It's only natural

Assessing the framing of the 2019/20 Australian bushfires

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Abstract

Bushfires in Australia have long been rhetorically painted in dark overtones, representing nature's onslaught on the human realm. Yet they are a phenomenon juxtaposing both darkness and light – chiaroscuro; using the unprecedented 2019/20 bushfire season as a case study, this thesis demonstrates how exploring the political ecology of disaster can open windows into the nature of our world extending beyond the burnt bush alone. Framing as an analytical tool is used to ascertain how the fires were conceptualised by the Australian government and a variety of alternative actor groups. This process not only serves to highlight the contrasts and conflicts present in these varied framings, but the power that frames themselves hold in influencing problem-solution pathways. This thesis posits that longstanding and embedded institutional and cultural ties to extractive industries manifested themselves in the way the bushfires were rhetorically discussed and materially addressed. Fire has come to coexist in the Australian psyche both as a malevolent destructive force and a beast to be tamed; this dualism is premised on an inherent divide between the human and natural worlds that allows for the illusion of control. In a contemporary context already marred by the influence of climate change and the looming threat of its continued presence, seeing bushfires as 'natural' belies an understanding of disaster that is profoundly socio-cultural and human-influenced. Framing the most recent bushfire season so – as something we have dealt with before and can continue to 'manage' – fails to account for the complexity inherent in the natural world and our connections to it. Instead, it predisposes the solutions to seek what is known and comfortable, encouraging us towards a renewed embrace of the status quo. The challenge moving forward lies in shifting our perspective inwards, towards the possibility of alternate socio-ecological relationships that can accommodate fire, instead of outwards towards management and control strategies designed to fight it. How this shift can be reconciled with a political climate forgiving of resource extraction and dismissive of climate change speaks to the intricacies that accompany wicked problems in sustainability.

Keywords: bushfire, Australia, frames, governance, sustainability, political ecology, human/nature relationships

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1 Introduction

Australia's most devastating bushfires are often labelled with adjectives synonymous with darkness: Black Saturday in 2009, Black Christmas in 2001, Ash Wednesday in 1983. The fear and chaos they shepherd in, the lives lost and properties destroyed, justifies this sombre linguistic tone. Yet fires are also revelatory phenomena; they shed light both literally and metaphorically. While historically long deemed 'acts of God' or the malevolent workings of an 'evil star' (Debrix, 2018), natural disasters like bushfire have come in contemporary terms to be understood as inherently socio-cultural and political (Hewitt, 1983b; Klein, 2007; O'Keefe, Westgate, & Wisner, 1976; Sökefeld, 2012). Grasped in this way, the very naturalness of natural disaster is brought to question. Instead, disasters come to be "theorized as opportunities for the legitimation of political authority and economic power as well as occasions of critical reflexivity in which political projects, contending discourses and the voices of dissent seek to mobilize" (Cottle, 2014, 17).

Fire as an intrinsic feature of the Australian landscape is a phrase sodden with use. While it is true that fire has a historic legacy, both managed and unmanaged (Anderson, Chubb, & Djerf-Pierre, 2018), and that native biota have evolved to tolerate fire (Morgan et al., 2020), the 'fire as natural' pretext has become a persistent element of Australia's bushfire management over the last century (Neale, 2018). With bushfire events presented as unprecedented yet disconnected, singular disruptions to our daily lives, we are nonetheless assured by government that better land management and technological advancement will defend our future selves (Neale, 2018). A dichotomy exists whereby "humans are either powerful agents of environmental processes able to reflexively control and understand the effects of their actions on the world which exists 'out there'…[or], humans are powerless victims to the 'natural laws' of that world in which they are physically subsumed" (Hill, 2017, 157). This contradiction in the way that we as humankind relate to nature plays out in a contemporary context of increased bushfire risk due to climate change (Cai, Cowan, & Raupach, 2009; CSIRO & Bureau of Meterology, 2018; Dowdy, 2018; Hennessy et al., 2005; Mariani et al., 2018). As this risk increases, so too does our entanglement with fuel – forest and grasslands – as our urban footprint extends further and further into the bush in search of homes 'among the gumtrees' (Neale, 2018).

Against this backdrop of increasing fire risk and human - nature disconnect, this thesis uses the most recent Australian bushfires over the 2019/20 New Year period as a case study to explore how disaster framings are power laden in their own right and via the solutions they predetermine. By evaluating both dominant and alternative framings, the thesis aims to open a window into how people make

sense of bushfire discursively and materially and how these understandings of disaster mediate political life. Utilising political ecology theory and it's penchant for disentangling complex webs of governance, knowledge, power and discourse (Bryant, 2015), along with an analytical tool of frames, this thesis seeks to answer four primary research questions:

1. *How were the 2019/20 bushfires framed by the Australian Federal Government[1]?*

2. *How does this framing contrast with alternative understandings and framings of other actor groups?*

3. *What driving forces underpin these misaligned frames?*

4. *What are the impacts on proposed solutions and implications for future pathways?*

Cronon notes that by describing "environmental change, we divide the causal relationships of an ecosystem with a theoretical razor that defines included and excluded, relevant and irrelevant, empowered and disempowered" (Cronon, 1992, 1349). As such, frames are valuable as much for what they don't say as what they do (Atkinson, Held, & Jeffares, 2011; Entman, 1993; Proctor, 2001). With this in mind, the research's initial focus to determine the dominant government framing of the bushfires (RQ1) is supplemented by an analysis of what is left unproblematic in this problem formation, silences that are made vocal by other actor groups via alternative framings (RQ2). This exploration of competing frames benefits from a backwards step in RQ3 to more closely examine the powerful underlying interests behind such framings. This attempt at contextualisation embeds this study in the realm of critical research (Boda, 2017; Wynn & Williams, 2012) and helps to explain the relative influence of some frames over others (Beland Lindahl, Baker, Rist, & Zachrisson, 2016).

These research questions draw strongly on the work of Carol Bacchi and her 'What is the problem represented to be?' approach (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). This approach provides a clearly structured analytical framework to explore the politics behind problem representations and to make the practices behind these representations visible (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). Bacchi's underlying premise is that "policy is not the government's best effort to solve 'problems'; rather, policies produce

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[1] The Federal Government here refers specifically to the Liberal-National party Coalition, who have been in power since the 2013 Federal election; they are typified as centre-right on the political spectrum. The Coalition forms one force of Australia's two-party system, the other being the Labor party.

'problems' with particular meanings that affect what gets done or not done, and how people live their lives" (Bacchi, 2012). This aligns well with broader frame theory, which posits that realties are selectively defined to promote a particular problem-solution pathway (Dewulf, Mancero, Cárdenas, & Sucozhañay, 2011; Entman, 1993), often creating policy controversies (Schön & Rein, 1994). RQ4 speaks to this problem-solution intimacy, whereby the eco-modern struggle against fire is both as something to fear and as something to control. The final part of this thesis attempts to comment on this dualism, situating Australia's most recent bushfires within broader discussions of depoliticization, power and human-nature relations.

1.1 Positioning the Research in Sustainability Science

Invoking Hagerstrand's definition of sustainability as "the art of keeping the future navigable", Boda (2017) notes that it's the artist's penstrokes that matter, not the finished sketch. Sustainability here is understood not as a destination, but a process. One of the key tenets of research engaging with this process is not just to be problem-grounded, but to be mindful of alternatives (Jerneck et al., 2011). "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'" (Flyvbjerg, 2004, 240). In this sense, sustainability science is sympathetic to a critical realist research epistemology as outlined later in this thesis, in that it sees social critique as a conduit for normative recommendations about the future. Using Bacchi's 'What is the problem represented to be?' approach connects my thesis to sustainability science as it encourages more than just a critical examination of prevailing practices, but further, an exploration of how these practices could be "questioned, disrupted and replaced" (Bacchi, 2012, 21). Jerneck & Olsson (2011) note that frames and reframing are particularly useful tools in this endeavour. By incorporating a wide variety of stakeholder dialogues into my framing research – both academic and non – I aim to add an element of transdisciplinarity that can help bridge the gap between "theory and practice, knowledge and action" (Boda, 2017, 532).

A second key aspect of sustainability science research is its thematic grounding, with a focus on human - nature relations (Kates et al., 2001; Miller, 2013). Miller et al. (2014) stress the importance of including spatial and temporal factors when exploring this relationship; Avelino & Rotmans (2011, 800) continue in this vein to suggest that temporality is what "distinguishes 'sustainability' from other essentially contested notions such as 'equity', 'democracy' or 'justice'". The 2019/20 bushfires form part of a long story of fire within Australia leading back to pre-colonial Indigenous management of the land, a story now unfolding within a larger context of climate change. This study therefore presents an opportunity to "connect the spaces of climate politics to more fundamental (and one could argue

mainstream) concerns with the workings of the contemporary state and political order" (Stripple & Bulkeley, 2011, 8-9).

Just as sustainability science questions 'what should be sustained?' (Faran, 2010) a relevant question now in the bushfire context is 'what should be recovered?' In the wake of the fires, what is done and what is not has implications that reach beyond the burnt bush into the structuring of knowledge and action on climate change. It is these frequently refuted ties between humankind and nature, between fire and the climate crisis, and between us and the future 'them' that animate this thesis.

2 Background

2.1 The 2019/2020 Australian Bushfires

Late October of 2019 was unseasonably warm in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales. With the landscape primed for fire, a thunderstorm set alight an area of dense bushland, culminating in the largest bushfire from a single ignition point in Australia's recorded fire history (Alexander & Moir, 2019). Fire in Australia is ubiquitous (Anderson et al., 2018); to borrow from Dorothea Mackellar, we're a land "of droughts and flooding rains" (Mackellar, 1911, 9). Yet the 2019/20 fires set a new precedent. Australians weren't prepared for what ensued; bushfire season had not yet officially begun.

