

The Project of Climate Change Denialism: Tackling Bushfires in the Post-truth Age

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Post-truth politics has established itself as a new cultural norm in the twenty-first century majorly through promoting scepticism over science and methods of science which are often anchored on testable facts and empirical truth. Climate change denialism remains a matter of contention in the contemporary world owing much to the post-truth narratives. The counter-narratives to climate change appear to be resilient enough to influence the political decisions of nation-states by instilling scepticism among people. Although environmentalists and scientists maintain that Australia is facing bushfires at an alarming rate because of climate change, the legislators are hesitant to address the issue as such. The official narratives on bushfires, every so often, happen to be misleading and unscientific. A possible project of climate change denialism is at work in Australia while the nation burns with bushfires. Tackling bushfires in the age of post-truth politics turns out to be more difficult since it demands great effort to deal with the post-truth narratives first, and then get into the issue at hand. This article is an attempt to examine the political dimension of climate change in the age of post-truth politics and how post-truth narratives play a vital role in dealing with bushfires in Australia.

Keywords: Climate change, Climate change denialism, Australia, Bushfires, Post-truth

Introduction

Post-truth politics has established itself as a new cultural norm in the twenty-first century majorly through promoting doubts and scepticism over science and methods of science which are often anchored on the principle of verification and empirical truth. As the world embarked on post-truth politics as the new normal, the distinction between facts and lies has become murkier. Though the traits of post-truth politics could be traced long back in human history, it has emerged as a cultural practice in the digitally aided new world. In the post-truth world, facts and truth are often replaced by believability. Oxford Dictionaries, which selected the term ‘post-truth’ as the word of the year in 2016, defines it as ‘relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’. Post-truth narratives place great significance on emotion and believability and consequently get accepted by the public regardless of their lack of truth value.

Denial of science and the creation of doubt could be conceived as the primary steps towards post-truth politics. As Lee McIntyre (2018) states, “In a world where ideology trumps science, post-truth is the inevitable next step” (p.31). Proposing climate change as a fabricated story is just another case of denial of science where the scientific studies on climate change and the evidence are neglected as propaganda. Climate change denialism remains a matter of contention in the contemporary world owing much to the post-truth narratives. Since the very moment scientists came up with the proposition that climate change is an existing danger, counter-narratives have popped up from various corners. These counter-narratives appear to be so sturdy and funded by business giants and they proved to be resilient enough to influence the political decisions of nation-states by instilling scepticism among the people. This points towards a possible project of climate change denialism and it is the same climate change denialism project that works in Australia while the nation burns with bushfires. Although environmentalists and scientists maintain that the nation is facing bushfires at an alarming rate because of climate change, the legislators are hesitant to address the issue as such.

Literature Review

The escalating gravity of bushfires in Australia and the nation's reluctance to come up with adequate measures to tackle climate change has gained international attention and a number of studies were done on the issue. "Climate Change and Australia" examines the various incidents of altered weather conditions in the nation and tries to call attention to the need to reduce the emission of greenhouse gases (Head, Michael, Toole, & McGregor, 2014). The repeal of carbon pricing in Australia in 2013 and the possible consequences are discussed in the research article, "Up and Down with Climate Politics 2013-2016: The Repeal of Carbon Pricing in Australia" (Crowley, 2017). Riley E. Dunlap (2013) offers a comprehensive study of how climate change denialism works as "an organised" event in his article "Climate Change Skepticism and Denial: An Introduction" by evaluating the socio-political condition of the United States of America.

This article is an attempt to examine the political dimension of climate change in the age of post-truth politics and how the post-truth narratives play a vital role in dealing with bushfires in Australia in particular. The study looks at the reactions to bushfires in Australia keenly and tries to evaluate how far climate change denialism influences the nation and its people. Content analysis of political narratives such as press meetings, tweets and social media comments and interpretive discourse and narrative analysis are employed in this particular study.

Post-truth and Agnotology

Agnotology, "the cultural production of ignorance," facilitates the post-truth condition by inducing doubt among people and the post-truth narratives, in turn, accelerate agnotology. Post-truth, in effect, is not synonymous with the lie; rather, it denotes a condition in which the distinction between truth and lie is blurred which makes the discrepancy between the two insurmountable. Ignas Kalpokas (2019) observes, "we have entered an era where the distinction between truth and lie is no longer important"(p.13). Post-truth politics exploits people's tendency to stick to their existing belief system and to go in harmony with the majority opinion.

