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Learning Backwards, Leaning Forwards: Why Australia Needs a Harmonised, Proactive Climate Adaptation Framework

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1. Introduction: From Disaster Response to Climate Reality

Over recent decades, Australia has experienced a demonstrable increase in the frequency, intensity, and compounding nature of climate-related disasters, including catastrophic bushfires, prolonged flooding events, heatwaves, and accelerating coastal erosion (IPCC, 2023). These impacts have extended well beyond environmental damage, significantly affecting housing security, transport networks, agricultural productivity, public health, and economic stability.

In response, governments frequently invoke the mantra *"we will build back better."* Yet this raises an unavoidable question: when, and on what evidence? Despite successive disasters, inquiries, and reviews, Australia continues to respond largely through post-event recovery rather than pre-emptive adaptation. The gap between stated intent and delivered outcomes has become increasingly visible to communities, particularly those repeatedly affected by natural hazards.

This paper argues that Australia must move from *learning backwards*—reactively identifying failures after disasters — to *leaning forwards* through coordinated, anticipatory climate governance embedded across all three levels of government.

2. The Governance Disconnect: Fragmentation Across Jurisdictions

Australia's climate governance is structurally fragmented. Responsibility for climate mitigation, adaptation, land use, infrastructure, and disaster management is split across federal, state, and local governments, often without clear accountability mechanisms or binding coordination frameworks.

The Commonwealth Government controls national climate targets, emissions reporting, and major infrastructure funding programs. State governments manage planning systems, emergency services, and most critical infrastructure. Local governments are responsible for development approvals, drainage, local roads, and community resilience. In practice, this fragmentation results in misaligned incentives, policy inconsistency, and cost-shifting rather than risk reduction (Productivity Commission, 2014).

For example, federally funded infrastructure projects are sometimes approved without alignment to state hazard mapping or local flood intelligence, leading to assets that are technically compliant yet strategically vulnerable (Australian National Audit Office, 2022).

3. "Build Back Better": A Repeated Promise Without Structural Change

The phrase "build back better" has featured prominently in government responses following the 2011 Queensland floods, the 2019–20 Black Summer bushfires, and recent east coast flooding events. However, major reviews consistently identify the same systemic weaknesses:

- Infrastructure rebuilt to 'historical' standards rather than future climate projections
- Inadequate land-use controls in hazard-prone areas
- Poor integration of Indigenous land management knowledge
- Short-term funding cycles that discourage preventative investment

The Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements (2020) explicitly warned that continued reliance on recovery funding without prioritising mitigation would lead to escalating disaster costs and worsening outcomes. Yet, implementation of these recommendations remains uneven and largely discretionary.

4. The Case for a Nationally Harmonised Climate Adaptation Framework

A central failing of Australia's approach is the absence of a binding, nationally coordinated climate adaptation framework that aligns planning, infrastructure, and land management decisions across jurisdictions.

Harmonisation does not imply centralisation. Rather, it requires:

- Shared national standards for climate-resilient infrastructure
- Integrated risk modelling and data sharing
- Coordinated funding tied to long-term mitigation outcomes
- Clear accountability for implementation

International experience demonstrates that federated systems can successfully deliver coordinated climate action. Germany's *Energiewende* and the Netherlands' long-term flood adaptation strategies operate through national frameworks while preserving regional autonomy (OECD, 2021).

5. Infrastructure and Landscape Interventions: Moving Beyond Reactivity

5.1 Climate-Resilient Infrastructure

Roads, bridges, rail corridors, and utilities must be rebuilt above projected flood levels, using future climate scenarios rather than historical averages (Infrastructure Australia, 2023). Continuing to rebuild "like for like" infrastructure in high-risk zones represents a misuse of public funds.

5.2 Water Diversion and Floodplain Management

The construction of strategic water diversion channels, upstream retention basins, and floodplain reconnection can significantly reduce downstream flood impacts. Comparable approaches in the Netherlands and Japan demonstrate the effectiveness of designing *with* water rather than against it (Delta Programme, 2022).

5.3 Controlled Burning and Fuel Load Reduction

Regulated, periodic controlled burns—led by scientific evidence and Indigenous fire stewardship practices—are critical for reducing bushfire intensity. Despite overwhelming evidence, fuel load reduction remains politically contested and inconsistently applied (Royal Commission, 2020).

5.4 Re-afforestation and Catchment Restoration

Large-scale re-afforestation across degraded catchments improves water absorption, reduces erosion, enhances biodiversity, and contributes to carbon sequestration (CSIRO, 2022). Current efforts remain fragmented and under-resourced.

6. Agriculture, Land Clearing, and Missed Opportunities

Agricultural policy represents a significant gap in Australia's climate adaptation strategy. Historic land clearing, over-irrigation, and monoculture practices have increased vulnerability to drought, soil degradation, and flooding (Murray–Darling Basin Royal Commission, 2019).

Despite repeated inquiries, climate resilience measures in agriculture remain largely voluntary. International evidence shows that linking subsidies to sustainable land management outcomes is far more effective than advisory-only approaches (FAO, 2021).

7. Political Cycles and Policy Instability

Climate policy in Australia has been undermined by frequent policy reversals and partisan contestation, discouraging long-term investment and planning. Infrastructure and landscape-scale adaptation require time horizons well beyond electoral cycles, yet climate initiatives are routinely reframed or abandoned following changes in government (Climate Council, 2023).

This instability represents not only a policy failure but also a governance failure.

8. Identified Gaps Requiring Further Work

This analysis highlights several gaps that warrant further research and policy development:

- Absence of enforceable national adaptation standards
- Limited evaluation of local government resilience initiatives
- Insufficient integration of Indigenous-led land management
- Lack of transparent reporting on implementation of inquiry recommendations

Addressing these gaps is essential to translating rhetoric into measurable outcomes.

9. Conclusion: From Learning Backwards to Leaning Forwards

Australia simply put, can no longer afford to treat climate adaptation as an afterthought or a discretionary add-on to disaster recovery. The evidence is unequivocally clear, the inquiries are plentiful costly and simply kick the can down the road, the real costs of inaction are on not just impact on the human population but an existential national and global threat.

A National Climate Resilience Compact, jointly owned by federal, state, and local governments, offers a pathway forward—one grounded in prevention, coordination, and accountability. Without such reform, “build back better” will remain an empty slogan rather than a lived reality.

Appendix: References

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