

PARLIAMENT OF VICTORIA

**PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

FIFTY-SIXTH PARLIAMENT

FIRST SESSION

Tuesday, 24 February 2009

(Extract from book 3)

Internet: www.parliament.vic.gov.au/downloadhansard

By authority of the Victorian Government Printer

The Governor

Professor DAVID de KRETZER, AC

The Lieutenant-Governor

The Honourable Justice MARILYN WARREN, AC

The ministry

Premier, Minister for Veterans' Affairs and Minister for Multicultural Affairs	The Hon. J. M. Brumby, MP
Deputy Premier, Attorney-General, Minister for Industrial Relations and Minister for Racing	The Hon. R. J. Hulls, MP
Treasurer	The Hon. J. Lenders, MLC
Minister for Regional and Rural Development, and Minister for Skills and Workforce Participation	The Hon. J. M. Allan, MP
Minister for Health	The Hon. D. M. Andrews, MP
Minister for Community Development and Minister for Energy and Resources	The Hon. P. Batchelor, MP
Minister for Police and Emergency Services, and Minister for Corrections	The Hon. R. G. Cameron, MP
Minister for Agriculture and Minister for Small Business	The Hon. J. Helper, MP
Minister for Finance, WorkCover and the Transport Accident Commission, Minister for Water and Minister for Tourism and Major Events	The Hon. T. J. Holding, MP
Minister for Environment and Climate Change, and Minister for Innovation	The Hon. G. W. Jennings, MLC
Minister for Public Transport and Minister for the Arts	The Hon. L. J. Kosky, MP
Minister for Planning	The Hon. J. M. Madden, MLC
Minister for Sport, Recreation and Youth Affairs, and Minister Assisting the Premier on Multicultural Affairs	The Hon. J. A. Merlino, MP
Minister for Children and Early Childhood Development, and Minister for Women's Affairs	The Hon. M. V. Morand, MP
Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Community Services and Minister for Senior Victorians	The Hon. L. M. Neville, MP
Minister for Roads and Ports	The Hon. T. H. Pallas, MP
Minister for Education	The Hon. B. J. Pike, MP
Minister for Gaming, Minister for Consumer Affairs and Minister Assisting the Premier on Veterans' Affairs	The Hon. A. G. Robinson, MP
Minister for Industry and Trade, Minister for Information and Communication Technology, and Minister for Major Projects	The Hon. T. C. Theophanous, MLC
Minister for Housing, Minister for Local Government and Minister for Aboriginal Affairs	The Hon. R. W. Wynne, MP
Cabinet Secretary	Mr A. G. Lupton, MP

Legislative Council committees

Legislation Committee — Mr Atkinson, Ms Broad, Mrs Coote, Mr Drum, Ms Mikakos, Ms Pennicuik and Ms Pulford.

Privileges Committee — Ms Darveniza, Mr D. Davis, Mr Drum, Mr Jennings, Ms Mikakos, Ms Pennicuik and Mr Rich-Phillips.

Select Committee on Public Land Development — Mr D. Davis, Mr Hall, Mr Kavanagh, Mr O'Donohue, Ms Pennicuik, Mr Tee and Mr Thornley.

Standing Committee on Finance and Public Administration — Mr Barber, Ms Broad, Mr Guy, Mr Hall, Mr Kavanagh, Mr Rich-Phillips and Mr Viney.

Standing Orders Committee — The President, Mr Dalla-Riva, Mr P. Davis, Mr Hall, Mr Lenders, Ms Pennicuik and Mr Viney.

Joint committees

Dispute Resolution Committee — (*Council*): Mr P. Davis, Mr Hall, Mr Jennings, Mr Lenders and Ms Pennicuik. (*Assembly*): Mr Batchelor, Mr Cameron, Mr Clark, Mr Holding, Mr McIntosh, Mr Robinson and Mr Walsh.

Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee — (*Council*): Mrs Coote, Mr Leane and Ms Mikakos. (*Assembly*): Ms Beattie, Mr Delahunty, Mrs Maddigan and Mr Morris.

Economic Development and Infrastructure Committee — (*Council*) Mr Atkinson, Mr D. M. Davis, Mr Tee and Mr Thornley. (*Assembly*) Ms Campbell, Mr Crisp and Ms Thomson (Footscray)

Education and Training Committee — (*Council*): Mr Elasmarr and Mr Hall. (*Assembly*): Mr Dixon, Dr Harkness, Mr Herbert, Mr Howard and Mr Kotsiras.

Electoral Matters Committee — (*Council*): Ms Broad, Mr P. Davis and Mr Somyurek. (*Assembly*): Ms Campbell, Mr O'Brien, Mr Scott and Mr Thompson.

Environment and Natural Resources Committee — (*Council*): Mrs Petrovich and Mr Viney. (*Assembly*): Ms Duncan, Mrs Fyffe, Mr Ingram, Ms Lobato, Mr Pandazopoulos and Mr Walsh.

Family and Community Development Committee — (*Council*): Mr Finn, Mr Scheffer and Mr Somyurek. (*Assembly*): Mr Noonan, Mr Perera, Mrs Powell and Ms Wooldridge.

House Committee — (*Council*): The President (*ex officio*), Mr Atkinson, Ms Darveniza, Mr Drum, Mr Eideh and Ms Hartland. (*Assembly*): The Speaker (*ex officio*), Ms Beattie, Mr Delahunty, Mr Howard, Mr Kotsiras, Mr Scott and Mr K. Smith.

Law Reform Committee — (*Council*): Mrs Kronberg, Mr O'Donohue and Mr Scheffer. (*Assembly*): Mr Brooks, Mr Clark, Mr Donnellan and Mr Foley.

Outer Suburban/Interface Services and Development Committee — (*Council*): Mr Elasmarr, Mr Guy and Ms Hartland. (*Assembly*): Ms Green, Mr Hodgett, Mr Nardella, Mr Seitz and Mr K. Smith.

Public Accounts and Estimates Committee — (*Council*): Mr Barber, Mr Dalla-Riva, Mr Pakula and Mr Rich-Phillips. (*Assembly*): Ms Munt, Mr Noonan, Mr Scott, Mr Stensholt, Dr Sykes and Mr Wells.

Road Safety Committee — (*Council*): Mr Koch and Mr Leane. (*Assembly*): Mr Eren, Mr Langdon, Mr Mulder, Mr Trezise and Mr Weller.