In the post-truth age, deliberate attempts are made to question the legitimacy of science by creating misperceptions. In a world, where believability is placed superior to fact, people tend to believe whatever they want to believe. When they encounter a piece of information that contradicts their existing belief system, they try to stick to their existing notions and reject everything else. Convenience matters more than truth on such occasions. Cognitive biases, systematic errors that human beings make during thinking and judgment, have a pivotal role in the growth of post-truth politics. People find themselves surrounded by numerous narratives on various subjects in the digitally aided world and the abundance of information, in a way, confuses people for it becomes a tougher task to find the factual account of something. As Eli Pariser (2011) notes, life in social media is like living inside a 'filter bubble'. What users see on their social media walls do appear according to their previous search and activity history and they would be filtered for personalised experiences. The filter bubble effect, by which people receive information from like-minded ones only, narrows down the chances of getting at factual information by restricting opportunities to see and compare the contrary narratives. As a whole, in the age of social media where the internet has become the information superhighway, confusing people is not a difficult job to do. Consequently, people tend to believe in narratives that come from their kith and kin, the people whom they trust to believe.

The project of climate change denialism

Since the early nineteenth century, research has been conducted on climate change and it was assumed that the emission of greenhouse gases would possibly adversely affect the global climate. In earlier research, scientists preferred the term 'inadvertent climate modification' to denote the human impact on climate. The term global warming first appeared in a 1975 article by Wallace Broecker. Though the terms climate change and global warming are used interchangeably in many places, they are not synonymous. Whereas global warming denotes the increase of average global surface temperature, climate change encompasses the phenomenon of global warming as well as the resulting changes in weather patterns. In June 1988, NASA scientist James Hansen proposed in the US Congress that a cause-and-effect

relationship between greenhouse gases and global warming could be proven scientifically. By the 1990s, it was proved that greenhouse gases and the resulting phenomenon of global warming play an inevitable role in most of the incidents of climate change around the world. The scientific community has now established that climate change is an existing phenomenon and that human actions result in climate change. Anthropogenic global warming or human cause global warming is not a rumour but a fact that should be dealt with immediately.

However, as soon as scientists approached a consensus on climate change, there emerged a number of counter-narratives holding that climate change is just a rumour. The magnitude of climate change denialism narratives in the contemporary world hints at a possible project of creating confusion among the people regarding the authenticity of climate change. The complex nature of climate change makes it perplexing to the common people and the counter-narratives make the people even more confused. The climate change denialism project brings originates from this confusion among people and the distaste towards science.

Climate change denialism was identified as an organized project during the early years of the twenty-first century, especially with the publication of an article on climate change by Riley Dunlap and Aaron McCright. They explored the connection between climate change denialism narratives and conservative think tanks. Climate change denialism could be reflected as an “organized disinformation campaign” to “generate skepticism” regarding anthropogenic climate change (Dunlap, 2013, p. 692). The climate change denialism project is largely associated with economic policies that are dependent on fuel industries. To admit the existence of anthropogenic climate change is to come up with necessary actions to reduce global warming such as reducing the emission of greenhouse gases which will, in turn, become a headache for the fossil fuel industry.

One of the major aims of the climate change denialism project is to prevent policymaking by the governments to mitigate the dangers of climate change. To tackle the possible adversities of climate change,

the emission of greenhouse gases should be reduced and this will obviously affect the economy of nations and industries which are heavily dependent on fossil fuels. Dunlap and McCright opine that in order to avert policymaking that will focus on carbon tax and similar strategies, the fossil fuel industry has accelerated climate change denialism by negating the reality and gravity of the issue. The fossil fuel industry's attempt to deny climate change could be read along with the tobacco industry's effort to negate the scientific claim that tobacco causes cancer and other diseases. Just like how the tobacco industry had questioned the legitimacy of the scientific claims and evidence that tobacco is injurious to human health, the fossil fuel industry, today, interrogates the scientific claims of climate change. Australia finds it difficult to deal with natural disasters that get intensified each year due to climate change, for they also need to fight the climate change denialism project at the start.

