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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

Main Committee

VICTORIAN BUSHFIRES

SPEECH

Tuesday, 10 February 2009

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

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| <p>Date Tuesday, 10 February 2009 Page 74 Questioner Speaker Thomson, Kelvin, MP</p> | <p>Source House Proof Yes Responder Question No.</p> |
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Mr KELVIN THOMSON (Wills) (5.45 pm)—It is a terrible thing to have to participate in such a debate but it is also a great privilege after the inspiring speeches given by many of my colleagues—among them the member for Ballarat, who is in the chamber—and also

by members on the opposition side. The Leader of the Opposition yesterday and the member for McMillan today made outstanding contributions. It is a privilege to be part of such a debate.

The weekend before last I went to the home of Jenny and Peter Beales just outside Kinglake. They are longstanding residents of Kinglake. Peter is a local councillor and Jenny has been very active in Labor Party and local community affairs for many years. They were having a lunch for Labor Party Kinglake branch members. My partner, Kerry, and I looked out over the picturesque forests at the rear of their property—forests stretching out as far as the eye could see. Now, suddenly, those forests are gone.

I rang Jenny on Sunday to check on her welfare. She told me a harrowing tale. On the Saturday night between 5.30 pm and 6 pm, some carloads of terrified men, women and children had screamed into their property, seeking urgent shelter. There were about 30 people in all and they stayed there the night. Their homes had been burnt down and they brought with them dogs, cats and even a rabbit. Some of the children were understandably hysterical.

One of their neighbours was also there. His property was ablaze during the night. Around midnight, Peter and the neighbour tried to see what was happening to his house but could not get through. They saw a building ablaze and thought his house was lost. A couple of hours later, they were able to get a better look and could tell that, while sheds had been destroyed, his house had not. It had been saved by a sprinkler system which had continued to function.

Jenny told me about the appalling devastation—schools, churches and community facilities all burnt to the ground. She also told me about the courage and selfless acts of members of the Kinglake community. She told me about the baker who came out on Sunday to prepare food for people who had none, although his own home had been destroyed.

The hearts of the people of Wills go out to the families and loved ones of those who have lost their lives, to those who have suffered serious injury and to those who have lost their homes, property or livelihoods. On behalf of the people of Wills, I acknowledge and praise the courage, heroism and 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 and others—both for everything they have done and for everything they will be doing in the coming weeks.

Many families and communities have been absolutely shattered. With thousands of lives reduced to square one, it is time for those of us who are in a position to assist to do exactly that. I encourage people to donate to the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund by phoning 1800 811700. Other important contacts I draw to the attention of the House are the Victorian Bushfire Information Line 1800 240667, the official Victorian government website of www.vic.gov.au and the Centrelink Assistance Information Line 180 2211.

One of my local residents, Nosrat Hosseini, contacted me to offer the spare rooms of her family's home in Pascoe Vale to the victims of the blaze. I applaud her family's civic mindedness, and I will be conveying offers of support from within my electorate to those who are carrying out the relief effort. We have all been moved by this disaster and there is much we can do to help.

Both the Australian government and the Victorian government are providing practical assistance to the victims of the fires—such as counselling, through Centrelink; Australian government disaster recovery payments of \$1,000 for eligible adults, and an extra \$400 per child for those people adversely affected by the fires; funeral assistance of up to \$5,000 for the immediate family of a person who has lost their life as a direct result of the fires; and Australian Defence Force assistance. The Victorian government is providing some immediate

cash assistance, through the emergency recovery centres, which will help tide people over until the Centrelink payments are processed.

In the months and years ahead there will be a lot of debate and discussion about the causes of the fires and the responses to them—whether there are things that could have been done better and whether there are lessons we need to learn. It is proper that there should be such a debate. I note that the Victorian Premier, John Brumby, has announced that there will be a royal commission into the bushfires, with a wide brief. That is deeply appropriate. For my part, I will be following the royal commission closely. The events of the weekend were so dramatic and demonstrated such a heightened level of threat that we all need to be willing to rethink our previous beliefs and assumptions and look at the facts and the evidence afresh.

With that important qualification, let me make some observations about bushfires and our response to them. Firstly, there is global warming. On Saturday, I and other Melburnians lived through the hottest day that Melbourne has ever experienced—46.4 degrees Celsius. Many other places in Victoria also got their highest temperature ever. That came on top of the second driest January we have ever had—a pitiful 0.8 millimetres of rain for the whole month—and that has come on top of a decade of drought for Victoria, which has been drying out since 2001.