The following months saw hundreds of fires ignite and unite to burn huge swathes across approximately 18 million hectares of Australia's eastern and southern coasts (Phillips, 2020). A recent study determined that up to 21% of the continent's forest biome was lost – a globally unprecedented percentage (Jager & Coutant, 2020). In a national context, this figure is equally substantial, with the median average percentage of forest loss sitting at just 1% for the previous 20 years (Jager & Coutant, 2020). 33 people lost their lives in the fires, including 9 firefighters on active duty (Parliament of Australia, 2020), but estimates suggest that the secondary impact of smoke inhalation contributed to an additional 445 deaths (Hitch, 2020). Throughout November 2019, Sydney and Canberra played house to the worst air quality of any major cities worldwide, and in December, Australia logged it's warmest day on record (a national average of 40.9 degrees) (Bungard, 2020). As urban areas began to fall within the line of fire, Prime Minister Scott Morrison mobilised the defence force to facilitate an emergency disaster response; over 1000 residents from the coastal holiday town of Mallacoota were rescued after being forced to batten down on the beach for several days (Henriques-Gomes, 2020). Equally unyielding was the fire's impact to wildlife, with an early season estimate forecasting the death

of up to a billion animals (Cox, 2020), including up to a third of New South Wales' koala population (Zhou, 2019). Extinction thresholds have potentially been crossed for many plant and animal species (Head, 2020). Overall, the 2019/20 bushfire season constituted a surprise to researches themselves; models had not predicted catastrophic fires of this nature for the next 80 years (Simon, 2020).
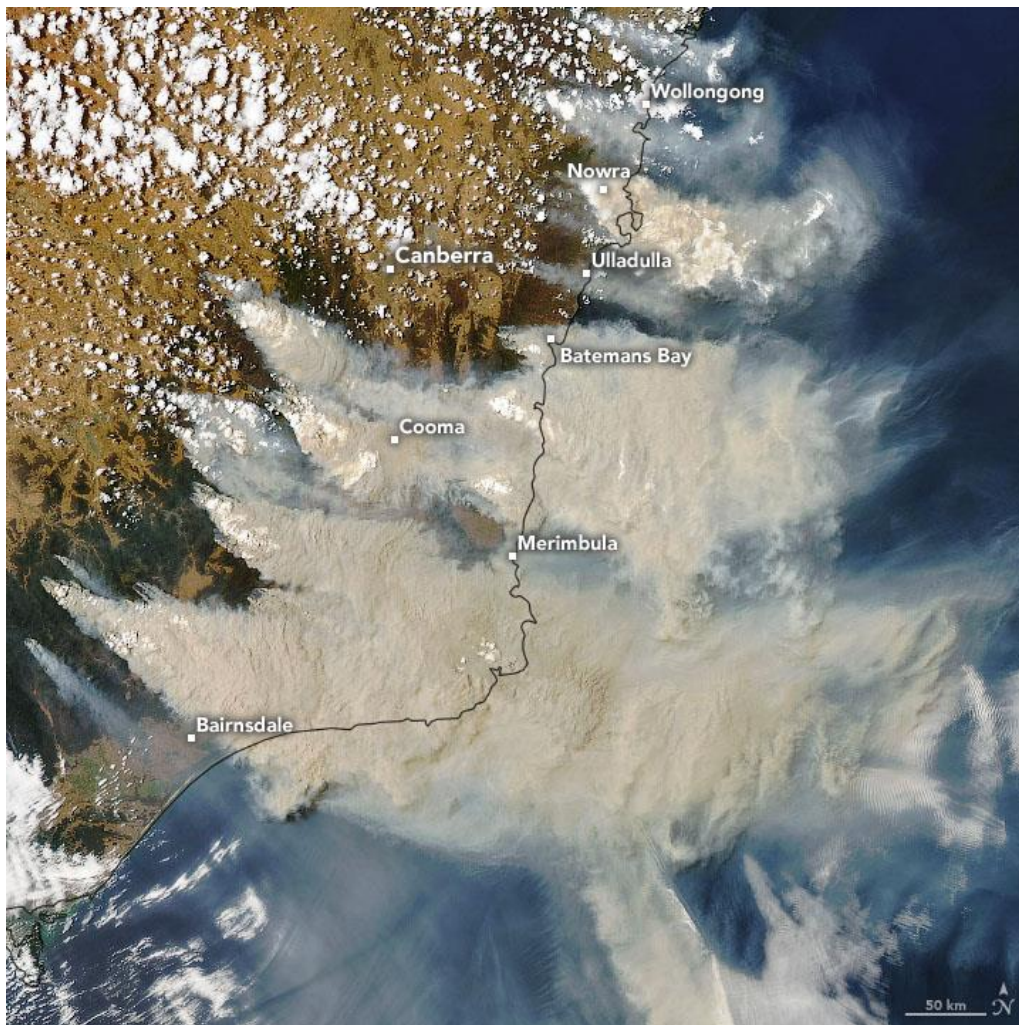
Figure 1. NASA Satellite images show the extent of smoke plumes drifting off the south-eastern coast of Australia, January 4, 2020 (NASA, 2020).

Hewitt (1983a, v) notes that "every event requires an explanation, and often the search for explanation is linked to a search for the locus of responsibility – someone to blame". What ensued for many Australians in the early months of 2020, in what has become indicative of post-fire periods historically (Whittaker & Mercer, 2004), was this apportioning of blame. As the New Year was welcomed in, various scapegoats took centre stage, ranging from arsonists to the Greens party and their policies. Bot and troll social media accounts were found to have actively assisted in the widespread diffusion of this fake news, a sign of the new dangers facing modern storytelling (Graham & Keller, 2020). Yet in the midst of the disaster discourse, climate change came to represent the battle

ground. As the fires burnt, the Federal government stance established the bushfires as an 'unpredictable natural disaster' (Smith, 2020), with climate change remaining ominously absent from politicians' lips. Given Australia's climate change track record and longstanding embedded ties to the coal industry (Brevini & Woronov, 2017; Curran, 2009; Greenpeace, 2019; Mcknight & Hobbs, 2017), this nonchalance met the expectations of many political commentators.

Materialising at the end of a year marked by heightened public engagement with climate change science and policy ("In the line of fire," 2020), the 2019/20 fire season encouraged strong pushback from both the scientific community and the public against the government's position on climate change/bushfire linkages. That the government had been dismissive of increased fire risk forewarnings from Australian fire chiefs in 2018 led to intense criticism. In addition, a 2009 *government-commissioned* report suggesting that bushfire seasons would "start earlier, end slightly later, and generally be more intense" by 2020 (Smith, 2020) was widely brandished in the arguments of government critics. Now in the wake of the fires, climate scientists working in the field of attribution science have released results suggesting that "human-induced climate change increased the risk of the weather conditions that drove the fires by at least 30%" (Phillips, 2020). For some, Australia's most recent bushfire season makes the continent deserving of infamy as "ground zero for climate change" ("In the line of fire," 2020).

2.2 The Call for a Royal Commission

In a speech titled 'An even stronger, more resilient Australia' given in early February 2020, Prime Minister Scott Morrison called for a Royal Commission into the 2019/20 fires. Royal Commissions represent the highest level of political enquiry in Australia and are instigated to explore issues of public concern via an open process of community input and participation. They hold "wide-ranging coercive powers of investigation" and are designed to be impartial, with investigators selected from outside of government (Prasser, 2020). Ultimately, they conclude with a series of recommendations that perform an advisory function to policymakers. A reporting deadline of the 31st of August 2020 was originally set for this Royal Commission, but implications as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic have seen the deadline delayed until the end of October.

The Commonwealth Letters Patent (included as an appendix in section 9.2) establishes the terms of reference for the Commission, i.e. the key investigative aims. These are shown in full in *Figure 2* below, but can loosely be described as (1) coordination between State and Federal governments in managing natural disasters; (2) natural disaster preparedness, risk management and resilience, including

enhanced accountability, and adaptation strategies for a changing climate; (3) frameworks enabling the Federal government to declare a national emergency, including deployment of the defence force; (4) other. Although investigations into these areas are not explicitly conducted by government, the Prime Minister is responsible for determining the terms of reference themselves, thereby restricting the avenues that the Royal Commission can explore. As such, the terms of reference can be said to represent the government's priorities in respect to future fire governance.

enabling power, appoint you to be a Commission of inquiry, and require and authorise you to inquire into the following matters:

(a) the responsibilities of, and coordination between, the Commonwealth and State, Territory and local Governments relating to preparedness for, response to, resilience to, and recovery from, natural disasters, and what should be done to improve these arrangements, including with respect to resource sharing;

(b) Australia's arrangements for improving resilience and adapting to changing climatic conditions, what actions should be taken to mitigate the impacts of natural disasters, and whether accountability for natural disaster risk management, preparedness, resilience and recovery should be enhanced, including through a nationally consistent accountability and reporting framework and national standards;

(c) whether changes are needed to Australia's legal framework for the involvement of the Commonwealth in responding to national emergencies, including in relation to the following:

    (i) thresholds for, and any obstacles to, State or Territory requests for Commonwealth assistance;

    (ii) whether the Commonwealth Government should have the power to declare a state of national emergency;

    (iii) how any such national declaration would interact with State and Territory emergency management frameworks;

    (iv) whether, in the circumstances of such a national declaration, the Commonwealth Government should have clearer authority to take action (including, but without limitation, through the deployment of the Australian Defence Force) in the national interest;

(d) any relevant matter reasonably incidental to a matter referred to in paragraphs (a) to (c).

