

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND JUSTICE STANDING COMMITTEE

Ninth Report — “Western Australia’s Readiness for the 2011–12 Bushfire Season” — Tabling

Resumed from an earlier stage of the sitting.

MS M.M. QUIRK (Girrawheen) [12.20 pm]: The demands on the committee to complete this report in the short time we had to produce it were significant. I thank committee staff—principal research officer, Dr David Worth, and Ms Jovita Hogan—for their diligence and for assisting us so ably. I also thank my colleagues: the chairman, the member for Joondalup; deputy chair, the member for Ocean Reef; the member for Pilbara; and the member for Morley. I acknowledge the open way in which they approached the task of considering issues of immense public importance.

I think it is of significance that the report is a unanimous one, despite the accusation levelled at the time of the establishment of this inquiry that it was a political exercise and would serve no useful purpose. Having had some exposure to the area of emergency services for some years, I was heartened by the way in which the key agencies approached their very difficult and challenging task. In our hearings there was little evidence of the ego, turf wars and blame shifting that has characterised the relations between key agencies in recent years. The committee found there was a genuine goodwill to get things right. I think, however, after the extraordinary events in yesterday’s Margaret River fires, that relationship will be tested, and many in the Fire and Emergency Services Authority could be forgiven for being angry at the way this fire occurred. It is a question we will be pursuing with vigour.

Reflecting on the circumstances that led to this inquiry, I expect, however, support and adequate oversight of future endeavours of FESA by the Minister for Emergency Services and that will be forthcoming in the future. I think that the agency interoperability problems characterised in recent major incident reports were compounded by a lack of effort on the minister’s part to address the elephant in the corner of the room.

In terms of the future, our report has found that less than a third of Keelty’s recommendations have been completed. It is worth looking at appendix 9 of the report, which sets out what still needs to be done and by whom. It is also clear from the evidence we received that career firefighters have ongoing concerns about the level of training that they and volunteers have received in recent years. They were also concerned about firefighter numbers and the equipment deficits.

I need to remind members that the Minister for Emergency Services has wilfully ignored these legitimate concerns. He has slandered the secretary of the firefighters’ union in this place and refused to meet with the United Firefighters Union to hear directly from them. Although we understand that water bombers are an effective tool in our firefighting effort and we all welcome the investment by government in this equipment, the committee found that there are times when, because of prevailing weather conditions, any response from the air is not feasible. The day of the Perth hills fires was one such occasion when the air capabilities of the Department of Environment and Conservation and FESA were pretty well grounded. Our report reflects that, given this limitation, it is dangerous if undue reliance is placed on this capability being routinely available.

One of the most astounding pieces of evidence that came out of the inquiry was the fact that during the Perth hills bushfire there was no running sheet recording key events and decision making. Afterwards this had to be reconstructed. I understand part of the reason for this was a lack of common IT programs. One of our recommendations is that the WebEOC program be available to all key agencies this season so that this fundamental problem can be overcome. In this context, members will recall there was considerable speculation about the timing of the convening of the state emergency management group meeting by the Commissioner of Police, Karl O’Callaghan. The lack of clarity and prevarication about this matter was due in part to the lack of a decent and comprehensive running sheet recording these key events.

Despite some optimism of better working relationships between FESA, police and DEC, it is apparent that key stakeholders are not embracing their responsibilities. Local government is a key player and it is clear from appendix 11 of the report that in many local government areas there is a high risk of bushfire this season. I note that ironically Augusta–Margaret River is one of the local government areas listed as being at high risk. Local government appears to be paralysed into inaction by concerns and fears over legal liability and insurance implications. Sensible recommendations from Keelty, such as increasing the number of green waste roadside collections to encourage property owners to clear their properties more frequently, are being resisted. If it is a matter of money or resources, the government needs to have discussions with the Western Australian Local Government Association as to how this might be accommodated.

