

# Why business as usual is so scary?

Shortly after Christmas Day, the sky disappeared. It was only then that I realised I'd always taken it for granted. The sky, and the air. I'd always taken the air for granted too, and now it was hazardous.



Like many parts of Australia, my hometown of Canberra had a truly terrible summer. [Surrounded by bushfires, and sitting in a geographic bowl between mountain ranges](#), the city filled with smoke and choked on it for months.

The smoke filled the air with fine particles that are dangerous to human health because they penetrate deep into the lungs, can trigger or exacerbate chronic disease and respiratory problems, and have been linked to increase mortality. [Concentrations of PM2.5](#) — the smallest and worst of these fine particles — are measured in terms of 10 micrograms per cubic meter ( $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$ ), with up to 25  $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$  considered low risk, 40 to 106 considered 'unhealthy', and 250 to 500 considered 'hazardous extreme'.

From mid-November to late January, Canberra's PM2.5 levels mostly hovered between 50 and 100, and a for a few terrifying days in early January they sat just below 1000 — so high an official rating didn't exist.

Meanwhile, bushfires in surrounding areas burned out of control, incinerating everything in their path.

All of this was bad enough, but the thing I struggled with the most was that, for the most part, life just went on as normal. Yes, some people wore PM2.5 masks. Yes, there was a run on air purifiers and weather sealing tape. But, apart from those 'beyond hazardous extreme' days when many places shut up shop, not a lot changed and, honestly, I couldn't get my head around it.

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On one such 'normal' day, I caught the light rail into the city to go to work. As we disembarked, the air was thick with smoke haze and the sun was small, dim and red. I walked through the haze in a crowd of office workers wearing masks and felt as though we had all stepped into a new reality – a dystopic future that had already become our present.

When I examined my reaction, I realised that on some level I was expecting all of this horror to make a difference. I know it was naïve, but I even hoped these bushfires might act as a circuit breaker and force our government to accept the need for more serious climate action.

Then, on 29 January, Prime Minister Scott Morrison extinguished my naïve hopes by [appearing at the National Press Club](#) to reassure us that the government is focused on 'keeping our economy strong'.

He went on to stress the importance of adaptation and resilience, because 'when it comes to practical safety of people living in bushfire zones, hazard reduction is even more important than emissions reduction.'

Although the Prime Minister did acknowledge 'the need to take action to reduce global emissions, to mitigate the risk of climate change', he defended the LNP's existing 'balanced and responsible emissions reduction plan', because anything else might risk damaging the economy.

On the one hand, this past summer has absolutely demonstrated the need for us to adapt to the reality of a changing climate and to do everything we can to make communities and our environment more resilient to the heat, the droughts and the increasingly frequent extreme weather events. Given that we have already [locked in worsening climate change](#), focusing on adaptation and resilience is common sense.

On the other hand, it is utterly chilling to hear our Prime Minister emphasise adaptation and resilience in a context in which he is refusing to take serious mitigation action.

Warming the climate to +1 degrees celsius has already ushered in a new reality of heatwaves, severe droughts, and catastrophic fires that start in Spring and burn for months. We are currently on track to reach +3 degrees celsius by 2100, which will lead to sea level rises of between 1 and 2 metres, extreme heatwaves, a significant drop in food production, and many more bushfires and extreme weather events.

Are we happy to just adapt to these extreme outcomes? Shouldn't we be doing literally everything in our power to reduce these risks?

The other day, my daughter casually mentioned that her personal future wasn't worth worrying about since 'the world is literally going to explode.' She said it in such a matter of fact way, and it broke my heart.

She's not alone in feeling anxious, even nihilistic, about the threat of climate change. [Children all over the world are experiencing 'eco-anxiety' or 'climate depression'](#).

And, yes, I know that alarmist language doesn't help, and that helping her to combat feelings of powerlessness by taking some kind of action does. But, honestly, explain to me how that works when the air is literally hazardous, the sky has disappeared, and our Prime Minister is telling us to adapt because the economy is more important than mitigation?



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Main image: The Australian Parliament house is hardly visible behind a dense smog. (Photo by Daniiiellc/Getty Images)

By Dr Cristy Clark. Taken from Eureka Street.