

## VICTORIAN BUSHFIRE VICTIMS

### *Condolence Motion*

**MR C.J. BARNETT (Cottesloe — Premier)** [2.02 pm] — without notice: I move —

That this house records its sincere regret at the loss of life, property and community resulting from the bushfires that ravaged parts of Victoria on Saturday, 7 February, and acknowledges the contribution made by Western Australian emergency services, and police, environmental, forestry, health and welfare officers in assisting the people of Victoria so devastatingly affected by the fires.

While it has been just over a month since the bushfires raged through communities in rural Victoria, the images of the extraordinary force of the fires and the destruction they wrought will long be remembered by all of us as the worst natural disaster in Australian history. The human toll, currently standing at 210, is unprecedented. As the stories of those lost came to light, the entire nation grieved. We also grieved for the loss of whole communities. Politics, ideology, geography and parochialism often divide us, but the reaction to the Victorian bushfires illustrated with great clarity that, first and foremost, we are all Australians. On a personal note, I have never been so moved by the singing of our national anthem than I was at the National Day of Mourning service in Melbourne two weeks after the fires. While the service provided a focal point for the nation's bereavement, it also ended on an uplifting note, reflecting upon not only the losses felt by so many, but also the extraordinary bravery, sacrifice, support, resilience and spirit shown by individuals and communities.

On behalf of all Western Australians, the state government had no hesitation in offering whatever assistance was required by the Victorian government following the bushfires. To that end, Western Australia led the way with a donation of \$1 million to the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund on Monday, 9 February—the first donation from a state government. This immediate action was sincerely appreciated by the Victorian Premier, John Brumby. The following day, at the request of the Victorian authorities, a 22-member Department of Environment and Conservation and Fire and Emergency Services Authority incident management contingent was deployed for approximately two weeks, working on the bushfire front line. On the same day, Western Australia Police sent to Victoria a four-man disaster victim identification team, a four-wheel-drive vehicle and equipment.

Western Australia's fire behaviour experts—Dr Lachie McCaw from the Department of Environment and Conservation's science division in Manjimup and Mr Ralph Smith from the Fire and Emergency Services Authority's bushfire and environmental protection branch—joined a team of researchers in a bushfire investigative program being coordinated through the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre. The researchers have since returned, but are expected to provide further support over the coming months.

A second contingent of 45 officers from FESA, DEC and the Forest Products Commission were deployed on 26 February to provide support on the front line and with incident management. Officers are scheduled to return this week. The Western Australian Department of Health deployed three forensic specialists from PathWest to provide disaster victim identification assistance for approximately 10 days. Five staff from the Department for Child Protection assisted the Australian Red Cross with the national registration and inquiry system. The Department of Agriculture and Food sent a team of eight veterinarians and stock inspectors to assist with counselling and animal welfare.

As Premier, I am proud that Western Australia, along with the entire nation, rallied to support our fellow Australians in an aid effort that continues today. The generosity of individuals, community groups, schools, church groups and sporting organisations in donating not only money, but also essentials such as blankets, clothes and towels to the various appeals for the victims of the Victorian bushfires has been overwhelming. The Western Australian state government remains ready and committed to provide whatever personnel, equipment and expertise may be required by Victoria as it slowly begins to rebuild shattered lives and shattered communities. The task is enormous, but the resilience and spirit of Australians, already illustrated in so many ways by so many people over the past month, will prevail.

A disaster such as the Victorian bushfires is shocking and sobering. We reflect on how quickly and easily such tragedy could befall communities in our own state. In light of this, I have requested that the Department of the Premier and Cabinet undertake a review of bushfire prevention, preparedness and response arrangements for Western Australia, with the assistance of all relevant aid agencies, including FESA, WA Police and the Department of Environment and Conservation. The report of this assessment will shortly be presented to cabinet.

To the people of Victoria, the survivors of the bushfires and the families and loved ones of those who were lost, I express the heartfelt sympathy of this house on behalf of all Western Australians.

**MR E.S. RIPPER (Belmont — Leader of the Opposition)** [2.07 pm]: As leader of the State Parliamentary Labor Party, I wish to extend on behalf of all party members and my colleagues on this side of the house the

deepest and most profound sympathy to those whose lives were touched by the Black Saturday bushfires of 7 February this year. Now that the fires are under control and the threats to lives and homes are finally over, my colleagues and I wish survivors strength and hope for the long process of rebuilding.

Black Saturday is Australia's worst natural disaster since Federation. There has been no fire in recorded Australian history that destroyed as much or burnt as fiercely. The fires swept the land with such ferocity and speed that even best-laid plans were of little help. Residents in towns across south-east Victoria lost loved ones, friends, neighbours and workmates, as well as possessions and homes. Many have also lost businesses and incomes and their sense of safety and belonging.