Rural and Regional Committee — (*Council*) Ms Darveniza, Mr Drum, Ms Lovell, Ms Tierney and Mr Vogels. (*Assembly*) Ms Marshall and Mr Northe.

Scrutiny of Acts and Regulations Committee — (*Council*): Mr Eideh, Mr O'Donohue, Mrs Peulich and Ms Pulford. (*Assembly*): Mr Brooks, Mr Carli, Mr Jasper, Mr Languiller and Mr R. Smith.

Heads of parliamentary departments

Assembly — Clerk of the Parliaments and Clerk of the Legislative Assembly: Mr R. W. Purdey

Council — Clerk of the Legislative Council: Mr W. R. Tunnecliffe

Parliamentary Services — Secretary: Dr S. O'Kane

MEMBERS OF THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL
FIFTY-SIXTH PARLIAMENT — FIRST SESSION

President: The Hon. R. F. SMITH

Deputy President: Mr BRUCE ATKINSON

Acting Presidents: Mr Elasmar, Mr Finn, Mr Leane, Mr Pakula, Ms Pennicuik, Mrs Peulich, Mr Somyurek and Mr Vogels

Leader of the Government:

Mr JOHN LENDERS

Deputy Leader of the Government:

Mr GAVIN JENNINGS

Leader of the Opposition:

Mr DAVID DAVIS

Deputy Leader of the Opposition:

Mrs WENDY LOVELL

Leader of The Nationals:

Mr PETER HALL

Deputy Leader of The Nationals:

Mr DAMIAN DRUM

Member	Region	Party	Member	Region	Party
Atkinson, Mr Bruce Norman	Eastern Metropolitan	LP	Lenders, Mr John	Southern Metropolitan	ALP
Barber, Mr Gregory John	Northern Metropolitan	Greens	Lovell, Ms Wendy Ann	Northern Victoria	LP
Broad, Ms Candy Celeste	Northern Victoria	ALP	Madden, Hon. Justin Mark	Western Metropolitan	ALP
Coote, Mrs Andrea	Southern Metropolitan	LP	Mikakos, Ms Jenny	Northern Metropolitan	ALP
Dalla-Riva, Mr Richard Alex Gordon	Eastern Metropolitan	LP	O'Donohue, Mr Edward John	Eastern Victoria	LP
Darveniza, Ms Kaye Mary	Northern Victoria	ALP	Pakula, Mr Martin Philip	Western Metropolitan	ALP
Davis, Mr David McLean	Southern Metropolitan	LP	Pennicuik, Ms Susan Margaret	Southern Metropolitan	Greens
Davis, Mr Philip Rivers	Eastern Victoria	LP	Petrovich, Mrs Donna-Lee	Northern Victoria	LP
Drum, Mr Damian Kevin	Northern Victoria	Nats	Peulich, Mrs Inga	South Eastern Metropolitan	LP
Eideh, Khalil M.	Western Metropolitan	ALP	Pulford, Ms Jaala Lee	Western Victoria	ALP
Elasmar, Mr Nazih	Northern Metropolitan	ALP	Rich-Phillips, Mr Gordon Kenneth	South Eastern Metropolitan	LP
Finn, Mr Bernard Thomas C.	Western Metropolitan	LP	Scheffer, Mr Johan Emiel	Eastern Victoria	ALP
Guy, Mr Matthew Jason	Northern Metropolitan	LP	Smith, Hon. Robert Frederick	South Eastern Metropolitan	ALP
Hall, Mr Peter Ronald	Eastern Victoria	Nats	Somyurek, Mr Adem	South Eastern Metropolitan	ALP
Hartland, Ms Colleen Mildred	Western Metropolitan	Greens	Tee, Mr Brian Lennox	Eastern Metropolitan	ALP
Jennings, Mr Gavin Wayne	South Eastern Metropolitan	ALP	Theophanous, Hon. Theo Charles	Northern Metropolitan	ALP
Kavanagh, Mr Peter Damian	Western Victoria	DLP	Thornley, Mr Evan William	Southern Metropolitan	ALP
Koch, Mr David Frank	Western Victoria	LP	Tierney, Ms Gayle Anne	Western Victoria	ALP
Kronberg, Mrs Janice Susan	Eastern Metropolitan	LP	Viney, Mr Matthew Shaw	Eastern Victoria	ALP
Leane, Mr Shaun Leo	Eastern Metropolitan	ALP	Vogels, Mr John Adrian	Western Victoria	LP

CONTENTS

TUESDAY, 24 FEBRUARY 2009

CONDOLENCES

Bushfires: Victoria 885

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Standing and sessional orders 921

Tuesday, 24 February 2009

The PRESIDENT (Hon. R. F Smith) took the chair at 2.03 p.m. and read the prayer.

CONDOLENCES

Bushfires: Victoria

Mr LENDERS (Treasurer) — By leave, I move:

That this house:

- (1) extends its condolences and deepest sympathy to the families and loved ones of those killed in the recent bushfires;
- (2) grieves for those who suffered injury and who lost their homes, property and personal possessions;
- (3) praises the work of firefighters and emergency services personnel from Victoria, other parts of Australia and overseas for their courage and sacrifice in fighting the fires and protecting our community;
- (4) expresses its deep gratitude to the many volunteers and community members who have supported friends, neighbours and communities at this time of great need;
- (5) sincerely thanks the people of Australia for their incredible generosity and support to the affected communities, particularly through the bushfire appeal fund; and
- (6) pledges to work with communities and all levels of government to rebuild fire-affected communities at the earliest opportunity.

Saturday, 7 February 2009, has been dubbed ‘Black Saturday’. It is a day when all of us will remember where we were. It was the hottest day in recorded history. It had fierce winds, and we all remember it. Bushfires in Australia have been described in a number of ways, and I would like to read a quote from 70 years ago which probably picks up where we were and describes well that day:

The speed of the fires was appalling. They leaped from mountain peak to mountain peak, or far out into the lower country, lighting the forests 6 or 7 miles in advance of the main fires. Blown by a wind of great force, they roared as they travelled. Balls of crackling fire sped at a great pace in advance of the fires, consuming with a roaring, explosive noise, all that they touched. Houses of brick were seen and heard to leap into a roar of flame before the fires had reached them.

That quote is from the report of the royal commission into the bushfires of 1939, and for any of us who lived in rural communities or were exposed recently, that is a very graphic description of what parts of Victoria were like on Saturday, 7 February, this year.