Figure 2. Terms of Reference for the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements (Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, 2020)

Debate following the call for a Royal Commission has been polarized, with some commentators – including some State governments and the United Firefighters Union – deeming it unnecessary (Kehoe, 2020; Lowrey, 2020; Truu, 2020). Their stance is premised on the wealth of pre-existing Australian bushfire inquiries, of which there have been 57 since 1939 and from which many recommendations remain un-implemented (Tolhurst, 2020). Both supportive and critical perspectives of the Royal Commission were present in my stakeholder interviews for this thesis.

3 Theoretical Entry Points

3.1 Ontological and Epistemological Stance

This research belongs to a critical realist philosophy of science (Bhaskar, 2008). This statement situates my thesis within a particular epistemology – a system of belief about how we generate knowledge (Robbins, 2012). While asserting the existence of an independent reality, the criticism within critical realism is directed at our ability to know that reality with any certainty (Bryman, 2012). In this way critical realism is distinct from positivism, which posits scientific knowledge as a true reflection of reality (Bryman, 2012), and constructivism, which rejects the existence of an essential reality beyond our subjective interpretations of it (Robbins, 2012).

Critical realism is particularly sensitive to 'generative mechanisms' that underpin our reality. It sees the role of science to "identify the structures at work that generate…events and discourses", suggesting that with greater understanding comes greater potential to effect change (Bhaskar, 2010, 2). Bryman (2012) notes that case study research designs are particularly well suited to critical realist research, as they tend to be guided by a strong contextual focus. In conceding that "the social world is always mediated and thus subjective" (Bryman, 2012, 616), frames as analytical tools are employed in this research to identify how such mediation occurs, and how subjectivities within history, governance structures and political relations ultimately come to affect our understandings of a sustainability challenge. Disasters such as bushfires entail elements that extend beyond what is immediately observable and measurable, yet there are material elements that "instantiate regimes…that subsequently materialize through practices of disaster governance" (Lawrence & Wiebe, 2018, 79).

3.2 Political Ecology of Disaster

Political ecology functions as an overarching theoretical lens through which to analyse the 2019/20 bushfires. At its core, political ecology challenges the apolitical attribution of "environmental problems to a range of causes beyond the realm of collective choice" (González-Hidalgo, Otero, & Kallis, 2014, 1015). Instead, it asserts the importance of identifying power relations, thereby "unravel[ling] the political forces at work in environmental access, management and transformation" (Robbins, 2012, 3). This focus functions in synergy with critical realism, and with the broader discipline of sustainability science of which this thesis forms a part.

Disaster studies was foundational to early political ecology (Robbins, 2012); in particular, Hewitt (1983b, 12) prompted a movement away from an understanding of disasters as a mere "archipelago of isolated misfortune". It is this challenge to long-held ideas of disasters as 'natural' that drives the analysis within this thesis, as it is unsympathetic to human-environment relations (Claus et al., 2015; Hewitt, 1983b). From a political ecology standpoint, disasters are conceptualised as "catastrophes in the making", "unnatural disasters" and "disasters by design" (Sovacool, Tan-Mullins, & Abrahamse, 2018, 243). As Olson (2008, 167) notes, "disasters often strip away layers of semantic, symbolic, and process cover to provide clear insights into the nature, priorities, and capabilities of authorities, governments and entire regimes. They are deeply, deeply political". By acknowledging this complex relationship between knowledge, power and politics (Claus et al., 2015; Forsyth, 2003; Lawrence & Wiebe, 2017), political ecology lends itself well to the analysis of both material and discursive elements of disaster. Such an analysis will be achieved in this thesis through a focus on frames and framing, as outlined below.

3.3 Frames

Hertog and McLeod (2001, 142) conceptualise frames as cultural phenomena, "organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world". They derive from the same family as discourses (Lindekilde, 2014) and are communicated via language (Reese, 2009). While framing often performs a necessary and benevolent function in the everyday way we discuss and communicate our own realities to others (Ytterstad, 2015), this thesis is primarily concerned with how framing can function in the political sphere as a more deliberate value-laden exercise of power (Atkinson et al., 2011; Kinder & Sanders, 1990; Proctor, 2001; Schön & Rein, 1994; Vázquez-Arroyo, 2013). The power of frames lies in their ability to shine light on a particular problem aspect while simultaneously casting shadows over others, setting up a lens through which we view and understand phenomena (Boda, 2017; Entman, 1993; Stone, 2012). Thus frames by their very nature "are guilty of some indifference to difference" (Hay, 2002, 249). Cronon (1992, 1350) highlights that this process of selection, simplification and saliency often serves "to make the contingent seem determined and the artificial seem natural". Not only does this shape our problem understandings, but it can determine, or indeed dictate, the pathways taken to address sustainability issues (Entman, 1993; Harris, 2010; Hertog & McLeod, 2001; Leach, Scoones, & Stirling, 2010; Perri, 2005). With this in mind, the key role of framing analysis in discussions of sustainability is to help identify the underlying motivations that perpetuate certain frames, and the winners, losers and environmental implications of this process (Boda, 2017; Creed, Langstraat, & Scully, 2002; Hay,

2002). Ultimately, this can help to bring forth alternative framings of "what exists, what happens, and what matters" (Gitlin, 1980, 6).

4 Methodology

4.1 Research Strategy and Design

With the aim of conducting more exploratory than confirmatory research (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006), this thesis is based on a descriptive single case study (Yin, 2018) of the 2019/2020 bushfires in Australia. Wynn & Williams (2012) situate a case study approach as commonplace in critical realist research, while Yin (2018) notes that a case study design is particularly adept at answering 'how' and 'why' questions and focusing on context as integral to the analysis. For these reasons, a case study research design was deemed appropriate for the kind of research I as a researcher wished to undertake. The case itself was selected in light of the following factors, deeming it representative of a typical 'wicked' problem in sustainability science, and thus requiring an interdisciplinary analysis:

- The complexity of the case, the convergence of space and power and the intrinsic focus on human-environment relations makes the case *relevant*
- The international attention garnered by the fires, and the widespread acknowledgement that they were unprecedented in Australia's fire history, makes the case *interesting*
- The recentness of the case, making it as-yet unexamined from an academic standpoint, makes the case *significant*
- The interaction of academic and non-academic perspectives and ways of knowing, along with my own preparedness to be reflexive in approach, makes the case *interdisciplinary*

While it is hoped that the results of this research could be applied and generalised to similar cases of fire or natural disaster, that is not an express aim of the thesis. This sentiment is shared by academic proponents of case study research, who instead note the value of a case being a 'force of example' instead of generalisable (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Bryman, 2012; Moon, Brewer, Januchowski-Hartley, Adams, & Blackman, 2016). In line with producing exemplary research, I have made a best attempt at ensuring transparency and trustworthiness of the analysis, a flaw of qualitative research that is often pointed out by its critics (Kaefer, Roper, & Sinha, 2015). Thankfully, case study research lends itself to triangulation (Baxter Pamela & Jack, 1990): the use of multiple methods or data sources to avoid bias, enhance credibility and provide analytical rigour (Khagram et al., 2010). In addition to this

corroborating function, Flick (2009, 445) sees triangulation as a strategy for "increas[ing] scope, depth and consistency" of the research as a whole.

4.2 Research Methods

4.2.1 Literature Review and Actor Group Identification

A commonplace first step in case study research is a literature review to provide context, ascertain knowledge gaps, and identify key actors (Bryman, 2012; Hancock & Algozzine, 2006). Since academic studies of the case in question are yet to reach publication stage, my initial understandings of the case were primarily garnered through newspaper articles as the bushfires were unfolding and in the immediate aftermath. To situate these fires within broader fire histories in Australia, the second stage of my literature review incorporated journal articles, policy documents and governmental reports relevant to bushfire history, preparedness and conflict along with disaster risk management more generally.

This literature review allowed me to identify a series of actor groups that are relevant in discussions of bushfire in Australia, and who were active voices in the 2019/20 disaster. While informed by this initial literature review, actor group identification was an iterative process built upon throughout interviews with actors themselves (see 4.2.2). In this way, a method attributable to Stakeholder Analysis was employed, whereby actors are not presumed to be self-evident but instead revealed via a distinct reflective and evolutionary process (Reed et al., 2009; Saldaña, 2014). A detailed overview of the actor groups determined can be found below in *Table 1*.

Table 1. Overview of actor groups, their representatives sourced for interview and the analytical method applied during research.

Actor Group	Representative	Identifier	Data source	Method of analysis
Government	Liberal-National Coalition (ruling party)	Gov	Transcripts of speeches and interviews	Frame Analysis
	Other government actors (e.g. Labor party, Greens Party)	AltGov		
Academic/Scientific Community	Academic: Emergency Management and Disaster Resilience	Academic1	Semi-structured interview	Frame Analysis and Interview Analysis
	Academic: Risk Management of Bushfire	Academic2		
	Academic: Media and Public Relations	Academic3		
	Researcher: Bushfire behaviour	Academic4		
	Academic: Fire Ecology	Academic5		
	Academic: Multi-species justice	Academic6		
First responders	Volunteer firefighting brigade captain	Responder1		
	President of rural fire brigade	Responder2		
	Firefighter	Responder3		
Community Organisations	Head of national environmental not-for-profit	Community1		
	Director of NSW conservation group	Community2		
	Facilitator of climate-change psychology group	Community3		
Indigenous Australians	Member of Indigenous land rights organisation	Indigenous1		
	Activist and musician	Indigenous2		
Directly affected	New England resident and ecologist (researcher)	Affected1		
	Adelaide Hills resident, State Emergency Services volunteer	Affected2		
	Adelaide Hills residents (couple)	Affected3		

4.2.2 Actor Interviews

Along with contributing to the actor identification process outlined in section 4.2.1 above, interviews primarily served two complementary purposes:

1. As data to conduct the frame analysis (see 4.2.3). Interviewees were asked to comment on the government's framing of the fires, aiding in the identification of dominant government frames and bolstering the analysis for RQ1. Actors' alternative framings of fire were assessed in their own right to answer RQ2.

