Australia’s new normal ... as city temperatures hit 47C people shelter from the deadly heat

In Sydney’s baking suburbs, fans have sold out – and fears about the effects of climate change are mounting

By Alex McKinnon Sunday 19 February 2017 / www.theguardian.com

Nahid is resting on a bench outside a Target clothing store, her groceries beside her. A cheery, middle-aged woman with a soft Egyptian accent, she is eating a cone of bubblegum ice-cream as though it contains the secret of life. When I ask her if she’s enjoying her ice-cream, it takes her 30 seconds to stop laughing.

“On the weekend I was sick! Sick from the heat! It was like a virus,” she exclaims. “My nephew, he was throwing up from the heat! He couldn’t even take water, he was so sick.

“They say it’s going to be this bad in March too! Normally it is a little cooler in March, but this year...” Nahid shakes her head sorrowfully.

Australians are no strangers to hot weather. But for the past week large parts of the continent have suffered a heatwave of unusual length and intensity. Temperature records were beaten in cities and rural towns around the country. Shops across Sydney
ran out of fans, and New South Wales energy minister Don Harwin urged people to beat
the heat by going to the movies. More than 40,000 homes in South Australia
experienced blackouts as electricity networks struggled to cope with the increased
demand placed on the grid by air conditioners.

For those lucky enough to live near the coast, there’s an easy solution: go for a swim.
Sydney’s beaches have been packed, as they are every summer, with city dwellers and
tourists desperate to cool off.

But in the far-western Sydney suburb of Penrith – 60km from the coast – options for
getting out of the heat are few. Penrith has the dubious honour of being Sydney’s hottest
suburb, with summer daytime temperatures four or five degrees higher than in the inner
city. During last week’s heatwave, the suburb sweltered through an unheard-of 46.9°C –
a record for the city. “Penrith has had about 12 days above 40 degrees this summer,
which is clearly unusual,” says Karl Braganza, climate monitoring manager at the
Bureau of Meteorology.

When it gets that hot, Penrith mayor John Thain recommends that people don’t even
venture outside. “The burn factor here’s so quick: it’s really important for people to stay
safe,” Thain says. “Last weekend people were just hunkered down at home.”

For locals who want or need to leave the house in such heat, there’s one overriding
option: Westfield Penrith Plaza, a sprawling shopping complex just off High Street.
Crucially, it has air conditioning – a feature that has attracted Nahid and swarms of
other Penrith locals on yet another boiling Sydney day. Children hang around after
school is let out; mothers with young children are anxious to prevent heat-related
tantrums; and pensioners kill time until the sun goes down and the heat begins to
dissipate.

Step through Westfield’s sliding glass doors into the outside world, and the heat hits you
like a car door. Strolling a few hundred metres up High Street is like wading through pea
soup. You sweat from places you never knew sweat could come from – the backs of your
knees, the small of your back, your feet. Middle-aged women sport sun umbrellas, a
criminally overdue fashion accessory in Australia; pedestrians huddle in what little
patches of shade they can find while they wait at crosswalks.

In the Australian Arms Hotel, where the only women present are those working behind
the bar, dozens of men are cooling off after a day’s work. Brian, a big, taciturn
Englishman with a beer belly and a long bushranger beard, is a fan of the Australian
climate, but the heatwave has forced him to revise his position somewhat. “They said it
was 47 degrees last week, but in your backyard, with the sun coming off the concrete and
everything, it’s more like bloody 51,” he says.

The heatwave is officially over, but the reality of Australian summers getting hotter is
much more serious and far-reaching than a few more hot days each year. Almost every
Australian capital city experienced higher-than-average temperatures in January; in Sydney and Brisbane, it was the hottest month on record. That scorching January came after 2016 was the country’s fourth-hottest year on record – a year that, in turn, followed on from 2013, the hottest year the country has ever recorded.

That increasing heat has made an already dry continent even more prone to devastating bushfires. NSW Rural Fire Service commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons describes fire conditions during the heatwave as “the worst possible... they are catastrophic. We haven’t seen this in NSW to this extent, ever.” Fire conditions were even worse than on “black Saturday”, Australia’s worst-ever bushfire disaster, in 2009, in which 173 people died. Less dramatic, but just as worrying, is the rising number of deaths from heat stress, which already kills more Australians than all other natural disasters combined. A shockingly high number of Australians died of heat stress on 27 January – the day after Australia Day, a national holiday where outdoor activities like swimming, barbecues and going to sporting matches are commonplace.

It wouldn’t be unreasonable to assume that the Australian government’s response to this steadily unfolding public health and safety crisis would include some acknowledgement of the elephant in the room – climate change. That’s certainly the opinion of the Bureau of Meteorology, which warned in its state of the climate report, published in late 2016, that “the duration, frequency and intensity of extreme heat events have increased across large parts of Australia”, and that “Australian temperatures are projected to continue increasing”.

“There’s a clear trend where those extreme hot days across the continent are increasing, and quite dramatically over the past 20 years,” Braganza says. “Regarding fire weather – which includes things like wind speed, humidity, the drought factor – we’ve seen a shift in most of Australia’s fire-prone regions towards a longer fire season and an increase in the frequency and extremity of fire events, as well as fire danger days.”

But the country’s current administration, headed by the conservative Liberal Party and the rural-based National Party, is deeply hostile to any substantive action on climate change, and the recent heat has seemingly done little to change their minds.

Conservative governments in Britain, Germany and elsewhere have taken steps to reduce their nations’ carbon emissions, often suffering politically as a result. But no such political courage seems to exist in Australia. Instead, absurdity reigns. At the height of the heatwave last week, treasurer Scott Morrison, one of the most powerful politicians in the country, brandished a lump of coal at parliamentary question time, declaring coal to be the future of Australian energy. “This is coal. Don’t be afraid! Don’t be scared!” Morrison proclaimed to the laughter of his government colleagues. They passed the lump of coal around among themselves as Morrison claimed the opposition Labor party, which has proposed ambitious renewable energy targets, are suffering from “coalophobia”. It was reminiscent of the stunt pulled in 2015 by US Republican senator James Inhofe, who infamously threw a snowball on the floor of Congress as “evidence” that global warming is a myth.
Morrison’s actions typify the government’s attitude to climate change – not just indifference, but an active hostility towards anything that threatens the country’s large coal industry. Last year prime minister Malcolm Turnbull and a number of his ministers blamed another South Australian blackout on the state’s renewable energy supply, despite advice from the public service stating that the real cause was a large storm that knocked over several major transmission lines.

Turnbull’s predecessor, Tony Abbott, made Australia the first nation on earth to roll back climate change legislation when he abolished the carbon trading scheme introduced by his Labor predecessor. Turnbull himself, once a keen advocate of renewable energy, has performed an abrupt about-face since assuming office in 2015; he now sings the praises of so-called “clean coal”, a hypothetical technology with dubious environmental and financial returns.

If Australian summers grow ever hotter in the years ahead, the public’s patience for such inaction is likely to wear thin. Perhaps moving parliament to Penrith – or somewhere without air conditioning – might help Australia’s politicians move things along.