Today there are six things I would like to cover in my contribution. They are: we as a community mourn the dead; we as a community comfort the living; we care for the injured; we thank our heroes; we rebuild our communities; and we learn for the future.

Also we need to remember communities affected not just on Black Saturday, as Victorian communities in Gippsland were affected before the Black Saturday fires, and as recently as yesterday communities around Daylesford and the Dandenongs have been experiencing new fires. But our focus of course will be on Black Saturday as the horrific magnitude of the day is burnt into all our minds.

Mourning the dead is something all of us have experienced when we have lost a loved one or seen tragic circumstances. So all of us have some understanding for those who face bereavement, but we can only begin to understand and contemplate the horror of losing loved ones to death in a fire.

Through Black Saturday, 210 people died either in the fires or in fighting fires. There will be 210 dignified, individual farewells for those people, but for the record it is worth pointing out the stark reality of these losses. In Marysville 45 people perished; 43 in Strathewen; 38 in Kinglake; 22 in St Andrews; 10 in Steels Creek; 8 in Flowerdale; and 7 each in Humevale and Kinglake West. There were 4 each in Callignee, Koornalla and Narbethong and 2 each in Churchill, Mudgegonga, Strath Creek, Toolangi and Whittlesea. Also people were lost in Bendigo, Cambarville, Heathcote Junction, Jeeralang Junction, Mittons Bridge, Reedy Creek, Upper Plenty and Yarra Glen.

These 210 people were someone’s parents, someone’s grandparents, someone’s child or grandchild; they were husbands, wives, friends, neighbours, workmates and team mates. They were our community; they were part of Victoria’s community. On Sunday last we had a national day of mourning for the loss of those 210 lives. It was a beautiful reflection by the community, an acknowledgement of the lives lost and a start of the healing process. That was our community’s response, but here today in this house we as a Parliament also mourn them.

Our second task is to comfort the living. Comforting the living is no mean feat for a community. The main comfort for the living is clearly their loved ones and sometimes in strangers reaching out and supporting them. As a community we also need to be able to respond to those who have fled the fear of fire, those who have lost their loved ones, those who are facing

uncertainty generally and those who have lost property. For many reasons we need to comfort the living.

The community has risen extraordinarily to the challenge. Refuge centres around various parts of Victoria are now dealing with the basics of food, shelter and clothes; they provide information, and medical and emotional care. To help understand the magnitude of the task, the Red Cross has now more than 16 000 registrations of people who have either lost their homes, who are seeking accommodation or are seeking support across 78 affected communities.

In comforting the living we need to deal with many aspects, but at this juncture let me say that the staff at the Department of Human Services have made a great effort, as have people from the Red Cross, from municipalities, from the commonwealth as well as many volunteers from church organisations; I could go on and on, naming the various people who have assisted in the task of comforting the living.

There has also been a great effort from across the world. It has been extraordinary. I read recently of a remote village in Papua New Guinea that many years ago had been assisted by Australia, and the people in that village collected \$6000 towards the bushfire appeal.

Extraordinary contributions have been made across the board. Everyone in this house knows of clubs, workplaces, congregations and corporations that have collected money. One school in my electorate raised \$73 000 in a single day for the Baptistcare fund. The blood bank has received an amazing volume of calls. It normally receives 1500 calls in a day, but on the Monday after the fires some 15 000 people called, wishing to assist.

I believe our third task is to care for the injured. We have seen an extraordinary effort from our emergency services and other services, including the burns unit at the Alfred hospital, and such hospitals as the Latrobe Regional Hospital and the hospitals at Yea, Alexandra, Mansfield and a range of other areas that have been particularly affected. In many of these smaller communities some people have to choose between defending their homes or going to work at a hospital to look after people who are in great need. Some people have chosen to work extraordinarily long hours in health services, to help their neighbours and friends and people in their community.

In caring for the injured we have witnessed extraordinary responses from the ambulance services, including the volunteers in the St John Ambulance service, from counsellors and from families, friends and

strangers who are out there caring for the injured. It is a task of a civilised society, and our community has sought to assist in that regard.

I believe our fourth task is to thank the workers — the people who have either risked their lives to fight fires or have put in an extraordinary amount of effort into rebuilding communities.

An extraordinary number of people have fought the fires. I will go through some of the agencies. The Department of Sustainability and Environment and network emergency organisations have put more than 2500 people at times into this effort. The Country Fire Authority has put in more than 2500 people a day, drawing on over 30 000 volunteers in the community at various times in its response. The Metropolitan Fire Brigade has put in more than 600 people. Interstate firefighters have come from New South Wales, Tasmania, South Australia, the Australian Capital Territory and Western Australia; one very brave firefighter from the Australian Capital Territory lost his life here in Victoria.

International assistance has come from the United States of America, Canada and New Zealand, from where people have come to assist Victorian communities in our time of need. In addition, our Australian military forces, the army and navy in particular, have been involved. Within Victoria additional support has come from organisations such as the police, with more than 2000 police directly involved, as well as assistance being given by the State Emergency Service, Emergency Services Telecommunications Authority, the ambulance services, Red Cross volunteers and, as I have already mentioned, the Department of Human Services. People from all those organisations have played an extraordinary role in fighting the fires.

Many other people from government departments have been involved, including the Office of the Emergency Services Commissioner, VicRoads, the Department of Primary Industries, Parks Victoria, the state coroner's office and many other organisations. Sometimes you see people in places where you would not imagine you would see them. I was at Toolangi not so long ago where I saw foresters, people whose normal job is to harvest timber, using 300 pieces of heavy machinery to assist the army and the fire services people in clearing firebreaks and the like. We have seen that in all sorts of ways when out and about, but overwhelmingly we have seen it in the volunteers who back up our salaried firefighters in logistics, in support and in every way we know. We also see an extraordinary generosity coming forward from our community — the offers of

assistance, of money, of goods, of blood, as I have mentioned, and simply from people who are willing to assist our community at this difficult time.

The fifth task is the rebuilding of the community. Rebuilding of the community is an easy phrase but a very difficult concept. We can rebuild bricks and mortar, but we need to heal communities that have been severely damaged and severely affected by loss of life and trauma. The spirit of building a community can be seen through a school, a church, a sporting club, in jobs in tourism, in families and in the health of the community — all different aspects that we have a challenge to address and move through.

