

ReMAKERS' MEMO #1, January 2020

An Australia reMADE primer to talking about the bushfires and where to from here

*V2, updated 14th Jan 2020

Introduction: A Summer of Disruption

We are living through something extraordinary. This has been the summer of disruption. A summer of homes and livelihoods burnt to the ground; of profound loss, after which many families and communities will never be the same.

Wall-to-wall media coverage tells the story of our fear, rage, loss and grief. And rising from the ashes, it's also been the summer of community, solidarity, generosity and love; of global and local outpourings of humanity. It's been a time of great pride and gratitude for who we are and what we have; feeling a sense of belonging, selflessness and care.

This is not the moment for narrow institutional or issue-siloed responses.

This is a time for huge ambition and confident calls for systemic change, to protect what we love, unleash our collective potential and inspire other countries to also act at the scale the climate crisis demands.

This summer represents, for a critical mass of Australians and to some degree the wider world watching on, a great disruption and paradigm shift. We must consciously respond to this, and choose to speak about these fires within a frame of transformation.

These fires signal the beginning of a new era, a new normal. Conversations that weren't possible before, actions that wouldn't have been considered before, demands that would have seemed outrageous before, become not only possible but with leadership, probable and obvious. This moment invites a new democratic participation, fuelled by broad conversations about the shared future we actually want (instead of one we're terrified of). Suddenly a majority of Australians are directly or indirectly impacted by climate change, and it's causing a crisis of political legitimacy.

There is a real opportunity to break the political gridlock, step out of our established trenches, and with clarity, compassion and courage make ambitious climate leadership the new common sense. But to do so we need to speak in a systems-transformation frame, not just a general 'action' or 'bad leadership' frame. Our challenge is to channel the rage that many are feeling into recognition that it's the system itself that needs to change.



Useful comparisons:

- **Chernobyl:** Some have called this Australia's 'Chernobyl Moment', referring to the moment in the Soviet Union when 'the system as we knew it became untenable.' The Soviet Union, which had seemed as solid as ever in 1986, ceased to exist entirely within five years.
- **Pearl Harbour:** Prior to the fatal Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, American leadership was reluctant to join the war effort, kowtowed by isolationist voices within the population. Let Europe deal with its own problems; what difference could we make; would it be worth the cost to us? Then seemingly overnight the US economy, government and society transformed itself to take a leadership role in World War II.
- **Port Arthur:** Reeling from trauma and tragedy, our nation was galvanised to take transformative action on gun control, by a conservative Prime Minister. John Howard copped criticism from many on his own side of politics, but on gun policy and public safety Australia still leads the world, much to our collective relief.

"I think the impact of the fire crisis has been so profound that it is as if, over Christmas, we have travelled through time and space and woken up in another country. Positions and statements that would have seemed radical just a few weeks ago are now coming from the most unlikely sources...Australia's fires have revealed that the Australian system is too untenable; that things cannot go on as before." -David Ritter, CEO, Greenpeace Australia

Where to from here?

- Step 1: Name the good** (community, public institutions, First Nations voices);
- Step 2: Speak about this crisis and its solutions in a transformation frame.**
- Step 3: Name what we want.**
- Step 4. Reach out to conservatives and people they trust.**



1. Name the good, lead with values.

Take the time to communicate the good in all this to connect with our audience as community leaders, not just protestors. Morale matters. There is now a huge new mass of people who are angry. Their anger is as righteous and valid as the anger that many others have felt for years. The challenge is to lead that anger somewhere useful: into a national demand for game-changing climate action. We do that best when we lead with our strengths, rather than our perceived 'weaknesses' as a country. Below are three key areas to concentrate on.

