we simply re-traumatise ourselves and others. Biblical lament is needed but paired with 'a sure and certain hope'. Further, during crisis or emergency we externalise the fear as an enemy, looking for short-term scapegoats. And the Great Australian Dream of a home by bush or sea turns into nightmarish and idolatrous illusion in an increasingly unequal society where generational injustice consigns younger people to permanent, restless rental, or purchase in dangerous areas.

Consider further the scarred and scorched earth. More than 11 million hectares of bush, forest and parks across Australia have burned, many times catastrophic Californian fires of 2019 which burnt the inaptly named Paradise to the ground.

After all this we still face a stalemate. As Cockburn sings again: 'If a Tree Falls in the Forest, does anybody hear the forest fall?' Will we really hear? Our tribal and simplistic refusal to consider both prescribed burning and climate change prevention are typical reactions to loss of security but delay cooperative climate change action.

These tribal, visceral reactions prevent us seeing longer-term and beyond our back fence to recognise, (which even the Pentagon does³) that Climate Change threats are the greatest threats to national and world security today, not just tomorrow. Maslow's hierarchy of needs can help in re-framing Climate Change Transition from a perceived inner-city radical or green leisure/aesthetic issue to a conservative workers' economic, ecological and healthy form of necessity and security.

In such a State of Emergency, it can no longer be, as for our national government, largely business as usual, or carry-on up the coalmine. Australia has ridden its rich resources luck for

way too long. This is the curse of the resource rich. Like the exploitation of Africa in the past, now Australia's miners are plundering the earth. Some, like 1980s Labor PMs Hawke and Keating called for us to be The Clever Country, and accomplished transition into the global economy and an accord between business and labour. But they also thought they were the smartest guys in the room, when what we really needed was a transition to becoming a Humble and Wise Country.

III. Exilic Transitions

In our time of cascading economic and ecological crises we are reminded that we are not in the Promised Land but something more like exile. We need wise, biblical direction for our eco-transitions. For instance, Jeremiah 29 challenges Israel's elites in exile not to rush back to restore Jerusalem or 'Christendom' to its former glory. It also demythologises imperial illusions to Make America Great, Brexit's Britannia Rules the Waves, or the idea of Australia as the greatest country/economy on earth with 28 years of unbroken economic growth, when it refuses to share it with its own indigenous people or refugees.

So Jeremiah 29:7 tells God's people to fulfil the creation commission of Gen 1:26-28, to have kingly but servant-like dominion, like God and Jesus. Gen 2:15 commands men and women to cultivate and keep the garden and guard paradise, through working or serving ('abodah') its flourishing as the cosmic temple of creation.

Jeremiah 29 renews the Abrahamic call and covenant (Gen 12:1-3; 15; 17:3-8). This is itself the renewal of the creation mandate expressing shalom or harmonious, flourishing relationships between God, humanity and earth. The Jewish exiles are to multiply, plant vineyards, and pray for and seek the shalom of Babylon city by affirming God's common grace and opportunities for cooperation and co-belligerence there.

Daniel and his friends later wisely and patiently enact Jeremiah's exilic vision of 70 years. They seek and pray for Babylon's shalom, witnessing to and enacting the Son of Man's (Dan 7) true, transcendent and humanising dominion over all de-humanising animalistic and imperial rule.

IV. New Testament Now-Not-Yet Transition: Time for Blessing & Giving

In displaying the dawning character of God's Kingdom and the blessed flourishing of creation, disciples are to be salt of the earth/land (not meat!) (Mt 5:13), sealing the covenant with creation or earth (Lev 2:13; 2 Chron 13:5). We are not primarily to be about purifying or stopping the world's rottenness, defensively picking up the pieces of a collapsing Christendom. Instead, like salt in the ancient world, we are to fertilise the soil of a future King/kin-dom or new creation now breaking in through preaching good news and practising healing (Mt 4:23).