If we measure the rebuilding task of our community, we see that the task is awesome. Two thousand and twenty-nine houses have been destroyed or severely damaged. If we look at where they are, we see that 1639 were in Murrindindi shire, which is more than one in five houses in that shire. There were 247 in Latrobe shire, 58 in greater Bendigo, 29 in Indigo shire and 56 in other shires. Three schools, churches and multiple community facilities are gone. Our challenge is to rebuild, but also and more importantly to rebuild the community spirit and the health of the community.

The final thing I will touch on is that we need to learn for the future. If we refer to Scripture briefly — to Ecclesiastes 3 — we see that there is a time for everything, including a time to heal. There is a range of things we could refer to in Ecclesiastes, but there is a time. We know as a state that we have had massive fires — in 1851, in 1939 and, in our memory, on Ash Wednesday in 1983. A royal commission will look at that.

As members of Parliament we have been out listening and learning. In my travels across this state I have come across many members of this house in their travels, including the five members representing eastern Victoria out in Gippsland. There has been an extraordinary united community sense. I have been to refuge centres with ministerial colleagues; with Peter Ryan, the Leader of The Nationals in the Assembly; and with Philip Davis, Ed O'Donohue, Peter Hall, Matt Viney and Johan Scheffer — with the entire spectrum. We have been out and about in parts of eastern Victoria and have all learnt extraordinarily from our community and shared with the community as part of the rebuilding.

We have seen public meetings, which many of us have attended, and there have been visits to relief centres. Some members of this Parliament are Country Fire Authority firefighters. I know of two in the Assembly:

my colleagues Ben Hardman, the member for Seymour, and Danielle Green, the member for Yan Yean. Many of us have been to municipal coordination centres. We have all been out there with our communities, and there are lessons to be learnt.

Today I conclude by saying that our task is firstly to condole for and respect those we have lost, to comfort the living and, going into the future, to rebuild the state. It is a very sad and grim day on which members of this house rise to speak on this condolence motion. It is a sad day, for all the reasons I have mentioned, but it is also an opportunity for us to start the process of rebuilding these great Victorian communities. I urge support for the motion.

Mr D. DAVIS (Southern Metropolitan) — I join the Leader of the Government in this condolence motion to pay tribute to and express condolence and sympathy for those who lost their lives or family members and to record the contribution of individuals, communities and emergency services, particularly our volunteers. I join this motion at a time when fires, including very threatening fires, are still burning and are still a risk to the community. We also have many weeks of hot weather to go in this fire season; it is not yet over. In the last few days further fires have begun, including fires near Daylesford and Upwey.

I express at the outset my deepest sympathy for each of the survivors and, on behalf of the community, great sadness at the losses experienced by so many families.

Nature is never fully tamed, and this is a crucial lesson from 7 February 2009. Different parts of the world face periodic challenges from the forces of nature — tornadoes in America's west, tsunamis in many Asia-Pacific countries, hurricanes in the tropics, and in the case of Australia and particularly Victoria, bushfire. These fires were perhaps in a technical sense textbook-perfect fires. Fire conditions were perfect, with perfect temperatures, perfect wind conditions for fire to move and substantial fuel loads. The fires resulted in record loss of life, although not in the size of the area affected.

As the Leader of the Government said, Victoria has been in this situation before, most notably in 1939 and 1983, and on other occasions. I urge Victorians to read the report of the 1939 royal commission. I will not repeat the quotes the leader has put on the record today, but the descriptions from 1939 could equally have fitted the conditions of 7 February.

On that day the main Victorian fires were at Bunyip Ridge in the state park, Bendigo, Healesville, Dargo,

Yarra Glen, Kinglake, Coleraine, Ferntree Gully, Horsham, Beechworth, Churchill, and Kilmore East and West — the so-called Murrindindi complex north and south.

As the leader said, 4500 people have been involved. Nearly 4000 firefighters, including 2500 Country Fire Authority volunteers, 340 vehicles, 23 bulldozers and 37 planes were used to fight these fires. Deaths have been reported in the following places: Kinglake, Wandong, Strathewen, Clonbinane, Callignee, Long Gully, Flowerdale, Yea, St Andrews, Humevale, Hazelwood, Marysville, Jeeralang, Hazeldene, Taggerty, Barwidgee Creek and Bendigo. I will not go through the complete list but the worst-hit towns for death tolls were Marysville, with 45 confirmed deaths; Strathewen, with 43 confirmed deaths; Kinglake, with 37 confirmed deaths; St Andrews, with 22 confirmed deaths, and Steels Creek, with 10 confirmed deaths.

A score of people have been in the Alfred hospital with severe burns and in hospitals across the state, including local hospitals. Over 7000 people have lost their homes in these fires. As the leader said, the registrations with the Red Cross are much greater than that. Over 2000 homes were destroyed by the fires, with specific reports of property loss in the following areas: Bendigo, Horsham, Whittlesea, Narbethong, Traralgon, Toolangi, Yackandandah, Labertouche, Yea and Thornton, as well as a number of the towns already listed.

Over 20 fires were started on that day. As I said, many of the fires are still burning and are yet to be brought under control. Over 340 000 hectares of land have been burnt. In some sense we forgot the lessons of our forebears, and we do that at our peril.

Analysis of these fires will take time and will primarily occur through the investigations of the royal commission. I welcome royal commissioner Bernard Teague in his role. This analysis must include a picture not only of the hazards involved but also of the risk to the community from similar events. I believe our chamber will have a special role in scrutinising the impact of these fires and supporting our communities. In fact a majority of members of this chamber have electorates that have been affected by the fires of 7 February and beyond.

We have all heard over recent days harrowing stories of narrow escapes and unbelievable horrors. I will briefly recount just a couple that had a deep impact on me. Bruce and his son stayed in Marysville to fight the fire and were lucky to save their home and lives. Bruce described the devastation at Marysville:

I'm standing at the front of my house and I can see a road and the creek which runs through the town, the football oval and big pavilion. It's gutted. If I look to my right, there's the school. All the buildings are gone but the shadecloth over the playground is still there. You can't understand it! Straight through the trees was a big guesthouse which could fit 200 people. It's rubble. Everywhere I look the trees are black. In our garden, we had ornamental trees and a lot have gone. In the distance I can see smoke from the Healesville fire, over the ridge down to the south. But we're safe here because there's nothing left to burn. Both our churches are burnt and I'm sure the cemetery is gone. The whole town is rubble.

