



**Is drought being written out of
the Australian climate change
story?**

**The normative construction of
a climate extreme**

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- Is drought being written out of the Australian climate change story?
 - How is drought positioned in relation to climate change and adaptation?
 - No: drought as prominent and useful
 - Yes: drought as dryness and normal
 - Pros and cons of this framing of drought
 - Lessons about climate extremes
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- Drought as prominent and useful
 - Drought as prominent in climate change discourses
 - Increasing frequency and intensity
 - Intensity as a function of duration
 - Drought as useful in climate change discourses
 - Drought as proxy/temporal analogue
 - Source of experience and learning about adaptation
 - Applies to all climate variability/extremes
 - But particularly drought?
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- Drought as dryness and normal
 - Drought as dryness in climate change discourses
 - Climatological reality: dryness and droughts related
 - Statistical reality: averages and extremes related
 - Extremes relative to average conditions
 - Extremes constitutive of average conditions
 - Lived reality: drought and dryness related
 - Political reality: drought being reframed as dryness? For what purpose?
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- Drought as dryness and normal

‘The Panel considers future policy should seek to move people towards an acceptance that future dryness will occur and is not a crisis’.

Expert Social Panel (2009) *It’s about people: changing perspectives on dryness*, Report to Review of National Drought Policy

- Situations are ‘talked into being’ (Weick et al. 2005: 413)... Can they also be “talked out of being”?
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- Drought risk visceral, familiar and symbolic
 - Extends the time scale of concern and avoids perception of risk as episodic
 - Reverses expectation of government assistance
 - Progresses government agendas
 - Free trade and self-reliant agriculture
 - Drought as normal business risk, not disaster
 - Privatising risk, lean government model
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- **Inaccurate and misleading**

‘To a point, trends and patterns are well and good but we’re chartering history really aren’t we? It doesn’t mean it won’t turn around, but it doesn’t mean it will. This could be it’.

- **Unnecessary**

‘The lead up to this drought has been terrible... Even our normal years have got to the stage where they aren’t good years any more’.

Interviewees, ‘Critical Breaking Point? The effects of drought and other stressors on farming families’. www.bcg.org.au



- Either/or mentality
- Extremes not just relative, but absolute
 - Drought involves absolute hardship
 - This cannot be simply ‘written out’
- Demoralising and disempowering

‘They’re telling us that everything’s going to get hotter and drier and that isn’t helping because most of us are in a terrible frame of mind anyway and you need all the positive things, not the negative...’

Interviewee, ‘Critical Breaking Point? The effects of drought and other stressors on farming families’. www.bcg.org.au



- Drought is a significant pre-existing stressor
 - Increasing sensitivity
 - Decreasing adaptive capacity
 - Regardless of any political/linguistic maneuver to reduce people's 'exposure' to drought, vulnerability is increasing
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Drought's position in relation to CC:	Is drought in or out of sight?	Perceived influence on CC adaptation	Common to other climate extremes?
Proxy	In sight	+ ve	Y/N
Same	Out of sight	- ve	N
Stressor	In sight	- ve	Y



- Extreme events are ‘generally easy to recognize but difficult to define’ (Stephenson 2008: 12)
- We need to be alert to how climate extremes are interpreted and written into – and out of – the climate change story
- They are defined in relation to what is ‘normal’, and are becoming more ‘normal’

‘Extreme events will become the norm’.

UK Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott



- In particular, we need to watch how language is used to accommodate the increasing frequency of climate extremes under climate change
 - How are they recategorised?
 - What is the effect on adaptation?
 - What role does our desire to promote long-term adaptation play?
 - What role do other political agendas play?
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