2. To make linkages between theory and empirical evidence, adding to the discussion for RQ3 and RQ4.

A total of 17 interviews with 18 interviewees (a couple was interviewed on one occasion) were conducted between February and June 2020 via phone or Zoom. Interviews ranged in length from 25 minutes to 1 hour. A purposeful sampling strategy (Robbins, 2012) was used initially, whereby actors relevant to each actor group were identified based on their experience and (perceived) authority to fairly represent the views of that group. This was followed by further snowball sampling to incorporate useful contacts and suggestions from the initial round of interviews (Robbins, 2012). Several interviewees bridged actor categories and subsequently provided valued input beyond their final categorisation.

Interviews were semi-structured; although I had prepared a general list of questions in the form of an interview guide (a copy is included as Appendix 1), I endeavoured to create space and flexibility for actors to reveal their own understandings and perspectives without excessive prompting (Bryman, 2012). This openness allowed for an iterative process as I adjusted my interview guide slightly over time while gathering more knowledge and experience. I was cautious to follow Bryman's (2012) guidance in respect to ethical interviewing; this involved seeking informed consent, respecting privacy, being transparent and honest and not causing harm. In this vein, all actors have been anonymised and given code identifiers, which can be found in *Table 1*. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in full with permission from each interviewee.

An overview of the framing analysis process undertaken using the interview data can be found in section 4.2.3. The interviews were also subjected to a broader thematic analysis in order to provide content valuable for the discussion. Based on the approach of Bowen (2009), each interview was

initially read and coded according to a list of themes relevant to RQ3 and 4. These themes developed over several readings of the data, making the process deductive yet flexible. This approach of using pre-determined themes was selected to generate content specifically relevant to the discussion (Bowen, 2009), in contrast to (and in collaboration with) the framing analysis, which used a more inductive approach to identify actor frames.

4.2.3 Frame Analysis

To obtain data suitable for an analysis of government frames, I conducted a search on the Capital Monitor database for all government speeches and interview transcripts mentioning the term 'bushfire' between the dates 1/9/2019 to 31/03/2020. This yielded 279 results, all of which were uploaded to NVivo for analysis, given its aptitude for organising large volumes of data (Kaefer et al., 2015). These documents were complemented by the interview transcripts, which were incorporated in the framing analysis.

Each document was read once in order for the dataset to become familiar before the formal analysis began and to delineate documents based on their party link (i.e. Liberal-National Coalition, the Labor party etc). Iterative re-reading and notetaking followed, in which initial frames were identified based on recurring thematic patterns in the data. These frames were then set up as 'nodes' (akin to storage containers) within NVivo and relevant parts of each document categorised within these nodes. The final frame categories included 'unprecedented', 'fire as natural', 'climate change influence' and 'the future of fire'. This process aligned with the analytical steps outlined by Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules (2017), but I also drew from the approach of Hertog & Mcleod (2001), who note the importance of language and metaphors in frame construction. This too informed my analysis of the dominant and alternative framings of the bushfires.

4.3 Limitations

The greatest potential limitation of this thesis is my own bias as an Australian native; I have a strong personal connection to the case and have been exposed to various fire framings throughout my life. In addition, my personal political stance combined with my academic grounding in sustainability science puts me, somewhat naturally, at odds with depoliticised discussions of environmental change. Jorgensen & Phillips (2002, 21) ask: how can a researcher conduct research when they "share many of the taken-for-granted, common-sense understandings expressed in the material?" Does this not increase the risk of prejudgement as opposed to 'seeing'? They resolve that although some researcher

positioning is unavoidable, a critical and reflexive application of "theory and method…legitimises scientifically produced knowledge" (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, 22). I am partial to Creed, Langstraat & Scully's (2002) suggestion that being explicit about our personal values as researches, and using reflexivity to minimise their influence, is far superior to making claims of total objectivity.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted my ability to conduct fieldwork and shifted the importance of the fires in the public eye. I would have liked to interview several government actors to add a more personal element to the analysis of government frames, but this was rendered impossible. Public discussion and media reportage of the fires was pushed aside as the pandemic unfolded, as were recovery efforts and more long-term risk-management decisions (including the Royal Commission). This potentially restricted my analysis of the post-fire environment, in what has become a crisis on-hold. Further analysis of the fires to better incorporate the aftermath would be an avenue for future research.

5 Results

The following two sections present the main findings from my framing analysis of government speech/interview transcripts and actor interviews. In exploring the diverse, and in many ways conflicting, framings of the fires, I answer the first two research questions of this thesis. As a basis from which to depart, it's interesting to note that the bushfires as 'unprecedented' was a sentiment shared across the board, and which came to represent a shared frame between all actor groups. Phrases such as "*What we have this time is probably an unprecedented summer in terms of the bushfires*" (Gov) (Karen Andrews, 15 January 2020) and "*Bushfires in Australia are of course, not new. What we have now though, is an extraordinary amount of land being affected*" (AltGov) (Anthony Albanese, 27 December 2019), remained part of the broader discourse surrounding the fires from their outset until their end.

It was from this shared understanding of the fires as unprecedented that framing pathways then diverged; alternative actor framings developed in opposition to the dominant government frame, which held that although unprecedented, the fires were nonetheless natural.

5.1 Dominant Government Frames

Although government communication from the Liberal-National Coalition was consistent in its allusions to the fires as natural, there was a gradual evolution of this frame over time as the disaster

unfolded. Academic3 speaks to this shift, noting, "*essentially what you had is the government shifted direction, but it did so under duress, and it did so only after a lot of public outrage regarding a perceived lack of action.*" Between October 2019 and early January 2020, references to the fires as natural were explicit, but consistent pressure from the public and the media to attribute blame and discuss the impact of climate charge triggered a much more considered and subtle response from government actors. The sections below are reflective of this shift.

5.1.1 We've been here before (October 2019 - early January 2020)

Anthony Albanese, the leader of the Labour party (AltGov) summarised the government's fire rhetoric as follows: "*It was characterised by complacency and an attitude of, 'Nothing to see here, we have had fires before'. And that prevailed throughout October, November, December, until finally there was some national action*" (2 March 2020). References to Australia's fire history in statements such as "*We've had fires for a very long time, everyone knows that*" (James Paterson, 12 November 2019) normalised the fires within a historical context of natural disaster whereby "*Mother Nature*" (David Littleproud, 7 October 2019) could be used as a passive scapegoat. Prime Minister Scott Morrison's statement that *"the scale of the disaster is enormous, and it is a reminder of the terrible threat that nature provides in this country"* (5 January 2020) is a representative example. Even as public disdain mounted in early January, perhaps most emphatically visible in the videos of NSW residents refusing to shake the Prime Minister's hand while he toured fire-affected rural communities, nature continued to be presented as a threat. "*They are natural disasters. They wreak this sort of havoc…as they have for a very long time.*" *"[There will] always be frustrations when you cannot in all cases completely counteract the forces of nature*" (Scott Morrison, 2 January; 5 January 2020).

This early frame conceptualisation was often accompanied by broader discussions of national spirit redolent of wartime appeals to Australian comradery. *"We will put our arms around you. We will get through this. We've been through disasters before and, as a nation, this brings the best out of us"* (David Littleproud, 10 November 2019). This focus on unity and "we" was persistent; it not only served to make government actors appear more sympathetic to the unfolding crisis, but also helped to establish the idea of nature as a threat – a threat that had been historically 'overcome'. "*Fires are not unusual or not uncommon to Australia; nor are droughts and nor are floods. But Australians get through these because we are a resilient bunch. We stick together, we band together*" (Michael McCormack, 10 November 2019). In late December, Prime Minister Scott Morrison was succinct in presenting this conflict framing of the 2019/20 bushfires as a natural, yet conquerable threat: *"Australia will prevail. We always have."*

5.1.2 Climate change is real, but... (December 2019 onwards)

While the government's initial discourse surrounding the fires was avoidant of references to climate change, this evolved over the course of the disaster. Most evidently from December 2019 onwards, government actors changed tack to openly acknowledge climate change: "*I should stress that there is no dispute in this country about the issue of climate change globally*"... "*[There has been an] attempt to deliberately create a polarisation on this issue. There isn't one when it comes to the actions of the government*" (Scott Morrison, 5 January; 9 January 2020). Yet when pushed to discuss the links between bushfire and climate change, Liberal-National party members fell back on a version of the following on almost every occasion: "*I am pleased to say Australia is one of the countries that can say that this year, as we face this crisis, as climate change has impacted on the world's weather patterns that has led to where we are here today to some extent...Australia is beating the commitments that have been made in 2020, and there are very few countries that can make that claim*" (Scott Morrison, 5 January 2020). The media, along with oppositional political actors, were quick to highlight that the idea of Australia 'beating' its international commitments to combat climate change was contingent on what many had described as an accounting trick: using Kyoto carryover credits. In an effort to save face, metaphorical mitigation muscles were flexed to emphasise Australia's leadership capability: "*Well with respect there's not too many nations that even got to Kyoto, let alone beat it. We've been doing a lot of heavy lifting as a nation. You know, we've got to be proud of what our achievements are instead of beating ourselves up, we perpetrate our own misery in this country sometimes*" (David Littleproud, 6 January 2020).