Tim from Kinglake told his harrowing story of narrow escape:

I'll thank the ratepayers of Whittlesea council because I did manage to bring home (I work at council there) one of the mobile spray units that we have for weed control and I had that outside, but it was so dark I couldn't even find the on switch on the pump. Our own home pump and hoses fell apart. We wet down the front veranda, then I ran around the corner and pulled the hose off the pump so we lost pressure on both pumps.

So 'Plan A' fell apart very quickly, and once we had the neighbour's shed exploding and the bush on the other side on fire we had to retreat into the house. All we took in were two 10-litre backpacks, but the thing that saved us was the baby bathwater that we were going to put on the garden that morning but we forgot, and when the roof was on fire in the lounge room I ran out to the back porch to grab the ladder and dad grabbed the buckets of bathwater.

They say in a fire you're supposed to get down low but because we have cathedral ceilings I had to get up high and I nearly passed out on the ladder throwing buckets of baby bathwater up in the roof to put out spot fires under the ridge caps. It's just luck, I think, that we survived.

Some heroes did not escape but died unrecognised.

My electorate, Southern Metropolitan Region, which is also the Leader of the Government's electorate, was not directly impacted by these fires, but that is not to say that the residents, like many other Victorians and indeed Australians, have not been affected. Many have signed condolence books that are available in each MP's office. Many school students in the Southern Metropolitan Region have sent messages to the survivors and their families. Lucia from class 7A at Elwood College wrote:

Black Saturday, when the fires raced through the countryside, the horrible roar, cars exploding, the heat and the bright flames. But now it's all over and all there is is blackness, dead, burnt trees, skeletons of cars and dead animals lie everywhere. What pain and sadness it gives me to see all the poor people. What horror you have lived through. To every single person who has had anything to do with the fires, I say sorry, with all my love and hope I can offer from deep inside my heart. I'm deeply sorry.

Toby from Elwood College, but this time class 9D, wrote:

All of Victoria is behind you all the way and we will help you pull through.

And finally, Isabella from year 9 at Mentone Girls Secondary College, wrote:

To everyone who was involved in the Black Saturday bushfires, I am so dearly sorry to all the unfortunate people who lost their homes, friends and family members in the bushfires. I hope that every one of you can start rebuilding your lives and homes. I would also like to thank the firefighters who volunteered to help fight the fires; they risked their lives to save others and homes. I wish and hope that everyone who was involved with the fires can restart a fresh, new and safe life.

The grief and suffering that has occurred as a result of these fires has had an impact on our communities and on so many individuals and families. It is in part an experience that is lived through by whole communities. The truth is that the grief that is felt and the impact of the tragedy that is experienced is essentially felt by individuals; it is individualised. How can we ever fully understand or appreciate the feelings of someone who has lost a spouse, a child or a parent? Remember always: the suffering of the many does not reduce the suffering of each individual.

The fires have also changed our community. Even while communities are being torn asunder, the psyche — the heart of the community — has been re-established. The community has re-established itself. Paradoxically our community spirit, which may have slipped over recent years, has been reawakened through the agent of these fires. These experiences will be etched in our memories for a long time. Our generation will not quickly forget the people, the lives or the lessons. As the Leader of the Government said, perhaps we did forget.

We can be proud of the bushfire appeals and the incredible generosity of the Victorian community, and indeed the Australian community, and beyond. The appeal conducted by Channel 9, the local fundraisers and the collectors — all of these have shown the strength of community. The towns involved — places that we all have memories of — have each played a part in the life of Victoria. Businesses, including the small businesses that are so much part of the community, have faced massive challenges and will face more as we seek to rebuild.

These fires have been characterised by the actions of heroes — firefighters, police officers, emergency workers, volunteers, CFA members and all the others who have contributed, including firefighters and police from interstate. Some of these people have sacrificed their own lives. I was honoured to meet Tasmanian firefighters at Woori Yallock and Australian Capital

Territory firefighters and New South Wales policemen at Alexandra. These are just a sample of the interstate and international support that was provided, and I say thank you. Members of the Australian army came with their bulldozers, logistics and tents. I thank those soldiers.

To the members of this house and those in the other place, I say thank you for your bipartisan efforts and support for local communities. This is democracy at its best. I also recognise those fighting to save wildlife, like Michelle Demise-Garrett from the Help for Wildlife group, and those seeking to help domestic and stock animals injured by these fires. To the firefighters, the police, the DSE workers, the members of the Red Cross and the armies of volunteers at the relief and recovery centres, this house and I say thank you, but most strongly I say it to those who engaged in heroism, recognised and unrecognised. These selfless acts speak to the highest values. Some acts of heroism were by those who have now perished and I say they, too, must be recognised and saluted.

In recognising the heroes and those we have lost, rebuilding and regeneration are our tasks as a state. As I said, the community spirit has been strengthened by this adversity. What the community needs as the first step in the response is recognition. But central to the recovery is doing justice to those we have lost. Where errors have been made or policy or planning failures have occurred we must recognise the facts and face them openly. Truth and honesty build trust and hope. This is part of the rebuilding. Leadership ensures a proper response, beginning first with recognition.

The process surrounding the royal commission is also part of the recovery and rebuilding. It will seek to answer the questions of ‘Why?’ and ‘What went wrong?’. These are the questions that are naturally asked. The process should not be one of looking for scapegoats but of looking for the truth, the responsibility and the lessons.

The funerals of those we have lost have begun; they will tear at the heart of each and every one of us. Each is a recognition of a life, and each is a recognition of a life cut short. Those we have lost deserve respect, and families deserve our respect and our total support in their cruellest hour.

I want also to say something about the need for assistance through counselling as part of the recovery. There is a need to ensure that services are available not only now and in the immediate aftermath of the 7 February fires but also to meet the continuing needs over the next 5 or 10 years. These needs will be over

and above the requirements of other communities, such as the psychological and personal impact of this incident. These needs must be met.

Communities will fight back; they are fighting back. I was impressed by the focus and spirit of Marysville people like the Marysville woman I met who is re-establishing the Marysville Kindergarten in the Acheron hall, which has been made available by the Acheron community. People are rebuilding.

My colleagues and members in this chamber will no doubt put on record the position of each fire in their local area — of course, in much greater detail than I could. As we mourn the dead and as we learn, people should have no doubt that each and every member of this chamber pledges to rebuild these communities, and that all Victorians join us in supporting this motion and what will follow.