- **Celebrate community.** It is people looking out for people that have made these fires enduring and brought us all closer together. We can take tremendous pride in our volunteer firefighters and in the communities they're part of, but also in the thousand million acts of kindness and connection that we've offered because this is who we really are at our best. We're not selfish competitors in a crisis. People are experiencing tremendous comfort in the kindness and reciprocity found within community. We've been through hell, but with angels by our side. We are reminded of the things that money can't buy. It's a sharp contrast to who we're told we are and what we're told to care about.
- **Celebrate our public institutions.** It is not the market that's being asked to come in and save the day, though some businesses are doing good things. The ABC, the firefighters and emergency workers, the ADF – all of the institutions the public already trusted have skyrocketed further in our esteem under this crisis. Some of us are remembering just how amazing and useful government can be! This is a time for publicly thanking and acknowledging all the public institutions we've relied on, and for re-articulating the value of public institutions and their purpose in serving the greater good. This is stepping stone infrastructure for imagining what more our public institutions and infrastructure might provide.
- **Raise up First Nations voices.** There are increasing calls for managing land in Traditional ways. This is an opportunity to elevate and normalise Indigenous voices in the national conversation, not just in regards to land management but the very way we operate as a nation. Be wary of feeding a conversation that blames poor fire management practice as the sole reason for the current catastrophe, or one that pits people and their suffering against each other.

2. Choose to speak in the transformation frame about what we must do, and what's standing in our way.

We started with four dominant frames in the discourse about the fires:

- a. The Business As Usual (BAU) frame: this is a natural disaster, and the government is delivering natural disaster relief.
- b. The BAU but bad leadership frame: this is a natural disaster that has been bungled by Scott Morrison – better leadership is needed.
- c. The charitable frame: this is a terrible disaster and we should all be digging deep to help with the relief effort.



- d. **The Transformation Frame: this is severe climate damage, and we need to transform how we do things to protect our country and planet (or people, wildlife, etc).**

Government Rebooted frame: Bushfires 2.0

On 12 Jan, the [PM gave an interview](#) designed to draw a line under previous failings, and re-establish his leadership. Here he conceded that we won't go back to business as usual, and he began to introduce his government's framing of 'the new normal'.

This Bushfires 2.0 government rebooted framing is about acknowledging climate change, but [shifting the climate conversation away from emissions reduction to resilience, mitigation and adaptation](#) as 'practical' changes. Or as someone tweeted, "Australia must adapt, but coal must go on." This 'new normal' provides cover for implying that all kinds of things must now just be accepted (more on this in conclusion).

So what do we do with all this?

- **Beware of just making Scott Morrison the fall guy.** People are understandably upset with the Prime Minister's lack of leadership here, but it's not the man alone, it's the entire system that's the problem. Here the Abbott-Turnbull transition is instructive. Making it all about any specific person addresses symptoms, rather than underlying problems.
- **Beware the 'government has failed us' bandwagon.** Frame criticism in a positive and implied way, talking about what the government can and should do now to move us forward. Talk about where certain business and political leaders have gone wrong in not taking climate threats seriously and listening to experts; or the specific failings of our current leadership. Just beware that it's easy for people to hear a blanket critique of the government in general, which undermines faith in democracy and the very idea that the government is capable of transformative leadership. Our take-home message is that a good government is responsible and leads. Not 'typical politicians, we can't expect them to save us.'
- **The charity frame is a double-edged sword.** Charity represents solidarity, empathy and altruism; looking out for others. It's a source of pride, hope, agency. On the other hand, it can be a proxy for people in power to avoid bigger responsibility for structural change. Those who oppose game-changing climate action often love the idea of charity because it is individualistic and voluntary, rather than the massive collective intervention really required. It's almost as though their message is, 'charity, not change.' We applaud people's charity in the here and now. And we need to remind people that we don't want this to be our only response. Like thoughts and prayers, it's not a substitute for long-term solutions or leadership.
 - *"Opening our wallets is part of what we're all doing individually to help out as best we can in this current disaster. And the new National Bushfire Recovery Agency is important. But please, Prime Minister, don't tell us that putting an ambulance at the bottom of a cliff is your only real policy, or the best we can do as a nation. We want change, not just charity."*



- **Speak in a positive transformation frame.** More on this in the next point, but before jumping straight to policy asks, paint the big picture choice for people.
 - *“We cannot stay beholden to fossil fuels and survive. Our government cannot stay beholden to one powerful lobby at the expense of our ability to live, work, protect our homes and our wildlife. There are solutions that are good for people, our economy, our livelihoods and our planet. But we must have the courage to front them.”*

3. Name what we want.

Articulate the choices for people: courage, leadership, honesty, vision, a step-change vs further denial and despair... perhaps even a descent into a more militaristic, less free and democratic country. The [Vision of Australian reMADE](#), developed from conversations with people from all walks of life, provides further language for talking about what we actually want and can provide some common ground. This can be a moment for regeneration, transformation, community and renewal.