Similarly, it is clear that the centralised approach to addressing the Keelty recommendations has had the effect that some agencies are sitting back and waiting to see what directives come out of the Department of the Premier and Cabinet. That is very much reflected in the answer given in this place on 8 November 2011 by the Minister for Planning, who said —

My understanding is that the government's response to the report is being coordinated by the Department of the Premier and Cabinet from a whole-of-government approach. The Department of Planning is part of that process and is working with other agencies, such as the Fire and Emergency Services Authority and the Department of Environment and Conservation.

Members will note from appendix 9 that recommendation 4 of the Keelty report was to give legislative effect to planning for bushfire guidelines, but that is not well advanced. Likewise, recommendation 3 to transfer responsibility for declaring bushfire-prone areas to the WA Planning Commission seems as though it is being resisted because it claims it does not have the expertise or resources to undertake that role.

The inquiry found that more joint training exercises need to be conducted. That is essential. I am told that there were some surprising teething problems at a joint training exercise conducted on 8 November. It is important that basic shortcomings are identified, so that operational effectiveness can be maximised well in advance.

One of the most important issues that needs to be addressed by government is the demand for comprehensive information on fuel load to be readily available on a statewide basis. This is a pressing matter, but it has been assessed by witnesses to the committee as resource intensive and a large task. With record numbers of properties being lost in recent years it could be argued that this information is vital in informing not only the planning and risk assessment processes but also impressing upon private landowners and local government where additional measures will need to be taken. It is a false economy not to put more effort into this vital tool.

On the question of resources, I draw members' attention to appendix 7. It is worth noting the substantial amounts collected in various local government areas and comparing that with the expenditure under the emergency services levy. Whilst many of the areas have career stations that are funded out of the emergency services levy, there still seems to be a great disparity. I think there needs to be a greater transparency in how the emergency services levy is spent.

The committee found a lack of clarity amongst the general public about what is meant by a "total fire ban". This needs some attention in the weeks to come. I fully endorse the committee's recommendation that there be a formal acknowledgement of the valuable work of volunteers through the development of a volunteer charter. On that note, I take this opportunity firstly to thank those who are currently fighting the elements, which are very unfavourable in the Margaret River–Prevelly region and secondly to thank in advance all our firefighters, both volunteer and career, and wish them godspeed for this year's fire season.

MR I.M. BRITZA (Morley) [12.29 pm]: I rise to make a brief statement on the report before the house. Along with my colleague the member for Ocean Reef, I did not support the decision to undertake this inquiry; nor did I support its terms of reference, as I felt then, as I do now, that there were a couple of matters that simply did not warrant this demanding inquiry at this particular time, for four reasons. Firstly, the Keelty report had just been concluded and Mr Keelty himself felt that he would have sought more time to finalise his findings and recommendations, had he been able to do so. If he felt that he needed more time, why did we feel that we needed to conduct an inquiry in only the two to three months available to us?

Secondly, I felt that we did not really hear anything significantly new that was not addressed in the Keelty report; therefore, we appeared to simply repeat the process, even though it was extremely enlightening and instructive for me.

Thirdly, having to spend unnecessary time on this inquiry took valuable time and effort away from concluding our previous report on affordable housing, and preparing ourselves for our new major inquiry into the toll and stress that trauma creates for our front-line emergency workers. The added workload on our research staff was immense, and their ability to finalise and organise all that their profession required was testament to their dedication and commitment to the task at hand.

Lastly, if Mr Keelty had given the government nearly two years to implement his findings, why was it necessary for us to try to get some answers in fewer than three months? That did not mean that we were in complete disagreement; otherwise, we would have brought down a minority report, but these four reasons were enough to give me caution and made me feel that the inquiry really had no legitimate and indisputable agenda, and caused me to have genuine reservations about its primary and principal motivation.