As the disaster developed, we heard the names first—Flowerdale, Kinglake, Marysville, Narbethong and Strathewen; names now etched in the memories of all Australians. Marysville is a town that no longer exists in any meaningful physical sense. Forty-five lives were taken there by the flames. Kinglake is now a pile of ash and rubble. Thirty-eight lives were taken in Kinglake, and another seven were taken in Kinglake West.

Next came the horrific numbers. Two hundred and ten people have now been confirmed dead, and more bodies lie in morgues awaiting the painstaking identification process. Four and a half thousand square kilometres of land have been burnt. More than 3 500 buildings were destroyed, including 2 100 homes.

Finally, the stories came. We read remarkable stories of courage and luck told by those who escaped the flames; we listened with deep sadness and horror to the pieced-together stories of those who did not. More than a month after the disaster, the stories are now about the hard slog through loss, grief and rebuilding. The small band of residents still in Marysville speak about the eerie silence of a town where no birds have been left alive to sing. A young boy in Kinglake spent his first day back at school huddled under a pile of toys and clothes in a corner, so traumatised by the memories of fleeing his burning home that he could not speak.

As with any large-scale disaster, the web of connections to those affected stretches across the nation. Well-known Western Australian resident David Wirrpanda spoke last week about his connection to the tragedy. He grew up around Healesville, a short drive from Kinglake. David is still waiting to hear from childhood friends who live in the Kinglake area. Even those of us whose friends and relatives were not directly impacted by Black Saturday cannot but feel an emotional connection to the victims.

Like the Premier, I am extremely proud that Australians responded to this feeling of being connected to victims with generous offers of financial and material assistance. Also, I strongly support the decision by the Western Australian government to donate \$1 million to the Black Saturday appeal and to offer the assistance of Western Australian Fire and Emergency Services personnel.

Black Saturday made one thing above all others shockingly clear; namely, fires of that magnitude defy almost all human efforts to control and to fight them. Certainly, they defied the plans made by individuals and agencies to combat them. The terrible perfect storm of dry and plentiful fuel, extreme heat, low humidity and a fatal wind change meant that any large fire, once started, had the potential to rage totally out of control.

One small positive to emerge from the ashes is the opportunity to review the way we manage bushfires in Australia. The Brumby government's decision to hold a royal commission into the fires is a welcome one, and all state governments are duty-bound to pore over its findings and to learn from any mistakes as well as any of the measures that proved to be successful.

Black Saturday forces us as legislators to consider our current plans to deal with bushfire emergencies and whether those plans are sufficient. We can already identify areas that need attention. In 2006 the Community Development and Justice Standing Committee undertook an inquiry into fire and emergency services legislation. It tabled its report in this house on 19 October 2006. The report found that the three acts currently covering bushfire response—the Fire and Emergency Services Authority of Western Australia Act 1998, the Bush Fires Act 1954 and the Fire Brigades Act 1942—do not function in concert and do not allow effective communication and coordination between all stakeholders. The Bush Fires Act and the Fire Brigades Act, both more than 50 years old, have become outdated and are inconsistent with modern legislation. The report recommended that the three acts be amalgamated into a single emergency services act.

It is also timely that we ensure that our volunteer firefighting force is properly equipped with appropriate safety clothing and firefighting equipment. Black Saturday made apparent the remarkable job that volunteer firefighters undertake to fight bushfires and laid bare the tough conditions and the long hours they face. The least we can do is to make sure they have all the tools they need to do their jobs.

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The opposition is willing to work on a bipartisan basis to support legislation for a single emergency services act and will support any effort the government makes to ensure that our bushfire response plans are in line with best possible practice.

Australia's beautiful and iconic bushland will always be prone to fire. In the wake of a tragedy such as Black Saturday, our natural response is to try to eliminate the danger; to vow that nothing of its sort can ever be allowed to happen again. The reality is that we can no more eliminate bushfires from this country than we can eliminate droughts or tropical cyclones. Our responsibility as legislators in this house and in the other place is to make sure that Western Australia has the best possible plans to respond to a worst case scenario like Black Saturday.

We must make Western Australian homes as safe as possible from bushfire, with bushfire-conscious planning regulations for individual homes and for residential areas as a whole. We must ensure that we close any loopholes and deal with inconsistencies in legislation, and that the right agencies are tasked with making the right response. We must ensure that all risk-management plans are up to date, informed by the most recent research. We must ensure that the best possible preparations for bushfire emergencies are made and that the planned response is properly resourced.

Finally, we must ensure that the advice and information given to the community is frequently reviewed and of the highest quality. I support the initiative announced by the Premier today for a review of our approach to fire management in Western Australia. I would like to join with all members in this house in remembering the victims of Black Saturday and wishing well the survivors who have lost so much.

