

FIREFIGHTING AIRCRAFT

123. Mr M.P. MURRAY to the Premier:

Will the Premier outline the State Government's response to the media statement released by the federal Minister for Regional Services regarding firefighting aircraft?

Dr G.I. GALLOP replied:

I refer the Parliament to the media statement and comments made by the federal Minister for Regional Services on Friday, 13 September. To say that Western Australia is disappointed by those comments would be an understatement. The response of the federal minister to this major national issue can be described only as a disgrace. He has ignored all the work done by both state and federal officers and the commitments made by the Prime Minister.

In January this year, at the time of the devastating New South Wales bushfires, the Prime Minister said that he would commit to buying - I underline "buying" - up to three *Elvis* helitankers, with one based in the "west". It was not clear whether he meant in the western suburbs of Sydney or Western Australia; nevertheless, he said west. I quote from the Channel 7 news of 2 January -

Prime Minister John Howard says the federal Government will look at buying up to three bombers, with one based in the west as part of a national firefighting fleet.

That promise was worth \$45 million. The idea was that the States would pay the operating costs of the helicopters. We wrote back to the federal Government and said that rather than jump on the *Elvis* bandwagon, perhaps we can work out a national approach to this major issue. The Commonwealth responded to that correspondence and between January and August the Commonwealth and the States prepared a very constructive approach to how we might deal with a national aerial firefighting strategy. Two overall recommendations were made, one that would cost \$26.9 million and one that would cost \$16.9 million.

Western Australia examined its situation and put the point to the Commonwealth that it would suit its circumstances better if it had two fixed-wing aircraft and a medium-size helicopter. Both proposals would have incorporated that idea. The \$16.9 million proposal would have cost the Commonwealth \$13.6 million and the States and Territories \$3.26 million. Importantly, if we take into account what we spend on firefighting throughout Australia, this would have meant that for every \$3 the State Government has put into firefighting, the Commonwealth would have added \$1. However, what did we get from the Commonwealth through the Minister for Regional Services, Territories and Local Government? We got a take-it-or-leave-it letter that said that the Commonwealth would fund \$5 million, as opposed to the \$16 million option that was being negotiated between the States and the Commonwealth through the relevant departments; no new fixed-wing aircraft or medium-sized helicopters to suit Western Australian conditions; a cost-sharing arrangement that was prohibitive for the States; and a strategy that was based more around the interests of Victoria and New South Wales than Western Australia. The Commonwealth has a take-it-or-leave-it attitude on many issues. It is not in the business of cooperating with the State Government to solve a national problem. The federal minister seems to prefer to organise a fight rather than find a solution through cooperation between the States and the Commonwealth. I will write about this matter to the Prime Minister and urge him to intervene so that the States and the Commonwealth can sit down and come up with a much better outcome for Western Australia in particular and the States in general.

We live in a federation, which consists of the States and Territories as well as the Commonwealth. The Commonwealth's attitude to many issues is take it or leave it; it thinks that it knows best. It considers that a one-size-fits-all approach is the way to proceed for Australia. That is not the way to govern Australia, and I hope that the Prime Minister will take advice from me and the other States on this matter and renegotiate these issues so that we can achieve a better outcome.