Some people in the community are responding by internalising the guilt and pledging individual change; others want to project blame entirely onto some other group or leader. The pitfall is paralysis over progress.

Our task now as leaders is to ensure the losses and sacrifices of so many were not in vain, or merely a preview of yet more misery without meaning. There's more for individual organisations and collectives to flesh out in your own thinking here, but below are some ideas indicative of the scale we're talking about:

1. *Australia to go on full climate emergency footing, to make the rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes to all aspects of society necessary to limit global warming to less than 1.5 degrees.*
2. *Australia to establish a Universal Care Guarantee – a climate safety net – that no resident of Australia will be left behind by severe climate damage.*
3. *Emergency intervention for Australia's flora and fauna in the wake of this unprecedented disaster for nature (e.g.: new money, new nature laws and new rules around development and land use).*

Or you might want to revisit [the School Strikers' Demands](#), the [Green New Deal conversation](#), etc.

4. Reach out to conservatives and people they trust.

Two things can be true now. Firstly, more people are turning to civil society and environment groups as truth-tellers in the midst of catastrophe. Secondly, new conservative voices are stepping up to voice their concern, too. Both are good. We know that traditionally in climate change, the messenger matters as much as the message. There are still going to be audiences that 'converts' can reach much better than traditional advocates might. We're not going to win transformation from the left flank alone.

But we have a moment where politics and political parties don't seem to matter as much. Voters of all persuasions are keen to talk about what good leadership looks like in nonpartisan ways. For a brief moment, party lines are down. Start talking about what is possible, while we have this window where our preconceptions have been smashed.



Get familiar with the moderate and conservative voices finally joining this conversation, from the [Coalition for Conservation](#) and [Young Liberals](#) to [NSW Environment Minister Matt Kean](#) and [RepublicEN](#) in the US. Consider reaching out, partnering in press releases, etc. Being generous, inclusive, supportive and highlighting where we agree cuts through, breaks the acrimony, builds trust and gives other conservatives permission to join. This is not a partisan issue, this is not business as usual. Show conservatives going out on a limb that they are welcome and valuable to this debate. Stay open to backflips and surprises.

Conclusion

Our nation has been rudely awakened to the reality that we are one of the most climate vulnerable countries on the planet. And now we have a moment where people are ready to participate in reshaping the system; ready to participate in new ways to reflect the new world. How are we enabling this?

We need to make sure we don't get stuck just responding to the government's narrow frame of what 'practical action' looks like, or worse. We're already seeing hints of an alternative agenda, which uses this 'New Normal' moment as a [shock doctrine](#) opportunity to justify a different kind of agenda (imagine dams and land clearing, lucrative service delivery contracts for private contractors, increase in police powers, decrease in nature protection laws, cracking down on activism, privatising essential services, etc). Here getting out early in the public debate is key. We need to socialise our thinking and not wait for perfectly formed ideas and solutions or we'll get stuck on the back foot.

Australians want a future where people and nature thrive. Where the values of a free, vibrant, democratic and caring society are strengthened, not sacrificed. We want to put these values front and centre, but so often they get pushed to the periphery of the debate – whether on our airwaves or in our parliaments. We get told that now is not the time, or we have to be ever-wealthier first, before we can decide to care for people and planet. We've already seen the hollowness of the 'cost of action' argument in light of the 'cost of inaction' reality. Business as usual is no longer an option. Let's name what we want, and talk about the transformation required to get there.



Australia reMADE is an independent, non-partisan education, communication and research initiative dedicated to 'the best version of us': a country where people and nature thrive. To see what we stand for, read the [Vision for Australia reMADE](#) on our website, which came out of qualitative research conversations with Australians from all walks of life. We are funded by a range of civil society organisations and philanthropy. To get in touch, contact info@AustraliareMADE.org.