Despite my absolute concerns and apprehensions, I was totally engaged in the inquiry and was captivated by the briefings, interviews and discussions we had with all the involved stakeholders. I was particularly taken with the evidence given to us by the Western Australian branch of the United Firefighters Union of Australia. Of all the hearings we engaged in, this particular hearing was, by far, the most profound, revealing, honest, frank and down-to-earth evidence I heard throughout the entire inquiry. I particularly recommend that members read and consider that evidence; certainly, parts of it should be implemented. Even though there may have been some differences of opinion, I am grateful that the committee worked amiably and extremely well, and I thought that that was terrific.

The fact that our research staff, Dr David Worth and Ms Jovita Hogan, presented such an outstanding and complete report indicates the remarkable quality, experience and dedication they both possess. Their focus on every task they have to undertake on the committee's behalf is worthy of commendation, acclaim and praise in the highest possible terms.

MR T.G. STEPHENS (Pilbara) [12.32 pm]: The report before the house inevitably speaks for itself, but it comes at a timely moment, given the significant issues we face this week in respect of the fires in the south west. It is important to remind the house that, despite what has been said, this is a unanimous report and the recommendations were agreed to by all the members who participated in this inquiry. While this work was being undertaken I was simultaneously reading a book by Bill Gammage, *The Biggest Estate on Earth — How Aborigines Made Australia*. When one is involved in an inquiry like this and reading a book like that, one cannot help but see that we have placed ourselves at great risk on this continent as a result of the way we have attempted to manage the landscape. In some ways, this report fits in neatly with the lessons that can be learnt from that book. We occupy this continent as the successors of people who endeavoured to manage this landscape in ways that have become unfashionable in recent times. The strategies that were historically deployed in managing the landscape of this continent are strategies from which we can draw lessons—lessons that are rammed home quite forcefully when we are faced with the challenge of serious fires, as we are this week. Some of those challenges were highlighted during the earlier debate in this place.

An important part of the way this state operates is to be reminded of exactly how the weather patterns work. We are reminded of the events of 1961, when a severe cyclone impacted the north of the state and delivered weather patterns in the south of the state that produced devastating and lethal fires, resulting in the distraction of emergency services personnel away from the then smaller population of the north of the state. We are now in a situation in which we have in the north increased population pressures and huge industrial investments of enormous consequence to the state and nation. This report is timely because it reminds the government of the challenges with which we are faced in Western Australia, and of the need to get on with the task of speeding up the response times of government agencies.

I disassociate myself from the comments made by the second speaker in this debate; if those comments are to be taken seriously, some hard and solid work should have gone into a minority report rather than disingenuous disassociation from the majority of the recommendations, as if they are somehow unimportant. What we have seen today highlights the necessity for these recommendations to be taken seriously and for the work of government to be advanced to meet the needs of residents from the top to the bottom of Western Australia.

Fires in the southern part of the state typically occur simultaneously with weather conditions in the north that place those residents at enormous risk. That was the case in 1961, and it could quite easily be the case again in the future. Strategies need to be deployed to equip the state with the capacity to focus on both the north and south of the state simultaneously when faced with the horror of serious bushfires.

The recommendations before the house as a result of the tabling of this report come at a very opportune moment, as the state faces serious fires in the Margaret River area; there has been loss of property but hopefully there will be no injury or loss of life. The recommendations speak for themselves, but it is regrettable that the current government has not moved as quickly as it should have to respond to these challenges. The task of this government is to have competent ministers exercising competent control over all aspects of government, including fire management and bushfire preparedness.

It should not require every aspect of government to be pulled back into the control of one minister, specifically the Premier, as though there was only one focus of competence within the whole operations of this government. It seems, regrettably, that even in this area of the bushfires, the shots, almost exclusively, in response to this important issue are not being driven widely across government but rather inflicted upon government by a central control from the Premier. That means that the delays in responding to these challenges are becoming self-evident and I hope that this report speeds up the state government in its rapid response to the challenges with which we are faced.