These are of course precisely the conditions of extreme bushfire threat. Bushfires are increasing in frequency and severity around the world. We have seen this in Greece, we have seen it in California and we have seen it elsewhere. The bushfires in Victoria stand in sharp, ironic contrast to the floods and storms in North Queensland. But they are all part of the same phenomenon—global warming, climate change. Scientists have been warning us for years that, if we do not curb our carbon emissions, we will create more frequent, more extreme weather events—more droughts, more bushfires, more floods, more storms. Saturday 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 Saturday become commonplace.

Secondly, 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 to chop the trees down. The member for O'Connor has been vocal on this matter yesterday and again today. These calls are understandable but, in my view, they are totally wrong. Far from the forests being our enemy, it is we who are theirs. The authorities have made plain enough their view that a number of these fires were deliberately lit by people. Another of the fires was the consequence of a cigarette butt discarded carelessly. Another was caused, we heard today, by a faulty power pole. The member for O'Connor says that we used to have roads and bulldozers through the forests. Well, those roads are still there but, sadly, they are precisely how many of the fires originated.

Furthermore, the CSIRO has given to the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties, which I chair, 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. Dr Clive McAlpine, senior research fellow at the University of Queensland's School of Geography, Planning and Architecture, says it is because of human modification of the land surface through changes in native vegetation cover and land use. Modelling of the impacts of vegetation cover change on regional climate, done by Dr McAlpine and other researchers, shows that areas which have been cleared are 0.1 to 0.6 degrees Celsius warmer in eastern Australia than they were before clearing, and that summer rainfall is four to 12 per cent less. The analysis shows that land clearing has contributed to hotter droughts during El Nino years. Clearing of native vegetation appears to be accentuating the impact of recent El Nino droughts by increasing the number of hot days greater than 35 degrees Celsius and by increasing the number of dry days during drought events.

According to Dr McAlpine, the clearing of vegetation changes the way wind moves over the land surface and reduces the incidence of formation of rain-bearing clouds. This is yet another of those feedback loops where problems start out small and get quite out of hand. 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 now is to re-establish our forests. Indeed, we should be trying to re-establish our rainforests. These areas are much more resistant to fires than eucalypt forests. They bring much-needed rain and water for our dams and agriculture. I believe the way to build and secure a healthy future for Victoria and to prevent a repeat of Saturday is not by cutting down our forests; it is by having more of them.

Thirdly, there is arson. I totally support the remarks of the Attorney-General yesterday that committing arson carries within it all the ingredients of the offence of murder. The sentences for arsonists should reflect this. If

the legal system is not delivering this outcome, it should be altered to do so. Whether this means increasing the sentences applying to arson or means charging people who commit arson with murder or attempted murder and making any necessary changes to the law about intent and the like, I have an open mind. But the basic legal principle is quite clear. If someone drops a brick into Melbourne's Bourke Street mall from a tall building not caring whether the brick hits someone, the law refers to this as being 'recklessly indifferent'. If the brick does hit and kill someone, they can be charged and convicted of murder. It is quite foreseeable that dropping a brick into a crowded place will kill someone. Similarly, if you light a fire on a day like Saturday, it is absolutely foreseeable that you could kill someone, and in my book it is murder if someone dies as a result. The people who light these fires are despicable, contemptible low-life, and the legal system must protect us from them.

Fourthly, there is the issue of staying or fleeing. As I said earlier, the Victorian government has established a royal commission to examine the fires and no doubt it will look in great detail at the number of deaths of people in cars and people in their homes and the advice that was given to them. One thing I will be particularly interested in is its findings concerning underground shelters or bunkers. I read one story of a couple who survived with their child because the mother had nagged her partner into building one and they were able to shelter in it. I will be interested in the way we are able to build effective underground shelters. It strikes me that they may have a key role to play in saving people who decide to defend their property but who are then confronted with a fire much larger and more terrible than they had imagined or people who have simply been caught out, being unaware of the fire's sudden approach.

Finally, my thoughts are with the family of Jacinta Bartlett. She, her husband, Gary, and their youngest daughter died when a firestorm tore through their home in St Andrews. Her other daughter, Maddison, aged 12, is in the Royal Children's Hospital where I understand she is being treated for burns to 40 per cent of her body. Jacinta Bartlett was a long-serving Moreland City Council employee and unit manager of contracts at the council at the time of her death. This family tragedy will hit the staff at the City of Moreland very hard, and my thoughts are with them. Indeed, Moreland City Council's Chief Executive Officer, Peter Brown, and his family narrowly escaped the Strathewen blaze. It destroyed their home and cars. Peter and his family survived by holding wet blankets over their heads in their backyard pool as the fire went over the top of them. My thoughts are also with Peter and his family, as they are with all the families who have gone through this terrible ordeal. It is a nightmare we will all long remember. The suffering, the cruelty, the heroism and the steely determination to continue on and to rebuild: all of this we will remember.