Further, in Paul's apocalyptic terms we are in a solidarity of suffering, with the Holy Spirit, in the labour or birth-pains of creation's transition towards the new creation (Rom 8:18-21). Creation is 'subjected to vanity ... in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God' – people who are God's images, co-heirs and heads with Christ, of creation.



Seek the peace of the city

Photo: Rex Features

Australian scholar Bruce Winter's book *Seek the Welfare of the City* links the encouragements of Paul and Peter to be peaceful workers and generous givers (Rom 13:3-4; 1 Cor 7:17-24, 29-31; 1 Thess 4:11-12, 2 Thess 3:6-13; 1 Pet 1-2:13-14) to Jeremiah 29:7. Further, it is for all, not just the elite, to act like Graeco-Roman benefactors, blessing and giving generously to their cities, especially in time of need, famine or indeed fire (in Nero's Rome), and later plague, without expecting repayment or patronage privileges.

In these ways, and in situations of some discrimination, Christians are to lead 'godly and just lives...waiting for and hastening...the new creation in which justice dwells' (2 Pet 3:11,12,13). Creation is not subject to destructive, judging fire, but refining fire. Such refined good work(s) in some sense follows us into the new creation (Rev 14:13). Thanks to Jesus' resurrection, our work is not vain or futile (1 Cor 15:58). New Testament eschatology with its balance of now and not yet is not escapology, but reflects the continuity of this creation and the next.

In the current Australian (and UK) situation where there is occasional discrimination, though not regular and permanent persecution, against conservative Christians, we need even more to heed the challenge to seek the shalom of the city through good work(s), in line with Jesus' beatitude that those who see our work(s) will glorify God (Mt 5:14-16). (The brackets show that it is not mere charity, on the margins of life, but everyday working activity).

The aftermath of bushfire and flood (with Storm Dennis) in what Scandinavians call 'Global Weirding', or climate extremes at either end, provides an opportunity for bearing 'public risk', as opposed to a user pays, localised form of bad luck. Governments of all levels need to bear their fair share of the load, along with insurers, but it is also a great opportunity for Christians in

partnership with civil society, to do good. This should not primarily or directly be seen as an evangelistic opportunity (taking advantage of people while they are low), but as a way to reflect and witness to God's benevolent, merciful goodness to people made in God's image who may increasingly reflect it back to God.

It is also to affirm God's beautiful and bountiful creation where the sun shines and rain falls, sometimes too much, sometimes too little, sometimes just right, but shining or falling on just and unjust alike (Mt 5:35-41). The opportunities for Christian-run businesses to support local communities, and for Christians to visit devastated tourist and rural areas, are a chance to bring blessing and indirectly point to God's goodness and gift of life - despite disaster and appalling loss of life.

V. Eco-Transitions and the Transition Movement

One key movement for Climate Change prevention and adaptation is the Transition Towns movement. It was co-founded in 2005 in Totnes UK, by permaculturalist Rob Hopkins. It is a non-partisan, secular group but has 'Heart and Soul' groups which often have spiritual and ritual practices at the core of their local community preparations for a post-carbon economy. Many Christians and other religionists and 'spiritual' people are involved. It is a great context for the kind of co-belligerence that Francis Schaeffer was advocating way back in 1970.⁴

When the Transition movement started, it was largely driven by green activists, but its biggest critics tend to be deep greens or red greens, who for different reasons accuse Transition of being mere reformists, and too 'easily

accommodated within consumer-capitalist society without threatening it'.

Hopkins' refreshing and co-belligerent response is to admit as much. 'For years, in the green movement, we have held that we are right, that we have the answers ... [But] many of the answers we need are to be found in people who we might, in a more judgmental moment, see as being part of the "system", including business people, lawyers, church groups, local history groups, and thousands of ordinary people with busy lives, bills to pay and children to raise'.⁵

You couldn't ask for a more hospitable invitation. I have Christian friends in Melbourne who are part of Transition groups and find it an amenable group for thinking globally and acting locally and vice-versa, around the cosmic challenge of climate change, and after

the bushfires. But scaling up these local responses will be a challenge.