Mr HALL (Eastern Victoria) — The events of late January rocked the small Gippsland communities of Boolarra, Yinnar, Darlimurla, Mirboo North and Delburn. The events of 7 February rocked the nation. The details of those late January events have been well recorded locally, and I will come back to them shortly.

The details of the 7 February events have been reported extensively around the world. They tell stories of heroism, bravery, lucky escapes, despair, generosity and all sorts of emotions. Sadly, they also tell stories of tragedy. These stories are compelling. I am sure we have all read them with immense interest since 7 February, though I think those stories are best told by the people who have been directly involved and are the makers of those stories.

The primary intent of this condolence motion before the chamber this afternoon is to express our condolences and sincere sympathy to all those who have lost lives and loved ones in the fires. I do that with a very heavy heart — a heart filled with sadness for those who have perished in the fires. I do so also on behalf of the people I represent in Eastern Victoria Region.

In terms of lives lost, these fires have been Australia's worst natural disaster. It has been reported that some 210 lives have been lost. But the accuracy of that figure is, again, something which I think will be determined over a period of time. It is reported that in Gippsland 11 lives and 247 homes have been lost; again, that figure may not be totally accurate.

When things like this happen close to home, it hits hardest. Townships like Koornalla, Callignee, Traralgon South, Churchill, Hazelwood North, Hazelwood South, Boolarra, Jeeralang and Yinnar are

all a part of our local community in the Latrobe Valley. There are other townships like Devon North, Yarram and a host of townships in the West Gippsland area that are not much further away from home. As I said, it is the closeness of these fires that has the greatest impact on all of us. The role of government and the Parliament is to assist in whatever and whichever way we can to help individuals and communities who have gone through this very traumatic experience.

I mentioned the Delburn, Darlimurla and Boolarra fires in my opening comments. I did so because not all of the fires that are the subject of this motion started on 7 February. The fire in the Boolarra area started on 28 January at 7.30 a.m.; that fire was deliberately lit. Three weeks ago, on 3 February, I absconded from the evening session of Parliament to attend a community meeting in Boolarra, which was attended by over 300 people. They were then putting in place things needed to assist that community to recover from those fires. The next day, 4 February, fire started in the Bunyip State Park; that fire is still burning.

There are also significant fires still burning throughout the state. They include the Bunyip State Park-Bunyip River fire which has now burnt over 26 000 hectares; there is also a significant fire at Wilsons Promontory which is still burning; there are fires in the Kilmore-Murrindindi complex north and Kilmore-Murrindindi complex south regions that are still burning. There are also fires that started overnight in places close to Daylesford, in the Dandenongs and in Yarram in Gippsland.

It is important for us all to acknowledge that these fire episodes are not over. There is much more hard work to be done. There is probably a significant time ahead of us which will pose extreme fire danger and fire risk.

I want to comment on what I believe is the extraordinary response from the front-line people who tackle the fires. I include members of the Country Fire Authority, the Department of Sustainability and Environment staff, Parks Victoria staff, Victoria Police, Hancock Victorian Plantations, the State Emergency Service, ambulance services and ABC radio. All of those groups assisted in providing a front-line response to those fires.

When you visit an incident control centre or a staging point for fire vehicles, you get some appreciation of the complexity of the task of responding to fire. Most members at some time over the last couple of weeks have visited such places. When you watch the various organisations in the same room coming together on an hourly or 2-hourly basis to plan the next attack on those

fires, one wonders how they can do it. One marvels at the complexity of that sort of operation.

I commend those involved in that operation for the work they have done. There will always be some criticism of the way in which matters are handled, there will also be some mistakes made and there will always be ways we can do things better in the future, but overall, in the face of these most daunting of challenges, I think the front-line bushfire response teams deserve our heartfelt gratitude for the work they did and in many cases are continuing to do.

I want also to make mention of the community's response, which I think was equally outstanding. Organisations like the Red Cross, local government, Lifeline, the Salvation Army, local service clubs and a whole range of charitable organisations, representing just about every sort of organisation you can name in the community, came together to assist in the community response to the bushfires. It is a very humbling experience to see volunteer and professional organisations at evacuation centres, at relief centres, and at staging areas and the like providing invaluable support to those who have been displaced from their homes by fire and those who are directly involved in fighting the fires.

The motion before us also makes comment about the generosity of Victorians, and again I want to add my compliments to all Victorians who contributed in a magnificent way when the call for help went out. The contribution to the statewide relief funds, to the Gippsland Emergency Relief Fund and to a whole range of community fundraising events has been absolutely marvellous. One quick example brought that home to me through a little project I was running through my office where I asked for 50 people to support the distribution of tools required by people who had lost everything in the bushfires. I asked for 50 people; I got 150 people and had to knock back another 50. That particular project has enabled the distribution of \$75 000 worth of tools to fire-affected victims along with almost \$20 000 worth of workwear.

It would be remiss of me not to mention in particular two of my constituents, Trish and Leon Sweeney. I also commend Rob and Andy Graham of Home Timber and Hardware, Traralgon, and Andrew Panther of Ausworkwear and Safety and their teams of helpers for their generosity in terms of the money and time they have put in to assist directly those who have been affected by fires. That is but one example. There are a million examples like that where Victorians and Australians have dug deep to help their colleagues who were in desperate need.

I also want to make quick comment about the royal commission to say that I support the process. I think that following such an event it is absolutely necessary that an appropriate inquiry be undertaken. In 2003 the emergency services commissioner, Bruce Esplin, reported to the Parliament on the impact of the fires of that year. In 2006–07 a parliamentary committee reported on the fires and made recommendations to the Parliament, and I think in this particular instance a royal commission is appropriate to provide the forum where many issues that need to be addressed can be addressed, and so I welcome that.

It is a time of mixed emotions that we all face. I feel great sorrow for those who have been affected by the fires, but at the same time I feel great pride in those who have gone beyond reasonable expectations to support those in need. I pay tribute to them, including, I might add, to the government, which has acted quickly to put in place support for fire-affected victims. I urge that support to be ongoing as the impact of these fires will still be prevalent for many years to come.

I express my sincere condolences to those who have lost loved ones, and if there are further means by which I and my fellow Gippslanders can assist those who have felt the impact of the fires we stand ready to do so.

Mr JENNINGS (Minister for Environment and Climate Change) — In Victoria in February 2009 our hearts were broken. We are still open and unguarded against the tragedy that surrounds us. We are grieving for the loss of life and the deep scarring of the landscape that will take generations to replenish and revive. In our world uprooted and turned upside down we now have a climate that sends more dark clouds over Victoria to start fires through dry lightning strikes than clouds that douse fire with healing rains.