**MR D.T. REDMAN (Blackwood-Stirling — Minister for Agriculture and Food)** [2.15 pm]: On behalf of the National Party, I also offer my sincere sympathies to those who lost friends, family, homes and businesses in the Victorian bushfires last month. This was a tragedy on an unimaginable scale, and its impacts will echo for many years to come. It was a demonstration of Mother Nature's terrifying power that overwhelmed even the most prepared. It was also a demonstration of the way communities, particularly in regional areas, rally together to help each other, to comfort each other and to look to regeneration. As a state that knows the horror and devastation of bushfires, I know that all Western Australians felt connected to our Victorian friends during this time. This was evidenced by the outpouring of donations of both financial and material assistance. Just about everywhere my colleagues and I have been in regional Western Australia recently, there have been efforts to collect donations for those Victorians impacted by this severe tragedy. That was particularly so at Wagin Woolorama last weekend. My electorate has been reminded of the challenges we faced during the recent bushfires in the towns of Bridgetown and Tenterden, hence the support my constituents have given following the tragedy in Victoria. As the Premier said, the Western Australian state government has offered a significant amount of support. I rang Hon Joe Helper, the Minister for Agriculture in Victoria, to offer our support and, as the Premier said, there has been support from a number of people from different agencies.

I have just returned from the Middle East, and it is significant that, even at an international level, people are offering their condolences and sympathies for what happened in Australia. One of the first questions asked of me by the leaders of the three countries I visited was, "How are those people in Victoria?" It is wonderful to know that at not only an interstate level, but also an international level there is support and sympathy for that substantial tragedy.

On behalf of my National Party colleagues, I offer our sympathy and support for those people who have been affected and who will feel the impact for many years to come.

**MR R.F. JOHNSON (Hillarys — Minister for Emergency Services)** [2.17 pm]: Like other Western Australians, I wish to convey my deepest sympathy for and sincere condolences to all those affected by the horrific fires that swept through Victoria just over four weeks ago. It was a tragedy that shocked and saddened all of us because of the high loss of life and utter devastation of homes and towns. As we know, more than 200 people were killed, and close to 2 000 homes were razed and burnt to the ground, leaving many thousands of people homeless. The thoughts and prayers of us all are with those who have lost loved ones, both family and friends, as they battle to rebuild their lives following this catastrophe.

Our thoughts are also with the family of the hero firefighter from Canberra, Dave Balfour, who had travelled to Victoria to support the firefighters. Mr Balfour was killed by a falling tree branch as he was connecting a hose to a tanker. Mr Balfour wanted to assist his Victorian counterparts because he wished to repay the support that Victoria's firefighters had provided during the Canberra fires of 2003. Victoria's Country Fire Authority performed a miraculous job in hellish conditions. Who can forget the graphic vision of those fire infernos as they raced up the hills at breakneck speed, fanned by the scorching winds, and destroying everything in their path? For me, some of the most graphic and haunting vision was to see the shells of the burnt-out vehicles that were left lying by the side of the road. I thought of the young families and couples who had tried desperately to outrun

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the fire but who had been tragically engulfed in the flames. It was special to hear the incredible stories of courage, sacrifice and heroism of the people who tried to help rescue others.

I also acknowledge and commend the bravery of Victoria's firefighters who performed extraordinary feats in horrific conditions. Their stories were emotionally powerful and moving. Our Western Australian emergency services responded to calls for assistance. So far WA has deployed a total of 70 personnel from the Fire and Emergency Services Authority, the Department of Environment and Conservation and WA Police. This team includes firefighters, incident managers, arson investigators and disaster victim identification specialists. Some 41 personnel are in Victoria and are expected to return later this week. WA offered to provide a further 98 personnel to Victoria but those people were not required.

As Victoria starts the enormous process of rebuilding its communities, it has been a time for us all to take stock of the current arrangements, processes and legislation that we have in place for managing bushfires. This government takes its responsibility for emergency management very seriously. When the Liberal-National government took office in WA, it faced the prospect of a very serious fire threat over the summer period. We took this threat very seriously and allocated additional funding to boost FESA's aerial firefighting fleet. The Fire King helicopter has already proven its worth. So far this fire season the Fire King has flown 36 missions and completed more than 500 drops, releasing more than 1.4 million litres of water. We have also approved the drafting of key legislation that will assist FESA to coordinate and respond to a major bushfire threat.

The fires in Victoria were spawned in the most freakish conditions imaginable and the fire authorities desperately tried to fight the impossible. While those conditions might not take place in WA, our government is taking all the necessary steps to prevent anything like that from happening and to ensure that our fire authorities are well resourced and supported to protect all Western Australians at all times.