With Rosie Beckham, UK theologian Tim Gorringe co-wrote a small-group study book on Transition Towns⁶ which sees the movement as an expression of common grace and co-belligerence. He has also led a two-year research study at the University of Exeter on the Transition Movement.

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VI. Just Financial Transitions

As well as bottom-up, ongoing local Just Transition movements like UK Transition Towns, the US New Parish Movement, and Australian WorkVentures,⁷ there are rolling occasional protest movements such as Greta Thunberg's School Climate Strike Movement and Extinction Rebellion. There is also a need for top-down movements, to help bypass slothful governments, in order to finance new energy and transport quickly up-to-scale.



Mark Carney:
Non-carbon entities

Photo: Channel 4

A shift is afoot in the West's financial markets that represents potentially the most important financial system change since the 1990s' new financial instruments that led to the global financial crisis. The recent acceptance of the scientific evidence of human-caused climate change by many of the world's biggest financial players may result in a new way of seeing money, which could change the substructure of developed economies.

Bank of England Governor Mark Carney recently called on an international network of investors with US\$80 trillion + in assets under management to invest in non-carbon entities. Likewise, the UN Principles for Responsible Investment organization has 'committed to considering Environmental, Social and Corporate Governance factors' in its investments.

Further, on the financial fiduciary regulation side, Australia's Prudential Regulation Authority (APRA) joined its UK, Netherlands and Singapore counterparts in boosting surveillance of finance institutions' exposure to carbon bubbles. Banks must take stress tests to measure resilience to 'climate change financial risks'. Sadly, the Federal Government announced recently that it is looking into another

new Queensland coal-fired plant (besides the gargantuan ADANI plant), despite a rising backlash.⁸

While the Federal Government still drags its feet, the Labor Opposition has committed to the zero emissions target by 2050 that has been agreed by 70 nations but without specifics, for fear of attack again by the government. Australia's very short three-year federal election cycle cannot cope with 30-year time-frames. The question is whether governments and businesses commit themselves to 7% carbon cuts per annum from now, locked in as a minimum until 2050. The real test is who will people trust to provide their jobs in the new economy. No-one wants to go first into transition but nobody wants to be last either. We laud first responders in fire and rescue emergencies but not first financial and business responders to the broader Climate Change Emergency.

Yet many in business are now seeing the writing on the coal-seam wall. Despite sticking with the government's poor Climate Change policy in the recent elections, after the bushfires the Business Council of Australia has committed its membership to 2050 zero-carbon emissions.

Further, the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) secretary-general, Australian John Denton, affirmed ICC's 'absolute commitment' to global temperature rise goals of a maximum 1.5 degrees C. He argued that at a time of declining public confidence in media, government and business, there is an opportunity for business to answer the call of workers 'crying out' for the public leadership gap to be filled. But to do that boards and businesses 'must earn that right to participate with civil society. That's why it's so important to have a bigger purpose than just profit'.⁹

This increasing demand for carbon transparency includes the Bank of England asking companies how increasing sea levels (and underwater views!) would affect their mortgage holdings. Similarly, Australia's largest bank, the Commonwealth Bank, is checking scenarios on mortgages and agricultural exposure to drought.

Insurance alliances too will shape the monetary system through a change in how risk is assessed in terms of relative investment in fossil fuels versus new carbon-cutting technologies. A massive carbon bubble is very risky and scary for pension and insurance companies.

In following the path towards climate transition it is helpful to follow the money trail to trace changes of momentum. Resource companies still have significant political clout in Australia through donations, dominating the National Party and the PM's office. And coal-mining, forestry and manufacturing unions influence Labor's still fatally compromised position on coal. But in the long run, the momentum is moving against fossil fuels.