In this parched landscape, where the First Australians have lived for countless generations, managed fire and survived uncontrolled fires, our current generation will struggle to come to terms with the recent chaotic destruction of precious human life and of flora and fauna and with the loss of the very integrity and capacity of the land itself. We have witnessed cruel winds, foul and untrue. The winds of 7 February 2009 drove fires, disrespectful of landscape and so unrelenting that there was no relief or safe haven for people caught up in them. From the 300 fires that started on 7 February, 209 precious Victorian souls were lost; human souls from all walks of life, through all stations of life, through all stages of life.

When I heard late in the afternoon about the loss of what I believed was one life that then led to a handful

of lives, my heart sank and my psyche went into a downward spiral, a vortex that I have barely come out of. But the thousands of Victorians I have met from that time whose hearts responded in the same way as mine, whose psyches responded in the same way as mine, have shown great resilience, great courage, great fortitude and great forbearance in coping with the trials and tribulations we have confronted. They have shown an overriding commitment to improve the lot of one another and to make sure these things never happen again. I thank these people wholeheartedly. I thank them for their strength, their courage and their determination, and I am glad to be in the company today of people who clearly share that feeling.

As a result of the 300 fires that commenced on that day, 209 lives were lost, more than 2000 homes and their contents were destroyed, and up to 7000 people in Victoria were left homeless. More than 300 000 hectares of private and public land was burnt by fires that commenced on that day alone. More than 100 state and community buildings were left in ruins, including schools, kindergartens, police stations and other parts of important community infrastructure. As well as that, 59 commercial buildings and more than 1500 buildings, including farm sheds and buildings involved in the agricultural sector, were destroyed. Nearly 9000 head of stock died, and countless birds and animals lost their lives and their habitat across the Victorian landscape.

I am very pleased to say that a feature of the commentary today and, hopefully, time and again and well into the future, will be to thank those who stood up at that time to confront those fires and who continue to fight them. More than 4700 people in Victoria took to the front line that day to repel and douse the fires and try to overcome the urgent and immediate threat, and more than half of those firefighters continue to fight that ongoing threat we confront to the present day. I see it as an absolute privilege of my life in public office to hopefully share some of that burden with the outstanding chief fire officers I have in Ewan Waller, who heads the team at DSE (Department of Sustainability and Environment), supported by Alison Stone, and Russell Rees from the CFA (Country Fire Authority). The extraordinary professionalism — far beyond a labour of love — that organisation brings to bear; the support it provides to communities and to volunteers who have been doing it so hard over the period from the time these fires commenced has already been indicated.

These serious fires we have been confronting are a feature of an ongoing pattern and an ongoing risk our community confronts. It is a risk we cannot ignore, and

we must make sure we are geared up to respond to it. Those firefighters and those who work within the network of emergency organisations which come together in times of crisis have demonstrated an extraordinary capacity and determination. Organisations such as the CFA, the DSE, the Metropolitan Fire Brigade, the Victoria State Emergency Service and their partners Parks Victoria and Melbourne Water, backed up by Victoria Police, the Department of Human Services, the Department of Primary Industries, VicForests, Ambulance Victoria, the Bureau of Meteorology, the Alfred hospital intensive care burns unit, the Red Cross blood service are coordinated in many successful ways by Bruce Esplin, who makes sure that the task — remembering the lessons learnt from the 2006 fires that demonstrated the need for better integration and coordination of these services — is undertaken with great determination. I thank him and his team.

All of us appreciate the warnings and alerts that have been continually pumped out over our airwaves by ABC radio since those tragic fires began. The degree of effort in terms of information sharing and community empowerment that has been undertaken each and every minute of each and every day since the emergency came to bear has been extraordinary.

The effort of support that has come from other jurisdictions across the country through the fire agencies, the land management services, the ambulance and emergency services and the police who have come from New South Wales, South Australia, Tasmania, the Australian Capital Territory and Western Australia, backed up by the Australian Army and the Australian Federal Police has also been extraordinary.

An extraordinary commitment has been demonstrated from around the globe. We have had firefighters and emergency services workers come to our shores from the USA, Canada and New Zealand — and some emergency workers have also come from Indonesia to back up our efforts. It has been amazing to witness the generosity of spirit that time and again has come to the surface, come to the fore and come to the assistance of communities and individuals in the community.

A number of people have commented on the extraordinary generosity of spirit in relation to the donations that have swept away anybody's expectations of what might be a reasonable limit to such generosity in terms of the donations made by citizens around the nation. Consider the volunteer effort that continues each and every day, whether it be in recovery centres, community halls or community settings throughout Victoria. We estimate that somewhere of the order of

20 000 Victorians are dedicating themselves to supporting one another each and every day during this crisis.

I will briefly mention some of these extraordinary individuals and some of the things they have had to come to terms with in the past few weeks. I am sorry to single out some individuals, because I know that the very first individual I will single out would not want to be singled out — and the other individuals I will highlight may also feel this way. The first individual is Claire Yeo, who works for the Australian Bureau of Meteorology — a brilliant person who works in this community's interests. The burden she carries is that she predicted the threat our community was facing. She made sure she shared that information — that she told the truth about what the evidence was suggesting about the risk confronting the community on 7 February 2009.

The terrible burden that Claire carries is that she feels that by declaring the truth, she has some responsibility for the terrible events that happened on the day. I hope Claire is relieved of that burden. Telling the community the truth — exposing us to the knowledge of that threat — is what we would have wanted her to do. It is what we need her to do, and it would be tragic if she carried that burden for much longer.

I also want to talk about Vin Anderson, who is quite an extraordinary volunteer — a bundle of energy, a raw dynamo — who I met at the Whittlesea recovery centre. He is a contractor from Kinglake, and in the few moments I shared with him he was very busy answering about 35 phone calls, trying to make sure that generators were in place to enable people to go back to their homes in Kinglake. Whilst he was busy organising for that to occur, he gave me a cautionary tale about what life would be like upon going back to Kinglake. This is a man who told me what a brilliant landscape and beautiful habitat it was, how magical it was to listen to the tree frogs at night. I must say he did one of the most outstanding impersonations of a tree frog I have ever heard — it stopped me in my tracks.

Mr Lenders — You could do it for *Hansard*.