Australian bushfires & climate change denialism

A lion's share of the Australian continent is arid and fire-prone. "At a geological scale, the aridity of the continent can be seen as a long-term consequence of its northward movement over the last 30 million years as part of the breakup of Gondwana" (Head, Michael, Toole, & McGregor, 2014). The nation's economy majorly relies on the fossil fuel industry and that, in turn, makes Australia one of the highest producers of greenhouse gases. Coal is a major export commodity and source of domestic electricity generation in the nation. The atmospheric temperature of the nation has consistently escalated through the years, especially after the 1950s. Bushfires were not new to the inhabitants of the land; however, the severity of bushfires has increased manifold in recent times. 'The Black Saturday Fire', which occurred in February 2013, resulted in the death of 173 people in Melbourne. An additional 374 people also got killed during the first week of the heatwave which began around January 26, 2013. The intensity of bushfires reached its peak during 2019-20. The bushfires that started in June 2019 lasted till May 2020. According to the Australian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council (AFAC), 33 people died in the incident and a total of 3094 houses were burnt down. Over 17 million hectares of land had been burned and the Bureau

of Meteorology noted it as “the largest in scale in the modern record in New South Wales, while the total area burnt appears to be the largest in a single recorded fire season for eastern Australia” (Richards, Brew, & Smith, 2020).

Though the continent went through a series of harsh natural disasters, taking proper actions to mitigate climate change was not an easy task for the world’s one of the largest exporters of coal. When about 75% of the citizens of Australia believe that climate change is an existing phenomenon, only 50% of them think that human activities contribute to climate change. Asserting that climate change denialism exists in Australia, Lesley Head (2014) argues that “As in the United States, denialism is closely associated with conservative think tanks” (2014, p. 182). When the federal labour government joined forces with the Greens party in 2010 to formulate a carbon pricing scheme, the opposition Liberal and National party alliance took a more conservative approach towards climate change. Studies show that the media propagated biased news to promote climate change denialism (Leviston & Walker, 2012).

Considering the significance of mining and the export of fossil fuels to the nation’s economy, the legislators often find it difficult to come up with substantial remedial projects and regulations to deal with climate change. Tackling bushfires in the age of post-truth politics corroborates to be more difficult since it demands great effort to deal with the post-truth narratives first, and then get into the issue at hand. As the discussions on climate change have modified into a political issue related to the national interest, most of the climate change denialist narratives accuse the environmentalists and the propagators of climate change who demand the nation’s government to come up with a sufficient action plan to reduce the production of greenhouse gases as people against national interests.

A study conducted in association with the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) proves that, in Australia, media plays a vital role in the publicity of climate change denialism as in any post-truth narrative. According to the study, which was conducted in 2010, 15% of the Australian population is unsure of

the existence of climate change and most of them are confused because of the presence of conflicting narratives. Seven per cent of the population who believes climate change is not true also believes that it is propaganda. Though the majority of people accept climate change as a reality, most of them are unsure of the causes and remedial methods of climate change. And there is a prevalent perception among the people that ‘climate change and its impacts are being exaggerated by certain interest groups’ for financial benefits (Peta Ashworth, Talia Jeanneret, John Gardner, & Hylton Shaw, 2011). The post-truth narratives of climate change denialism grow and flourish out of the chaotic states of minds of the people regarding the issue.

Whenever an attempt to link bushfires to climate change is made, counter-narratives are produced without delay, often by the legislators in the government or by any other influential politicians. The then deputy prime minister of Australia, Michael McCormack, described the people who tried to connect climate change with the worsening condition of bushfires as ‘raving inner-city lunatics’ during the 2019-2020 bushfires. McCormack opined,

We’ve had fires in Australia since time began, and what people need now is a little bit of sympathy, understanding and real assistance – they need help, they need shelter ... They don’t need the ravings of some pure, enlightened and woke capital city greenies at this time, when they’re trying to save their homes, when in fact they’re going out in many cases saving other peoples’ homes and leaving their own homes at risk. (Remeikis, 2021).

