



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Main Committee

VICTORIAN BUSHFIRES

SPEECH

Tuesday, 10 February 2009

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

<p>Date Tuesday, 10 February 2009 Page 820 Questioner Speaker Costello, Peter, MP</p>	<p>Source House Proof No Responder Question No.</p>
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Mr COSTELLO (Higgins) (5.09 pm)—This has been an awful week. It has been an awful week for our community and our state, and we are hurting. We are hurting as much as we have ever hurt before, with the greatest loss of civilian life from any natural disaster in Australia's history—a death toll over 170 and still rising; an extraordinary loss of life which will touch so many people in Victoria and beyond. We are bewildered that these events could have happened on such a devastating scale and we are bruised by these events.

The events of the last 72 hours have caused a horror not just in Victoria but in Australia and around the world. There is something particularly gruelling to know that young children have been killed and to see families who have huddled together and died in their homes or been incinerated in their cars in communities that we all know well and have all visited. This has occurred amongst us with a ferocity that, with all our technology, we were unable to stop.

Our hearts go out to those who have lost friends, neighbours and relatives. I received word last night that David Stokes perished while defending his farm at Upper Plenty. I shared many camps with him when working for OAC Ministries. I want to say to Jenice and his family that our thoughts and our prayers go to you. He was a loving father, a faithful husband, a committed Christian and a hardworking farmer. We do not know why he was taken but our hope and our consolation is in our faith and his faith. These are questions that we will never be able to answer.

I spoke yesterday to Ray Evans, who will be known to many in this parliament. He was at Marysville on Saturday morning. He woke up and said it was so hot at 8 am that he decided to leave. There was no threat of bushfire. He said it was just too hot and he went down to Melbourne. He has seen footage on the news of his home, which has been destroyed, but his life was saved because he took that fateful decision to leave on Saturday morning. This is how capricious a fire is. Some lose their lives and some do not; a house is burned and another one saved; a wind change takes a fire around one farm and into a neighbour. It is completely capricious, untameable and unstoppable.

Those of us who were in Victoria on Saturday knew it was going to be a bad day. When you got out of bed you knew that it was going to be one of those scorchers, and eventually it peaked at 46.4 degrees, the hottest day that Melbourne, anyway, has ever had. We knew that after a month where there had been no rainfall this was a tinderbox. The week before we had had almost a whole week of temperatures above 40 degrees. But there was something even worse on Saturday, and that was the wind—the north wind; the wind that sets the fires off. And anyone who has lived through bushfires in Victoria knows that that is an ominous sign. They were the conditions that we lived through on Ash Wednesday in 1983; the conditions when we had the big bushfires in the 1960s; the conditions that our parents had lived through with the Black Friday fires in 1939; the conditions that we were all warned about and raised on. It is captured in novels like *Ash Road* by Ivan Southall. When the north wind blows on those tinder-dry days the whole of the state is at the mercy of natural disaster. It is a cruel climate. We live very precariously in this environment, in this country. It is a beautiful environment but it holds great terror under these conditions.

As is always the case when we have these enormous calamities, we see the best and the very worst of human nature—the very worst of human nature, to think that some of these fires could have been deliberately lit, but the very best of human nature, when we see people risk their own lives to save houses, neighbours and friends. The stories of heroism make us marvel that there are those who are prepared to place their own lives on the line in a voluntary capacity for their friends, their neighbours and their community. Like so many others, I pay tribute to the volunteer brigades of the CFA, the SES, the Victoria Police, the Red Cross, the Salvation Army and all of the thousands of volunteers who, as we speak, are still in the field serving their fellow Victorians.

This is going to be a very difficult, long, drawn out period for the state of Victoria. Fires continue to burn as we speak. There will be the coronial inquests. There will be the funerals. And then there will be the investigations as to how and why this occurred. The grieving will turn to anger and loss. Of course, there will be some people

who will never recover because the trauma is so great. Our thoughts and support are with the communities in Victoria now, but we have to make sure that they are still there in months and years to come, because it will take years to put many of these people's lives back together and to put the communities back together.

I welcome the announcement that the government has made in relation to the new authority that will be charged with reconstruction. That authority has the great responsibility of putting communities back together and it will have a lot of support, but it will not be done in weeks and it will not be done in months. I welcome the announcements in relation to the emergency payments, but of course more will be required. The government knows that, and I have no doubt it will attend to it and will have the full support of the opposition in relation to it.

Then we will have the royal commission, which I also welcome, which will have to look at the steps that can be taken in the future to minimise loss of life and damage. On a continent like this, we will never be able to take away fire nor the risk of fire but we will have to determine how to minimise the loss and damage in the future. Until now the policy has been to have a fire plan and either to evacuate or to stay and fight. What is clear is that there are some fires that are so great, where the intensity and speed are such, that to stay and fight is impossible. How we are to distinguish those fires where there is no hope of staying and fighting from those where it is a reasonable strategy will of course be a matter for the royal commission to look at.

We live at the mercy of this environment and, as many people seek, for lifestyle reasons, to move to the country, to the outer fringe, the number of people that will be exposed to this kind of risk will increase. We need to think about what we can do to secure the situation for those people, how to minimise those risks—whether it is going to be necessary for houses to have fire bunkers in certain areas so that those people can be protected even if their properties are not. All of that lies in the future. But all Australians will want to say to all their fellow Australians who have perished and to their families that the nation turns in grief, turns in understanding and turns in support. We want to do everything that we can individually and corporately for those who have suffered such losses, to grieve and then to rebuild, to move on but to never forget those who have suffered these losses.

I want to say on behalf of my constituents, my electorate, who will know many of those who have perished—we will all know many who have perished when the final lists are published—that we stand together to face this terrible ferocity of nature. We stand united, we stand bewildered and bruised, but we will rise again. We owe it especially to those who have lost their lives, and to their families.