**MRS M.H. ROBERTS (Midland)** [2.22 pm]: A condolence motion such as this gives us the opportunity to reflect on those who are the first to respond to natural disasters and those who follow in the immediate aftermath and help communities and people rebuild their lives. Career firefighters, volunteer firefighters, police officers, State Emergency Service volunteers and career personnel assist in the first instance, and then first aid workers, doctors and nurses and staff at the burns units deal with the aftermath. The Salvation Army assists the people who fight the fires day after day to make sure that they are provided with care and sustenance.

A couple of weekends ago, Prime Minister Rudd delivered an address at the service for the National Day of Mourning for the victims of the Victorian bushfires. His sentiment was as follows: on Black Saturday we saw the worst of nature but the best of humanity. He went on to define "courage" as a firefighter standing at the gates of hell, unflinching and unyielding, and neighbour saving neighbour and stranger saving stranger. He emphasised the heroism of ordinary people who never expected to be brave or decent or good but who, when the moment came, simply did great things.

The movement right across Australia to support the suffering of those in Victoria has been extraordinary. Schoolchildren, small businesses, shoppers in supermarkets, owners of caravans and haulage businesses, musicians, athletes and actors across our great land—ordinary people—have been giving generously, even sacrificially. This is extraordinary work by ordinary people who have come together in the same spirit. They will not be beaten by fire or be daunted by scale, and they are united for a common cause. As we reflect on Black Saturday we can also praise the thousands of acts of ordinary kindness and goodness that are restoring hope and rebuilding communities. We can remind ourselves that we all have that ability. We can come together and, through acts of determined virtue, do great things, just as the people of Victoria and people right across Australia have done in response to what is surely the worst natural disaster in Australia's history.

**MR J.C. KOBELKE (Balcatta)** [2.24 pm]: I take this opportunity to support the motion and express my sympathy to all those who lost family, friends and work colleagues and also those who lost possessions and homes and who are seeking to re-establish their lives. We realised the absolute size of this disaster through the photos and the television footage in the media. It was a tragedy of such enormous proportions that it was hard to understand, especially when we were so many thousands of kilometres away. Due to the dryness of the bush after many years of drought, the strong winds created a firestorm that took all before it in certain towns north and east of Melbourne. As other speakers have mentioned, we witnessed the courage of our firefighters, a range of emergency service workers and police who had to confront that scenario and try to assist people. They were successful in saving many lives. We saw the strength of the Australian character come out and the bonds that are there.

On a personal level, I rang a cousin who resides just west of the affected area who I had not spoken to for about two years. He said that he and his family were packed and ready to go but fortunately the fires did not reach them. They had a few photos and keepsakes ready in case they had to get in the car and leave should the fires move further to the west across the top of metropolitan Melbourne. We have seen how the fires have drawn

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people together from across Australia and the fantastic generosity of people trying to assist those who lost everything. That is a great characteristic of Australia—that people have been willing to help those in need and come together at this very special time. To our 66 Fire and Emergency Services Authority and Department of Environment and Conservation officers who have gone over to Victoria, along with our police officers, our thanks for their contributions on behalf of Western Australia. To those who will be returning from Victoria, we want to recognise the contribution that they have made. Let us remember those victims of this absolute tragedy and continue to give our support and strength to those people who now have to rebuild their lives, homes and communities.

**MR D.A. TEMPLEMAN (Mandurah)** [2.27 pm]: I would like to make a very brief contribution to this condolence motion. The previous speakers have acknowledged the tremendous response throughout Australia to the tragedy in Victoria. Volunteers, emergency service workers, various communities and many other Australians responded with their prayers, support and generosity. I am sure that all of us have heard stories of individuals and groups in our electorates who have banded together to raise money to help the people of Victoria rebuild. Indeed, the City of Mandurah is no exception. A couple of Sundays ago I attended a church service at the Salvation Army where cadet Erica Cossington, the wife of the local captain, spoke. During the weekend of the fires she was in the affected area and saw with her own eyes the devastation and the effect it had on the local people. On the morning of that service she asked the congregation, particularly the children present, to pray for a little fellow named Noah. Noah is a four-year-old boy who was severely traumatised by the fire. She asked that the congregation pray for Noah because he, like so many people, had been scarred by this tragedy. She told a very heart-warming and moving story, which she repeated later that afternoon at the City of Mandurah's response to the National Day of Mourning.

We can all be so proud that we live in a country that responds so gladly, gratefully and effectively when we are touched by such a disaster. This nation certainly responds valiantly in times of calamity, emergency and tragedy. Our thoughts go out to all those who have been involved in the response and who have given ongoing support.

**The SPEAKER:** In support of this condolence motion, I ask that members stand and observe a minute's silence.

Question passed, members standing.