Totally ignoring the cause-and-effect relationship between climate change and the increasing gravity of bushfires, McCormack created an aura that climate change is not an issue to deal with. His words are more or less emotionally appealing in an attempt to connect with the suffering people and to divert attention from the climate change crisis. When he points out that Australia has always been facing bushfires, he consciously hides the fact that the intensity of bushfires has escalated in recent times. Bushfires start earlier in each year and the bushfires of 2019-20 started in June whereas naturally bushfires occur at the beginning of summer and it lasted almost one year. BBC

reports that Scott Morrison, the prime minister of Australia, refused to answer the question regarding climate change and stated, “My only thoughts today are with those who have lost their lives and their families” (2019). Neglecting facts instead of addressing them is a common practice in post-truth politics. As a substitute to deal with climate change as a potential danger, the prime minister, in fact, came up with a tweet showing his “concern” for the affected without mentioning any legislative actions to deal with the dangers of climate change. Morrison’s (2019) tweet read as “Our thoughts and prayers are with those who have been so directly and horribly impacted by these fires”.

Conservative Liberal MP Craig Kelly asserted many times that climate change has nothing to do with bushfires in Australia. According to him, the cause of bushfires is drought and high fuel loads and there is no evidence to show that climate change is the reason behind the increasing temperature and bushfires. He accused people of getting out in the name of climate change and “scoring political points”. Kelly argued,

To try to make out as some politicians have to hijack this debate, exploit this tragedy and push their ideological barrow, that somehow or another the Australian government could have done something by reducing its carbon emissions that would have reduced these bushfires is just complete nonsense. (Martin, 2021)

In order to make his assertions more believable, Kelly also added that scientists have reported that there is no link between drought and climate change. He went on to add, “People here in Australia understand – if they look at the evidence and look at the signs – there is nothing that we can do here in Australia by sending billions more off to China to buy solar panels to replace our coal-fired electricity generators”. Though Kelly did not provide any evidence for his claim that scientists have proven there is no link between climate change and droughts in Australia, he could create a sense that his claims are scientifically proven. His emphasis on ‘evidence’ and ‘signs’, though he does not provide any of them, also makes his narrative a believable one. Kelly does not care for evidence provided to prove that the

intensity of bushfires has escalated owing much to climate change and instead, continuously demands for ‘evidence’ just to mislead people. One of the major issues with the post-truth politics is that the accused have to carry the burden of proving themselves and the accusers can come up with any kind of allegations without having any evidence to prove their claims.

Questioning and belittling one’s authority is another tactic of post-truth politics. Craig Kelly, in a discussion on climate change, called Laura Tobin, a meteorologist, a “weather girl” who “had no idea what she was talking about”. In fact, Laura Tobin is a working meteorologist who possesses a degree in physics and meteorology and she worked as an aviation forecaster at the Royal Air Force for four years. On the other hand, Craig Kelly is a politician with more than thirty years of experience in business not in any branches of science. However, he dares to question the authenticity of a scientist on a matter in which she conducts research and claims that her arguments are “not true”. Truth for Kelly is not what the scientists prove with evidence but what he believes. Anti-expertism is inherent in post-truth politics which enables anyone to come up with any kind of nonsense as truth.

Partial truths and the hiding of information also play a vital part in the post-truth narratives. Niels Andela et.al. (2019) found that in the past two decades, the land burned by wildfires had decreased by 24% globally in their research paper “The Global Fire Atlas of Individual Fire Size, Duration, Speed and Direction”. Referencing their finding, Craig Kelly argued that bushfires in Australia were not an unusual event though statistics showed that it was catastrophic in the year. What Kelly did not mention was that the research paper which had quoted to substantiate his argument also stated that one of the major reasons for the decrease was the changes made by humans to the landscape such as turning forests into agricultural lands. Moreover, Craig accused the Green Party of hazard reduction burns. Nationals MP Barnaby Joyce also came up with similar accusations stating many of the policies taken in the name of climate change management act as barriers among “many of the practicalities of fighting a fire and managing it”. Anyhow, these claims were dismissed as misleading and outright lies by the fire experts in Australia. Professor Ross

Bradstock, the director of the Centre for Environmental Risk Management of Bushfires at the University of Wollongong, stated that “These are very tired and very old conspiracy theories that get a run after most major fires”. Greg Mullins, a former New South Wales (NSW) fire and rescue commissioner, stated that blaming “greenies” is “a familiar, populist, but basically untrue claim”. According to Bradstock, “Hazard reduction work has increased because of increased funding to the RFS and to national parks. There has been more carried out in recent years than in previous decades”. He considers Joyce’s claims as “without foundation” and “an obvious attempt to deflect the conversation away from climate change” (Readfearn, 2021).