Yet confusingly, in stark opposition to this positioning of Australia as a leader, the government's primary deflective strategy in the face of targeted climate change questioning was to emphasise the country's powerlessness to influence both local and global climate politics: "*If we turned off every single coal-fired power station in this country right now, those fires would still be occurring and the drought would still be on*" (Bridget McKenzie, 9 November 2019). "*Well, the climate is changing; there is no doubt about it. The question I've always got is do you honestly believe there is a piece of legislation we can move in Canberra that's going to change it back, and the answer to that question is quite obviously no*" (Barnaby Joyce, 23 December 2019). It was common for statements of this nature to be comparative, whereby Australia was represented as a mere goldfish in a sea full of sharks: "*now, we are doing our bit but we can't start saying that we are going to singlehandedly influence what China does or influence was India does, or change the climate itself*" (Barnaby Joyce, 23 December 2019). Overall, this rhetoric was an attempt to justify why additional action on climate change was

unnecessary, despite the 'unprecedented' nature of the fires. What material aspects underlie this rhetorical strategy will be explored further in section 6.1.

A concurrent strategy employed to disassociate the bushfires from broader climate change discussions fell under what Academic3 termed 'the rally around the flag strategy'. By focusing on the "*very raw emotional environments*" (Scott Morrison, 12 January 2020) that are "*above politics*" (David Littleproud, 13 January 2020), this strategy functions by calling out unwanted attention on an issue as being unsympathetic to the unfolding crisis. Statements such as "*[This] is not the time for a conversation by these people that want to politicise climate change. I don't want to weaponise it in the middle of someone's misery*" (David Littleproud, 11 November 2019) were indicative of this strategy at work. In this way, climate change discussions were relegated to a future realm, one that may or may not exist: "*The time for argument is not now. That is not to say there is no time to talk about important issues like climate change, of course there is and we are talking about it. But let's do it in a way that does not distract from the very immediate need of protecting people's lives, protecting their property, honouring those who are out there doing everything they can*" (Scott Morrison, 22 December 2019). This strategy was often closely tied to associations of the fire as 'natural', strengthening the idea of nature as a threat to be overcome as outlined in 5.1.1. "*We cannot control the natural disaster but what we can do is control our response…I understand the frustration but this is a natural disaster. Natural disasters are best dealt with through [a] methodical, well-coordinated response*" (Scott Morrison, 2 January 2020). The subtle implications of this statement are that (1) immediate recovery and response trump discussions of more long-term management strategies and (2) climate change does not deserve a seat at the table in these discussions.

5.1.3 It's all about balance (mid-January 2020 onwards)

Once the more immediate emergency bushfire response had passed, framing of the fires expanded to incorporate future outlooks. When discussing this future, the government's position was routinely presented as prioritising balance: "*Let me be clear to the Australian people - our emissions reductions policies will both protect our environment and seek to reduce the risks and hazards that we are seeing today and at the same time, it will seek to ensure sure the viability of people's jobs and their livelihoods all around the country*" (Scott Morrison, 2 January 2020). *"[We need to make sure] that whatever directions we determine will put us on a path that is both environmentally effective and economically responsible*" (Mathias Cormann, 23 February 2020). Statements of this kind were repeated almost verbatim by the Prime Minister in the months following the fires. They speak strongly to the belief in a panacea win-win outcome, to be discussed further in section 6.

A recurring question by the media was whether the nature of the 2019/20 fires would justify a more rigorous approach to future mitigation efforts, potentially incorporating a recalibration of Australia's international targets. Acknowledging that it's important to "*avoid the extremes of this debate*" (Josh Frydenberg, 13 January 2020), the government's position was once again to shy away from global responsibility: "*global emissions don't have an accent, they come from many countries and we need to look at a global solution*" (Scott Morrison, 12 January 2020). "*The truth is we're 1.3 per cent of the world's emissions*"…"*This is an international problem that requires an international solution, our focus is on technology*" (Josh Frydenberg, 6 February; 13 January 2020). In discussing changes to national policies, the Prime Minister was insistent: "*I'm not going to put a carbon tax on people. I'm not going to increase their electricity prices and their costs of living. And I'm not going to wipe out resource industries upon which hundreds of thousands, if not millions of Australians depend on for their living*"…"*Our policies don't pursue reckless job destroying and economy destroying targets which won't reduce bushfire risk, but will take people's jobs*" (Scott Morrison, 12 January; 10 January 2020). The concerns foregrounded here contradict the notion of a 'balanced' approach; economic sustainability is overtly prioritised, hinting at the motivations that lie underneath such discourse.

In discussing the future post-fires, government rhetoric was confined to national boundaries, zoned in on practical solutions and avoided connecting local realities to more macro, global problems of climate change. In looking forward, government actors fell-back on nationally focussed aspects of bushfire response and recovery: the expansion of Commonwealth powers in times of disaster and adaptive measures to increase bushfire resilience. This ultimately came to be reflected in the Terms of Reference for the Royal Commission: "*[The] Royal Commission is about three things: improving natural disaster management coordination across all levels of government; improving Australia's resilience and adaptation to a changing climate…; and, importantly, a legal framework as is necessary for the Commonwealth's involvement in responding to national emergencies.*" (Scott Morrison, 20 February 2020).

5.2 Alternative Frames

The alternate framings of the 2019/20 bushfires were almost always described in oppositional terms, acting as a contrast (or in many cases a challenge) to the dominant government framing of the fires. As such, many of the passages in these results provide a critical perspective of the government's fire framing, as well as serving to present alternative frames.

The main sentiment conveyed through these alternative frames revolved around the unnaturalness of the fires; this was achieved through explicit references to climate change, the foregrounding of environmental impacts that extended beyond the anthropocentric realm, and discussions of futures that better incorporate and seek solutions to these two elements.

5.2.1 It's climate change

There was an almost overwhelming linkage of the fires to climate change on behalf of the alternative government actors and non-government actors, with all interviewees bar Indigenous2 and Affected3 employing those terms. Academic6 grew animated when stating, *"There's empirically no doubt that it was a climate catastrophe related fire. The science is unambiguous on that".* Laughing out of frustration, Responder2 commented, *"It's so, dare I use the expression, black and white*." These overt discussions of climate change sat in stark contrast to what Community2 described as the government's *"romantic vernacular of Australia being a land of fire and floods…we've seen this before and we've survived…which was very different to what the fire service was saying at the time"*. For Responder3, this constituted blatant *"deflection…which I found quite insulting"*. Perhaps as to be expected with political territory, the alternative (Labor) government position was also highly critical of this dominant government rhetoric, but this seemed to extend beyond mere political jostling: *"People who…don't accept that climate change is human induced…they go around saying Australia's always had bushfires. That's about as relevant as saying, you know, there was lung cancer before cigarettes were invented or there was murder before guns were invented. Some things make situations worse and climate change makes bushfires worse"* (Chris Bowen, 15 January 2020). *"When it comes to climate change, the Prime Minister's attitude is there's nothing to see here. It's business as usual. Well if he thinks there's nothing to see here, it's because he can't see through the smoke that's coming from those bushfires"* (Anthony Albanese, 22 December 2019).

The ominous expectation of the 2019/20 bushfire season featured prominently in alternative framings, often expressed with an air of contempt for the government's lack of action given this forewarning. AltGov, Affected2, Community2, Community3, Indigenous1, Academic2, Academic4, Academic6, Responder2 and Responder3 voiced their sadness at seeing the realities of what science (and in several cases their own research) had long predicted coming to fruition: *"I did my research in 2013…it felt really clear to me that something like the summer of 2019/20 was coming. It was a painful thing and a vindicating thing to be like, yep, we all knew this was coming. It's almost a sick feeling"* (Community3). Labor senator Penny Wong noted, *"I'm a former Climate Minister – warnings about a longer bushfire season and more intense fires have been on the table for a long time*" (11 November

2019). Labor party leader Anthony Albanese's comments struck a similar chord: "*The fact is that the bushfire season is doing exactly what the science has told us it would do*"… "*it's not a matter of belief. Belief implies a leap of faith*" (22 December 2019; 7 January 2020).

Several actors spoke to a shift in the broader public acceptance of climate change and a growing frustration with the government's inaction on that front; this was not necessarily restricted to the bushfires, but represented a more general feeling within the public sphere. Community3 voiced that in both her research and working capacities, climate change had become "*a more acceptable topic*", while Responder1 noted that "*I think the community were really aware…they're very aware of climate change*". From a political perspective, AltGov actors presented evidence of a similar sentiment, noting "*They don't want to be told it's a natural disaster*"… "*People can now smell it, see it, feel it*"… "*They're talking about climate change. There's an appetite in the community to listen to the experts and to act on their advice*" (Anthony Albanese, 3 January 2020; Jim Chalmers, 17 December 2019).

5.2.2 Environmental impacts and the illusion of control

Alongside an acceptance of climate change, alternative frames diverged from the dominant government framing in the way the environment itself was discussed. In what Academic6 described as an "*overwhelmingly anthropocentric perspective*", the government primarily described the impact of the fires in terms of their physical magnitude, damage to infrastructure and threat to human lives and livelihoods. While occasional references to animal deaths or habitat loss were made, it was the human impact that made the bushfires a crisis, one which necessitated "*the single largest response to a national bushfire… that the country has ever seen*" (Scott Morrison, 10 January 2020). In saying "*I think you've got to separate what happened to the people*", Academic2 demonstrated an opposing position commonly referenced in alternative framings of the fires; AltGov actors and non-government actors tended to foreground environmental impacts much more prominently. From the non-government actor groups, Indigenous1, Indigenous2, Academic4, Academic6, Affected1, Community2, Community3, Responder1 and Responder3 all specifically spoke of the impact of the fires in terms of the types of land and vegetation that burnt and the way in which the burning occurred: "*I think the unusual thing this year was not how much land was burned but the areas that were burning like rainforest and wet sclerophyll forest*" (Responder3). "*There are a lot of old growth rainforests [in NSW] that were part of the original campaign for forestry protection in the seventies, and some of the forest that burnt was that original forest. That hit me*" (Community3). References similar to these made by the Labor party culminated in Terri Butler, Shadow Minister for the

Environment and Water, stating, "*we're seeing unrolling a national ecological crisis*" (10 January 2020).

