

SPEECH TO GREEK FESTIVAL OF COBURG, SUNDAY 8 FEBRUARY 2009

We come together today for a Festival, but it feels not so much like the day, as the day after. Because yesterday we lived through the hottest day Melbourne has every experienced – 46.4°C. And on Melbourne's outskirts – our south, east, north and north-west, we witnessed some of the worst bushfires we have ever witnessed. And so our celebrations this year must necessarily have a sombre tone. Our hearts go out to the families and loved ones of those who have lost their lives, and to those who have suffered serious injury. We acknowledge and praise the courage and heroism and the sheer hard work of those fighting the fires – the Country Fire Authority, the Metropolitan Fire Brigade, and all the volunteers. We also salute the relief agencies – the Salvation Army, the Red Cross, Wildlife Carers, and others - for everything they **have** done and **will** be doing in the coming weeks.

Bushfires are increasing in frequency and severity around the world. We have seen this in your homeland of Greece. And the bushfires in Victoria stand in sharp, ironic contrast to the floods and storms of north Queensland. But they are all part of the same phenomenon – global warming, or climate change. Scientists have been warning us for years now that if we do not curb our carbon emissions we will create more frequent, more extreme weather events – more droughts, more bushfires, more floods and more storms. Yesterday was a foretaste of the weather that lies in store. We have a duty, a moral responsibility, not to leave to our children and grandchildren a world in which days like yesterday are commonplace.

After an event such as this, there are always those who will see the bush, the forests as the enemy. Their reaction is to want a chop the trees down. There will be calls for more logging, more grazing, more pre-emptive burning. This is understandable, but it is absolutely wrong. The CSIRO has given evidence to a Parliamentary Committee which I chair, the Treaties Committee, evidence which shows that the parts of Australia which are becoming hotter and drier are precisely those areas where human settlement has occurred – the eastern seaboard, southern Australia, and south-west Western Australia. A Queensland academic has shown with modelling how cutting down Australian forests changes wind and rainfall patterns and makes the countryside hotter and drier.

If we cut down our forests, we will turn Victoria into a desert. What we need to do is to re-establish our forests. Indeed we should be trying to re-establish our rainforests. These areas are much more resistant to fire than eucalypt forests. They bring much needed rain and water for our dams and agriculture. The way to build and secure a healthy future for Victoria, and prevent a repeat of yesterday is **not** by cutting down our forests, it is by having more of them.

Let me conclude by congratulating Chris Koniditsiotis and the other members of the Organising Committee of the Greek Festival of Coburg. Your tireless efforts, year in and year out, to put this Festival together are an inspiration to us all. You showcase Greek culture, and highlight the role the Greek Orthodox Parish of Coburg and Pascoe Vale not only **has** played, but continues to play, in building, strengthening and shaping the community here in Coburg and Pascoe Vale.

I wish you success and good things both today, and throughout 2009.

Kelvin Thomson