Matt Canavan, the former Australian senator, posted a sardonic tweet with the caption “climate change” on June 10, 2021. He posted news reports showing snowy scenes from New South Wales and hinted that global warming is unreal because snowy weather still happens in Australia. The tweet was obviously misleading because occurrences of cold snaps do not prove that climate change or global warming is not real. Nerilie Abram et al. point out,

Just as average temperatures in Australia have risen markedly over the past century, so too have winter temperatures. That doesn’t mean climate change is not happening. In a warming world, extremely cold winter temperatures can still occur, but less often than they used to. In fact, human-caused climate change means extreme winter warmth now occurs more often, and across larger parts of the country. Record-breaking hot events in Australia now far outweigh record breaking cold events. (Abram, Kauwe, & Perkins-Kirkpatrick, 2021)

Matt Canavan is a pro-coal proponent who denied climate change whenever possible. Although he agreed, in December 2019, that Australia should reduce carbon emissions, he added, “What I don’t agree with is that doing so in Australia would significantly or at all reduce bushfire risk. ... The fires have not started due to climate change” (Taylor & Remeikis, 2021).

Gerard Rennick, senator for Queensland, also is a climate change sceptic who often comes up with arguments to deny the

existence of climate change. He repeatedly accused the Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) of the government of Australia of manipulating climate data and playing a part in the “global warming agenda”. In an interview with Sky News in November 2019, Rennick said, “I don’t believe the record, the changing records and the way they’ve gone about it” (Taylor & Remeikis, 2021). He continued to deny the impact of human activities on the climate during the bushfires in 2019-20 through his social media posts. In December 2019, Rennick wrote a Facebook post stating,

A sea wall being built 7000 years ago to deal with rising sea levels isn’t surprising. The earth has been warming for around 12,000 years - the time period is known as the Holocene. Around 7,000 years could tie up with the Holocene highstand where sea levels rose quite dramatically. Not sure of the reason why but to the best of my knowledge it wasn’t due to coal powered fire stations. (Rennick, 2019)

The primary intention of the post could be recognised as to spread confusion among the people about the scientific claims on climate change.

Conclusion

Climate change denialism has grown into an organised project in the post-truth era. Most of the arguments made by climate change denialists could be linked to post-truth politics which has basically grown out of the refusal of science and scientific methods. Science always tries to reach the empirical truth through continuous experiments and observations. Whereas, post-truth narratives sprout out of scepticism and develop relying on people’s emotions and beliefs. Post-truth narratives are often characterised by their heavy focus on appeal to emotion and belief systems, use of partial truth and outright lies, rejection of expert opinions, hiding information and a total disregard for facts and evidence.

The project of climate change denialism was so evident during the 2019-2020 Australian bushfires which is also known as the Black Summer. Scientists have proved through a series of experiments that anthropogenic climate change is an existing phenomenon that could

turn out dangerous anytime in the near future. In fact, research shows that the world is going through severe natural disasters as a result of global warming. Though bushfires in the summer season were not new to the Australian continent, the gravity of bushfires has intensified manifold in the recent past. Scientists point out that the fossil fuel industry has much to do with the rapid climate change across the continent because the fossil fuel industry is the reason behind the emission of greenhouse gases in large quantities. However, the scientific claims on climate change are not accepted by many of the legislators and they propose that the narratives of climate change are just rumours. The climate change denialists come up with their own narratives of what they believe as truth, and encourage people to believe in their versions.

Tackling bushfires in the post-truth age becomes more challenging because of the climate change denialism project. In order to come up with measures to reduce the impact of climate change in the continent, the governing bodies need to deal with the climate change denialism project at first, with which many of the legislators themselves are associated. For a nation like Australia, of which the economy majorly relies on the fossil fuel industry and mining, reducing the emission of greenhouse gases is a herculean task that could be attained only through proper legislative changes. For that, the post-truth narratives should be checked and fact-checking should be given foremost priority.

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