In placing greater focus on the environmental impacts of the fires, human-environment relations and the human-environment interface were emphasized in ways that went untold in the dominant government frame. Community3 spoke of "*friends who built properties [in northern NSW] in the seventies surrounded by rainforest and it never even occurred to them that those forests could burn.*" This sentiment – the idea of humans becoming dangerously intertwined with nature – was shared by Responder2 and Academic5 respectively: "*Everyone wants to live in the bush"…"they go and live in the most ludicrous places, undefendable places*". Academic2 held that this willingness to place oneself in the line of fire stemmed from a widespread illusion of control when it comes to bushfire: "*there's an attitude that a bushfire is something that happens, and we say we will make sure it never happens again. Yeah, well you just can't do that. You would never say that about an earthquake, but for some reason, because we can spray water on it, we think we can do something. But what we can do is fairly limited*". Indigenous1 too spoke to this illusion, noting "*fire knows no boundaries or borders*". Yet this commonly held illusion of control creates what Affected1 termed a discourse of "*heroes and villains – villains being the fire*". The government's early framing of the fire as a threat to be overcome (see section 5.1.1) was indicative of this broader discourse discussed by alternative actors. Commenting on how the human-fire relationship was frequently framed in the media in conflictual terms, Responder1 went as far as to say, "*it felt like a war*".

5.2.3 What are we balancing exactly?

Just as the fire 'problem' was framed by alternative actors in terms of human influence (climate change) and tense human-nature relationships, the future-post fire was similarly discussed in environment-focussed terms. A strong red thread wove its way through my discussions with many actors, which suggested that as part of the problem, we have a responsibility to protect what we have thus far come to damage: "*We've created these fires, we have a responsibility, not just to protect ourselves and our property, but also to think about how to re-afford what protection we can to other beings*" (Academic6). The challenge, as many actors comprehended it, was to accept some kind of environmental responsibility in a context where "*the political mantra will be about protection of life and property first*" (Academic5). A similar challenge, which also touched upon the underlying and structural implications of Australia's relationship to fire, was the push for greater incorporation of traditional Indigenous knowledges in fire management: "*We need to be paying attention to First Nations' knowledge*" (Indigenous2)…"*One thing I noticed during these fires was a call for greater*

Indigenous involvement in how we manage the landscape" (Community1). In this way, alternative framings of the future prioritised the application of local, context-specific knowledge that could help ease the burden of "*200 years of mismanagement of land*" (Community3).

Alongside framing their ideal futures, alternative actors were on the whole critical of the government's pathway forward. In particular, the government's unwillingness to prioritise climate change mitigation or develop more comprehensive global climate change targets was called out by AltGov actors: "*I read a whole lot of the initiatives that they've put out to the press today; you know these are all things that we were talking about ten years ago. When people look back at the [current government] they're going to see a lost decade when it comes to climate change action, at a point in time which was really critical*" (Richarld Marles, 14 January 2020). "[*It's] not just [about] adaptation, but prevention too. We should listen to science*" (Anthony Albanese, 21 February 2020). The concept of resilience was met with similar criticism, with Responder2, Community1, Community3, Academic4, Academic6 and Affected1 making comments akin to Academic1, who noted "*there's no synergy of what resilience means…and this disparity causes problems*." Overall, the call for a Royal Commission was perceived as underwhelming and, for some actors, pointless: "*Royal Commissions are never dealt with seriously. It's a fundamental issue*" (Academic5). "*This cannot be an excuse for Scott Morrison to continue to do nothing*" (AltGov) (Richard Marles, 13 January 2020). On the whole, alternative frames called out for a "*new normal*", one which did not frame recovery "*as if the situation…was just dandy before the bushfires*" (Joel Fitzgibbon, 21 January; 13 January 2020) and one which involved "[*thinking] about these things differently and [starting to do] it now*" (Murray Watt, 21 November 2019).

6 Discussion

Having detailed the dominant and alternative framings of the 2019/20 bushfires, the following sections of the thesis aim to explore and analyse the "sociopolitical and institutional processes that are obscured by the imagined naturalness of so-called natural disasters" (Gould, Magdalena Garcia, & Remes, 2016, 107). Acknowledging that forms of power come to be exerted where politics, governance and knowledge intersect (Agrawal, 2005), the discussion initially turns to describe how a questioning of frame dominance is implicitly a questioning of Australia's own history and institutions. With this contextualisation, I then shift to discuss what the dominant frame affords, what path it pushes us down, what world view it privileges, and what problems it brings to the fore. Addressing these final two research questions leads ultimately to some brief concluding remarks about how things could be done differently in light of the fiery future that by all accounts lies ahead of us.

6.1 Dominance, Power and History

In policy formation, what knowledge is considered valuable and what is discounted is both contextually contingent and reflective of underlying power relations (Atkinson et al., 2011; Fischer, 2003; Hay, 2002; Leach et al., 2010); policies are thus "social artefacts" (Mckee, 2009, 468). In this light, policy controversies can essentially be seen as struggles over "basic structures of social organization and allocations of power" (Stone, 2012, 225). Where policies display a resistance to change, where norms have become sedimented and power relations embedded, here lie the roots of policy prejudice. It is these persistent junctures that Reese (2008) notes are most deserving of examination. For Academic6, the 2019/20 bushfires are indicative of such circumstances; in her eyes, "*there wasn't a diversity of views. There were views, and then there were a set of political agendas that constituted views. They gained a lot of ground*". To understand what motivated the staunch advocation of the natural argument at the outset of the fires, and the sluggish and tentative connections to climate change at their end, we can look to the ongoing legacy of resource extraction in Australia. In the words of Labor Senator Penny Wong, "*coal has become the battleground on which the climate wars are being fought*" (20 February 2020). It is owing to historically contingent ties between coal and economic growth in Australia that emergent government discourse surrounding the bushfire season came to be depoliticised.

The Australian continent has long harboured what Pearse (2009) describes as "quarry vision". Dreams of reaching the resource-laden southern wilderness were ripe in the minds of colonial settlers of the mid 1800's. Through time and "from every direction, Australians are told that their current and future prosperity depends on what we dig, drill and smelt for the world." Coal is heralded as our "natural competitive advantage endowed by providence" (Pearse, 2009, 1). Such sentiments are reflected in the post-fire words of Prime Minister Scott Morrison: "*I am not going to write off the jobs of thousands of Australians by walking away from traditional industries, I'm not going to embrace economy wrecking job destroying reckless targets*" (23 December 2019). Justified by a logic of 'coal developmentalism' the continued extraction of coal is intimately linked with and overtly advertised as essential to the Australian economy; coal is tied to the vision of development in Australia. But where coal was once Australia's "economic security blanket" (Pearse, 2009, 11), coal's contribution to contemporary government revenue is relatively minimal despite it being our single biggest export, sitting at approximately 1% (Bradley, 2019). Moreover, employment within the mining industry accounted for just 0.4% of Australia's workforce in 2018 (Bradley, 2019) and only 1.3% during the country's most recent mining boom in 2007/08 (Pearse, 2009). In light of these underwhelming figures, Brevini & Woronov (2017, 150) suggest that the contemporary defence of coal must originate

from more than simply "neoliberal ideology or corporate capture", but extend from deeply rooted ideas of Australian cultural identity itself. In 2017, Scott Morrison - then Treasurer - held up a lump of coal in parliament and said, "this is coal…don't be scared" before accusing the opposition of suffering from "pathological and ideological 'coal-phobia'" that was preventing coal from becoming an "important and sustainable part of [Australia's] energy future" (Murphy, 2017). Somewhat paradoxically, this critical moment gives credence to coal's material, underlying influence via the presentation of the physical material itself.

These material historical realities of coal are significant, for they mould contemporary (environmental) politics. Despite mounting concerns regarding the future of extractive industries globally, new coal projects nonetheless sit atop the political agenda (Blondeel & Van de Graaf, 2018). Most noteworthy is the Adani Carmichael mine in Queensland, which has been framed politically as a panacea – boosting regional economies and creating thousands of jobs, while simultaneously providing 'clean' coal to the world (Blondeel & Van de Graaf, 2018). Here once again, the uncritical acceptance of the mining industry's contribution to the nation's development is blinding. The Adani mine continues to be purported by its private and political advocates as offering up to 10,000 new jobs for the region, even after the Adani Corporation's economist conceded under duress in court that this figure was grossly inflated. In reality, Adani will likely create no more than 1464 jobs (Bradley, 2019). Continuing to pander to Adani as an employment boost establishes a familiar yet treacherous choice for the public, between jobs on the one hand and the environment on the other. On a global scale, the altruistic tinge that sees Australia's "destiny" to "bring affordable energy to the world" in the form of coal – words spoken by then Prime Minister Tony Abbot (Brevini & Woronov, 2017, 150), is particularly nefarious.