In fiscal terms, resource and energy companies are outgunned. The biggest are only worth around US\$100 billion; the new investment amounts are in trillions or tens of trillions.

Australia's best eco-economist, Professor Ross Garnaut,¹⁰ is a helpful co-belligerent for Christians. Like other climate activists such as Naomi Klein,¹¹ he responds very positively to Pope Francis' climate change encyclical *Laudato Si'*. But both he and Klein see the increased urgency and institutional inertia.

Garnaut notes that on 5th Dec. 2015, the United Nations agreed in Paris to hold global temperature increases to 2°C, and as close as possible to 1.5. Four years on, the best possible case is c. 1.75°C if we move decisively now towards 2050 zero emissions. Short of that and my three grandsons will live, or die, with increases of c. 4°C by 2100, and more thereafter.

But positively Garnaut notes that there's been an extraordinary fall in the equipment cost to store renewable energy in order to even out irregular supply. Per person, Australia has natural resources for renewable energy superior to other developed countries, especially our northeast Asia customers. Only transition to that can reduce our world-leading *per capita* CO₂ emissions together with Canada and the US.

Unless a bipartisan approach can be restored, the canary calling in the world's greatest coal-mining country will be ignored, and the normal will only get worse, not only for Australia, but for our global coal customers.

'Resource companies still have significant political clout in Australia through donations'

VI. Conclusion

Like Australian Christian ecologist Byron Smith, I believe that it's not a radical but conservative thing to want your children to live in a world that looks something like this one; where you can still take an Australian tree or sea change summer holiday, or welcome badly sunburnt Barmy Army England cricket supporters! Please pray for our nation and its strategically placed Christian politicians (and their co-belligerents), to seek and pray for the restoration of creation, and shalom both for this nation and the world. **REC**

1 © Carlin America Inc.

2 Jack Board, 'Forget a "new normal": Experts say Australia's worst bushfires still lie ahead,' <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/world/australia-bushfires-climate-change-weather-new-normal-12270996>

3 A 2011 National Strategic Narrative report argued, that 'security means more than defence', pressing past 'a strategy of containment to a strategy of sustainment (sustainability)'. Climate change is 'already shaping a "new normal" in our strategic environment'. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2011/may/20/climate-change-climate-change-scepticism>

4 In his *Pollution and the Death of Man*, Appendix. IVP, 1970.

5 <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2013/jun/15/transition-towns-way-forward>

6 Timothy Gorringer, Rosie Beckham, *The Transition Movement for Churches: A prophetic imperative for today*, Canterbury, 2013.

7 See Paul Sparks et al, *The New Parish*, IVP, 2014 and Gordon Preece, *Changing Work Values*, Acorn, 1995. Ch. 3 based on my first parish in charge in an area near Sydney Airport transitioning from old industrial to new digital technologies using principles of Christian community and ecology.

8 'Banks must face climate stress tests: regulator', *The Saturday Age*, 'Business', February 22, 2020, 7.

9 Bevan Shields, 'Companies "will fill role of leadership on climate"', *Saturday Age*, February 22, 2020, 17.

10 Author of *Super-Power: Australia's low-carbon opportunity*, Latrobe Uni. Press, 2019. Garnaut was keynote speaker for the Eco-Transitions Conference run by my Centre for Religion and Social Policy (RASP) at the University of Divinity. Proceedings are in *Zadok Perspectives 'Eco-Transitions'* edition, no. 141, Summer, 2018 including Ross Garnaut, 'Civilization on Trial', 5-10.

11 *On Fire: The Burning Case for a Green New Deal*, Allan Lane, 2019, 147-57. Garnaut, *Super-Power*, 23, 49, 166, 173. Production, use, and fate of all plastics ever made', Roland Geyer, Jenna R. Jambeck & Kara Lavender Law, in *Science Advances*, 3.7 (2017). This article analyses the results of the first global study of all mass-produced plastics.



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