The influence of coal plays out too in party politics, creating a vicious cycle that further entrenches path dependencies and strongly encourages maintenance of the status quo. Successful operations of the coal lobby to hinder political responses to climate change are well-documented (Hobbs, 2020); a campaign against the introduction of a carbon emissions trading scheme in 2008/09 proposed by the then Labor government ultimately resulted in its repeal (Mcknight & Hobbs, 2017). Describing his industry role, CEO of APPEA[2] Malcolm Roberts stated, "we are trying to minimize policy and regulatory arrangements that reduce our attractiveness as a destination for investment" (Hobbs, 2020, 5). Not only do statements such as these highlight how the mining lobby "rationalize[s] the use of power and persuasive strategies as an important and ethically defensible part of the wrangle of ideas" (Hobbs, 2020, 7), but they give credence to the words of the former Labor Treasurer when he describes

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[2] APPEA represents the interests of oil and gas in Australia

battling vested interests against action on climate change that "were determined to smash us and smash us and smash us again" (Mcknight & Hobbs, 2017). The persuasive presence of the coal industry is cemented further by the 'game of mates', which sees the fluid interchange of high-ranking staff from government offices to mining companies and lobbying organisations (and vice versa) (Bradley, 2019). Within this environment of mutually beneficial reciprocity, deviations come at a personal cost. As Academic3 describes, the legacy of the lost carbon trading scheme extended to former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull: "*He wanted to try and regulate climate change and had proposed new energy targets. And that, in part, was a catalyst for his own colleagues within the Conservative Party to remove him.*" While in the wake of the fires, Labor politicians came to describe the Liberal-National Coalition as "*full of climate change deniers*" (Richard Marles, 13 January 2020), perhaps in light of these political and personal pressures, a better term would be climate change delayers. For the 2019/20 bushfire season, the unfortunate outcome of this policymaking context was that the dominant government framing of the fires was not marked by questions of fact but questions of value.

Discussing political responses to catastrophe, Vázquez-Arroyo (2013, 740) alludes to a "rhetorical strategy by means of which the shadows of past catastrophes…are invoked to authorize particular forms of political power…while depoliticizing the catastrophe in question". By framing the fires as a natural and recurrent part of Australian life, the Federal government conformed to this familiar rhetorical strategy, one that both extends from and is legitimised by the still-unfolding legacy of coal in Australia. Where power lies in the value-laden framing of an issue is in its penchant for influencing public perception (Hay, 2002), authoritatively determining what is thinkable or knowable (Atkinson et al., 2011). Edelman (1993, 231) posits that "the social world is a kaleidoscope of potential realities, which can be readily evoked by altering the ways in which observations are framed and categorized." The influence of material historical realities saw climate change sidelined at the outset of the bushfire crisis and at best superficially addressed as the flames retreated. For Hay, this exclusionary frame is context shaping (Hay, 2002). For Foucault before him, this represents the 'invisible hand' of policymaking (Atkinson et al., 2011), whereby "power procures the knowledge which supports its purposes [and] ignores or suppresses that knowledge which does not" (Flyvbjerg 1998, 226). What this subversive process has culminated in according to Celermajer (2020) is "a story of two Australias. The Australia that is saturated with the reality of the climate catastrophe. The Australia for whom it remains abstract." How these two stories end, whether they diverge further or merge as one, will too be strongly influenced by the dominant frame and what solutions it deems meritorious of exploration. Just like this, the ideological smokescreen of 'natural' disaster causes pathways forward to unravel "across the landscape of understanding and intervention, narrowing other tracks to minor bush paths or obscuring their traces altogether" (Leach et al., 2010, 87).

6.2 Futures, Relationships and Alternatives

"*We're in a climate emergency because of politicians and power brokers trying to preserve a status quo that sees the coal, oil and gas barons get rich*" (AltGov) (Adam Bandt, 14 February 2020). Where the natural frame was employed to validate a disaster-induced breach in this status quo, the solution pathways presented in the wake of the fires carve a pathway back to it. Here, in the struggle against nature's destructive force, the question is not what actions *are* most rational, but what actions are made to *appear* most rational. It is in these appearances that we again bear witness to how an entrenched political economy of coal and power brushes aside key dimensions of sustainability.

The push to return to normal is encapsulated in the government's (mis)use of the concept of resilience in the post-disaster framing of the fires. Co-opting what has become somewhat of a buzzword in contemporary disaster and recovery management landscapes (Davoudi, 2012; Dawson, 2017; Porter & Davoudi, 2012; Welsh, 2014) serves in this instance to naturalise neoliberalism's hold on governance and policy. This hold is characterised by an economically driven logic - a logic that brought life to the problem itself - and bears the archetypal neoliberal stamp of "government at a distance, technologies of responsibilisation, and practices of subjectification that produce suitably prudent autonomous and entrepreneurial subjects in a world of naturalised uncertainty and crisis" (Welsh, 2014, 16). Notions of 'bouncing back' – both communities and the economy – were liberally dispersed in government rhetoric surrounding the recovery process. In late January, Scott Morrison declared his commitment to focussing on the "*things we need to do to make Australia more resilient to [bushfires] in the future. And a lot of them are just really practical, commonsense things*." In this positive inflection to replace old notions of 'vulnerability' (Buizer & Kurz, 2016), resilience comes to mean the ability to "absorb perturbations" and adapt after a period of instability (Reid, 2018, 232). In the case of the 19/20 bushfires, the chain of causation extends from the natural world to the human world, presenting nature as the origin of instability and we as those who must adapt to it. This engineering-based understanding of resilience as an equilibrium state has become prevalent, yielding to accommodate concerns of the political realm that prioritise "the return to "normal" without questioning what normality entails" (Davoudi, 2012, 302). While stability in itself is not problematic, the power-laden anxiety to achieve it deserves questioning. By using the term uncritically and without definition, the Federal government shies away from more appropriate understandings of resilience from disciplinary lineages that are more sympathetic and empirically aligned with studies of disaster and disaster management (Porter & Davoudi, 2012; Welsh, 2014). Specifically, socio-ecological resilience is premised on the idea of transformation in place of adaptation, rejecting the push for a return to equilibrium (Córdoba Vargas, Hortúa Romero, & León Sicard, 2020; Davoudi, 2012). This

understanding accounts for the non-linearity and complexity of natural and human systems in ways that the government's framing does not.

Where to be resilient is to be adaptable, adaption in the government's eyes emphasizes the importance of control. Here we see the dualism inherent in the dominant frame, where nature as a threat instigates an eco-modern response predicated on the illusion of human mastery over the natural world. Bankoff (2001, 27) suggests that the friction here between unpredictable nature and modern governance is "a sociocultural construct reflecting a distinct institution centred and ethnocentric view of man and nature". Alongside increasing resilience, the terms of reference for the Royal Commission prioritise adaptation measures for a changing climate and avenues for increased military intervention in crisis management and natural disaster recovery. "*We must continue to learn from this fire season so we are better prepared for the next one. Whether that be the deployment of the [Australian Defence Force], local hazard reduction, access to resources such as aerial firefighting equipment, consistency of disaster recovery arrangements or resilience in the face of a changing climate*" (Scott Morrison, 5 February 2020). The effect of priorities such as these is that "in relation to climate change, resilience and adaptation now sit side by side, potentially displacing the more revolutionary concept of mitigation" (Welsh, 2014, 19). This displacement can be seen too in the government's hopeful rhetoric surrounding future technological advancement to justify its present lack of climate change action. This pathway forward is problematic in that it is founded upon the notion of a risk-based calculable world where win-win solutions are possible (Leach et al., 2010); supporting this pathway is merely "a rhetorical rescue operation for a capitalist economy confounded by ecological crises" (Dryzek, 2013, 197).

The resilience via adaptation approach fails to acknowledge the complex and underlying factors that narrate Australia's fire regime and vulnerability to disaster (Sudmeier-Rieux, 2014). Instead, by protecting entrenched orthodoxies it promotes a "life of constant adaptation, [and] the abandonment of long-term expectations" (Duffield 2011, 15). In the adaptation-focussed world envisioned by the Australian government, we are resilient insofar as we accept the inevitability of disaster. In the words of Academic6, resilience means "*get tough and deal with it*". To be resilient therefore is "is to forego the very power of resistance and accept one's vulnerability to that which threatens" (Reid, 2018, 237). In a vicious cycle, resilience keeps us locked into the search for 'normality', even though what has come to be normalised is a human/nature relationship that in itself is profoundly detrimental to both parties. The important challenge to this standpoint involves a questioning of what in our 'normal' lives

is indeed worth preserving. Who is empowered to undertake this questioning, and who is not, brings to light notions of agency that are equally as important.

A key outcome from my interviews with alternative actors was a general consensus surrounding the possibility of a different type of relationship with fire, one far more embracing than controlling. In contrast to our current "*highly anthropocentric and humanist understanding of risk and danger and loss*" (Academic6) that sees us "*relate to our environment in a monolithic way, to manage the risk 'out there'*" (Community3), these understandings often drew from traditional Indigenous knowledges that open up to fire by accommodating it's dynamic and uncertain nature and addressing its 'unnaturalness'. In the words of Indigenous1, "*without those changes in mindset, we just come up against the same roadblocks. The policies are designed by people who, in the back of their minds, even subconsciously are thinking fire is a key threat that needs to be reduced. Until they have an experience that teaches them differently, they'll still be applying rules and laws and regulatory policy from that perspective.*" This understanding is sympathetic to transformational notions of resilience, which reject the idea that "an ideal state of system is one where disturbances can be avoided or kept to a minimum" (Fuenfgeld & McEvoy, 2012, 327). Instead of an approach premised on managing risk, true resilience should be a process of "*[letting] these things that come and impact us truly touch us…by addressing the deeper questions of why that event has taken place*" (Community3). This means creating fire management and solution pathways that do not see individual disaster events as locally bounded and globally disconnected, but as part of the contemporary story of human-induced climate change. To do so however would be to butt heads with the same vested interests that shaped the dominant framing of the 19/20 bushfires. Addressing climate change in Australia's future fire management necessitates efforts to mitigate, not just adapt to, a changing climate, yet mitigation begets a "*rapid transition away from coal*" (Community2). As Academic5 notes, "*the problem then is: where is the political will to actually support that*?" How can alternatives take hold in a world where vested interests shape words, words that can themselves be used to shape our understandings of that world, the stories of the politically powerful forced upon a reality that they do not fit?

7 Conclusion

In the vein of critical realist thinking, the workings of the world that are visible to us are "the outcome of interaction between the powerful particulars that underlie them" (Bhaskar & Callinicos, 2003, 90). While disasters may be instigated by natural events, unpacking how they play out involves disentangling webs of contingent histories, incumbent interests and "asymmetrically structured agency" (Stirling, 2014, 84). In the context of the 2019/20 Australian bushfires, this thesis has shown

how historical cultural and economic ties to the coal industry played out in the dominant political framings of fire. The roots of these fire framings are the same roots that see us reinvesting in solution pathways where climate change 'action' can stand alongside a continued indulgence of the Australian coal industry. Employing 'bouncebackability' notions of resilience serves in this context to reinforce the status quo of control and command style adaptation strategies, shifting the spotlight away from more fundamental imperatives of mitigation. This represents a blueprint, one dimensional response to the convergence of complex, multiscale problems: bushfire and climate change.

Shedding light on this political ecology of disaster understates the entrenched political and structural barriers that will continue to hinder alternative ways of thinking and acting from being realised. Yet simultaneously, this research suggests the presence of a growing challenge to the status quo; from a diversity of actor perspectives emerged a series of shared and similar concerns surrounding the dominant rhetorical and material management of fire (and climate change) in Australia. It is my hope that this thesis provides the necessary recognition of these shared understandings and alternatives, the knowledge for agents of change to frame their claims, and the momentum for these claims to be mobilised to compel political movement towards mitigation efforts. Interestingly, the COVID-19 pandemic has set the scene for a rebuttal of the economic reasoning behind stagnating change; as Academic6 notes, *"now we actually have an example showing that we're capable of drastic change. I think there's practical implications in that even though COVID has displaced the discourse of bushfire, it may have enhanced our capacity to act"*. Coupled with the emerging body of research on just transitions, there is room for future research to explore how Australia could move "towards a post-carbon society" (McCauley & Heffron, 2018, 2) in a way that acknowledges key aspects of recognition and redistribution.

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9 Appendices

9.1 Interview Guide

Thanks so much for talking with me today. I'm doing research for my Master thesis on the recent Australian bushfires and I've become specifically interested in understanding them better—what are peoples own perspectives of the fires, how they were managed, and what this all means for the process of recovery. The purpose of this interview is to get a broad sense of how you experienced and understand the fires and how you view the future post-fires.

So that I can better remember the conversation, is it OK if I audio record our interview? I also want to let you know that you will remain anonymous. The interview should take about 30 minutes and it is completely voluntary so if you want to stop or if you have any questions, please feel free to ask me at any time.

Guiding questions:

- Could you describe yourself a little? This might be how you see your role in your community, what you do for work or pleasure, where you live in Australia.

- What was your own personal experience of the fires (if applicable)?

- How do you understand the background of the fires? Do you believe that certain factors led to them being more intense than what Australia may have experienced in previous fire seasons?

- Did you notice how the fires were described by government actors? If so, why do you think they were described this way?

- Did you notice whether others societal or political groups described the fires differently to the government?

- What do you understand of the government's preparedness and response to the fires, either at state or federal level? Were there any aspects that you think could/should have been done differently?

- Looking forward, what do you think could help the country better prepare for fires more generally?

- The word 'resilience' has been used a lot in the wake of the fires to describe something that we need to improve on moving forward. What is your understanding of this word?

Thanks so much for your time today. I've learned a lot talking to you and your input will be really helpful for my thesis.

9.2 Royal Commission Terms of Reference

ELIZABETH THE SECOND, by the Grace of God Queen of Australia and Her other Realms and Territories, Head of the Commonwealth

TO

Air Chief Marshal Mark Donald Binskin AC (Retd),

The Honourable Dr Annabelle Claire Bennett AC SC, and

Professor Andrew Kerr Macintosh

GREETING

WHEREAS Australia is experiencing an extreme bushfire season in 2019-2020, resulting in devastating loss of life, property and wildlife, and environmental destruction across the nation.

AND these bushfires have profoundly affected communities across Australia and engaged the responsibilities and powers of State and Territory Governments as well as those of the Commonwealth Government.

AND the changing global climate carries risks for the Australian environment and Australia's ability to prevent, mitigate and respond to bushfires and other natural disasters.

AND recognising that Australia as a nation must take action, including the development and implementation of adaptation actions, to address the consequences of longer, hotter, drier seasons and severe weather events.

AND recognising that, while all levels of government will review various operational aspects of the 2019-2020 bushfire season as they consider necessary, an inquiry focused on national coordination, conducted jointly between the Commonwealth and State and Territory Governments will give Australians confidence that natural disaster coordination arrangements are the best they can be.

NOW THEREFORE We do, by these Our Letters Patent issued in Our name by Our Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia on the advice of the Federal Executive Council and under the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Australia, the *Royal Commissions Act 1902* and every other

enabling power, appoint you to be a Commission of inquiry, and require and authorise you to inquire into the following matters:

(a) the responsibilities of, and coordination between, the Commonwealth and State, Territory and local Governments relating to preparedness for, response to, resilience to, and recovery from, natural disasters, and what should be done to improve these arrangements, including with respect to resource sharing;

(b) Australia's arrangements for improving resilience and adapting to changing climatic conditions, what actions should be taken to mitigate the impacts of natural disasters, and whether accountability for natural disaster risk management, preparedness, resilience and recovery should be enhanced, including through a nationally consistent accountability and reporting framework and national standards;

(c) whether changes are needed to Australia's legal framework for the involvement of the Commonwealth in responding to national emergencies, including in relation to the following:

  (i) thresholds for, and any obstacles to, State or Territory requests for Commonwealth assistance;

  (ii) whether the Commonwealth Government should have the power to declare a state of national emergency;

  (iii) how any such national declaration would interact with State and Territory emergency management frameworks;

  (iv) whether, in the circumstances of such a national declaration, the Commonwealth Government should have clearer authority to take action (including, but without limitation, through the deployment of the Australian Defence Force) in the national interest;

(d) any relevant matter reasonably incidental to a matter referred to in paragraphs (a) to (c).

AND We direct you to make any recommendations arising out of your inquiry that you consider appropriate, including recommendations about any policy, legislative, administrative or structural reforms.

AND We direct you, for the purposes of your inquiry and recommendations, to have regard to the following matters:

(e) the findings and recommendations (including any assessment of the adequacy and extent of their implementation) of other reports and inquiries that you consider relevant, including any available State or Territory inquiries relating to the 2019-2020 bushfire season, to avoid duplication wherever possible;

(f)   ways in which Australia could achieve greater national coordination and accountability — through common national standards, rule-making, reporting and data-sharing — with respect to key preparedness and resilience responsibilities, including for the following:

      (i)   land management, including hazard reduction measures;

      (ii)   wildlife management and species conservation, including biodiversity, habitat protection and restoration;

      (iii)   land-use planning, zoning and development approval (including building standards), urban safety, construction of public infrastructure, and the incorporation of natural disaster considerations;

(g)   any ways in which the traditional land and fire management practices of Indigenous Australians could improve Australia's resilience to natural disasters.

AND We further declare that you are not required by these Our Letters Patent to inquire, or to continue to inquire, into a particular matter to the extent that you are satisfied that the matter has been, is being, or will be, sufficiently and appropriately dealt with by another inquiry or investigation, or a criminal or civil proceeding.

AND, without limiting the scope of your inquiry or the scope of any recommendations arising out of your inquiry that you may consider appropriate, We direct you, for the purposes of your inquiry and recommendations, to consider the following matters, and We authorise you, as you consider appropriate, having regard to the date by which you are required to submit your final report, to take (or refrain from taking) any action arising out of your consideration:

(h)   the need to establish mechanisms to facilitate the timely communication of information, or the furnishing of evidence, documents or things, in accordance with section 6P of the *Royal Commissions Act 1902* or any other relevant law, including, for example, for the purpose of enabling the timely investigation and prosecution of offences;

(i)   the need to establish appropriate arrangements for information-sharing in relation to any other inquiries or reviews, in order to support concurrent inquiries or reviews as well as your own, in ways consistent with relevant obligations, and in ways that avoid unnecessary duplication, improve efficiency and avoid unnecessary trauma to witnesses.

AND We appoint you, Air Chief Marshal Mark Donald Binskin AC (Retd), to be the Chair of the Commission.

AND We declare that you are a relevant Commission for the purposes of sections 4 and 5 of the *Royal Commissions Act 1902*.

AND We declare that you are a Royal Commission to which item 5 of the table in subsection 355-70(1) in Schedule 1 to the *Taxation Administration Act 1953* applies.

AND We declare that you are authorised to conduct your inquiry into any matter under these Our Letters Patent in combination with any inquiry into the same matter, or a matter related to that matter, that you are directed or authorised to conduct by any Commission, or under any order or appointment, made by any of Our Governors of the States or by the Government of any of Our Territories.
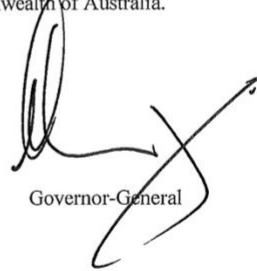
AND We:

(j)   require you to begin your inquiry as soon as practicable; and

(k)   require you to make your inquiry as expeditiously as possible; and

(l)   authorise you to submit to Our Governor-General any interim recommendations that you consider appropriate; and

(m)   require you to submit to Our Governor-General a report of the results of your inquiry, and your recommendations, not later than 31 August 2020.

IN WITNESS, We have caused these Our Letters to be made Patent.

WITNESS General the Honourable David Hurley AC DSC (Retd), Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia.
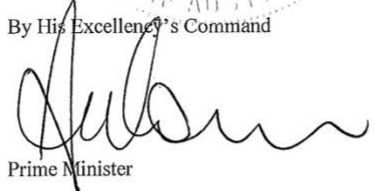
Dated 20 February 2020

Governor-General

By His Excellency's Command

Prime Minister