Mr JENNINGS — If I had practised it, I could do it for *Hansard*, but the syllables would have made it tricky.

He talked about a friend of his who had gone straight back to the mountain. His story was quite telling and moving. It was a cautionary tale about what life had been like before, and what life would be like now and in the immediate future. As I said, one of his mates had

gone back to the mountain. However, he could not stay on the mountain because in the darkness there was a complete silence — no sign of life, whether it be birds or tree frogs. His friend believed, on going back to the mountain, that he was in a living coffin. All of us must be alive to the potential for people returning home to be struck by the complete difference in their homes and in the way they relate to the landscape. What happened to his mate was a shocking awakening.

On the day after the fires, 8 February, I travelled to Narre Warren and met up with a great Country Fire Authority crew that had done an extraordinary job in a very confined space to protect houses along a gully; they had done a fantastic job. I happened to meet Lyndon Barry from the Pakenham CFA crew. Whilst we were travelling, rumours were spreading like wildfire throughout the CFA that up to 39 firefighters had lost their lives on the previous day. Firefighters from the CFA, the Department of Sustainability and Environment and other agencies were out that day, not knowing the truth about how many firefighters had lost their lives.

When I returned after travelling around with Lyndon, one of the first things I did was try to make sure from the emergency coordination centre how many firefighters, if any, had lost their lives and report that immediately back to Lyndon. I was very happy at the time that I could report back — happy, to the extent you could be happy at that point of time — that in fact no firefighters had lost their lives. At the time when our community was coming to understand that many of our fellow citizens had lost their lives during the course of that day, that message that I gave back to Lyndon held true. It held true for another week, and hopefully it will hold true to the limit of the tragic loss on Tuesday, 17 February, of one firefighter, David Balfour, who travelled to Victoria, in his words, 'to repay the debt' from when our firefighters went to the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) to support firefighters there at their time of crisis.

David paid a great price in repaying that debt. His family — wife Celia and their three children — paid a great price for that commitment to us all. We appreciate that, and we do not underestimate it for a second. I feel very disappointed that in a real sense taking part in this condolence motion today prevents me from travelling to the ACT to be part of the memorial service for this heroic and great firefighter, to whom our community owes a great debt.

Beyond those individuals I can tell the house that in the last few weeks I have made eye contact with a lot of individuals, whom I cannot name, who have been doing

it pretty hard. Their eyes tell quite a story. These are eyes that are full of soot, full of dried tears and full of grit, and inevitably they are full of a lot of redness. The redness in those eyes, I think — I am sorry I cannot attribute this line, but this is what somebody told me — is a road map to their soul. In fact these people who are out there fighting fires, with great determination, without knowing weariness, keep going back. They are showing their humanity and their commitment each and every day, and we as a community owe a great debt and offer great thanks to them. But it is a demonstration of how compassionate and considerate our community has shown itself to be.

If you think about this in terms of evolution, which I have reflected on a little, you would say that as a community we have evolved pretty well, as demonstrated by how well we have rallied around to support one another. But there was one very primal moment that I want to share; perhaps I should not, in the name of cabinet confidentiality, but I shall. This reflects our nature in terms of the pure primal connection between us all. About a week ago through a cabinet committee process where we considered what was happening in our firefighting effort and went through incident reports involving the stress for police officers going around identifying the charred remains of our citizens in various locations through the countryside, Mr Kieran Walsh, the acting police commissioner, gave a chilling report of an incident that required further examination, and when he did there was a collective low bellow throughout the room. There is no other way to describe it: it sounded more like the howl of an injured animal than the human voice. I think there is a very good chance that all Victorians, when they have been responding to these issues in the last couple of weeks, have heard that bellow somewhere deep within their hearts.

We have had firefighters who have had to continue to go back to the front line. They have been caught between their desire to be with their loved ones, to embrace them, to hug them and to provide support and encouragement to them. One of the great tragedies is that every time they have done it they have been confronted by the memory and realisation that there is some other family where that is not taking place. So what we have witnessed time and again is that, confronted with this situation, they have felt no option but to go immediately back out to the fire and try to do their best to put it out. It is an extraordinary thing that they have been doing on our behalf. And we are still dealing with seven major fires today.

If Victoria was currently playing football, we would reckon there was something rigged because every

quarter when we change ends, we still seem to be kicking against the wind. But this month, this year, there is good news: there is no state of origin and there are no sides; we are all on the same team. I have been proud to see the demonstration of great valour and leadership exhibited by my colleagues. I have been overwhelmed by the courage and commitment of our citizens from all walks of life. I have no doubt that all of us have been driven to do as much as we can, and probably all of us feel we can never do and will never do enough. I trust the royal commission will bring openness, scrutiny and integrity to ensure that our community learns from the suffering we are currently enduring.

In Australia, and in Victoria, we have come to understand that our ecology can replenish, revive and flourish through fire. The fires of 7 February 2009 went much too far beyond this. They consumed oxygen that should have supported life. The fires scorched nutrients from the soil and made it more akin to the surface of the moon than our precious and vulnerable planet. These fires tortured our land on which we have lived and will live. These fires will change our watercourses for at least a generation. Most tragically, these fires denied a full and happy life to our toddlers and our youngsters and tore families asunder. The inferno tormented our older, wiser and kinder people with unforgiving, undeserved and untimely deaths.

But through the sorrow and the suffering comes an unbounded solidarity throughout our nation and around the world. In the worst of worlds, we have seen the best of our people. The fires have tested but not defeated our professionalism and our persistence. Shining through the firestorm is the courage of our citizens and their conviction to support and revive community. In the light of the dawn we can believe that the darkness of the fires will be replaced with the collective hope in our hearts as together we rebuild for a brighter tomorrow.

Ms PENNICUIK (Southern Metropolitan) — My colleagues Greg Barber, Colleen Hartland and I, alongside our fellow members of the Parliament of Victoria and with all Victorians and Australians, express our shock and horror at the ferocity of the firestorms that descended upon so many Victorian communities on 7 February.

We know 210 lives have been lost in this tragedy, a figure that is difficult to grasp and accept. The deaths of these people have devastated the communities of Bendigo, Callignee, Cambarville, Churchill, Flowerdale, Heathcote Junction, Humevale, Jeeralang Junction, Koornalla, Kinglake, Kinglake West, Marysville, Mittons Bridge, Mudgegonga, Narbethong, Reedy Creek, St Andrews, Steels Creek, Strath Creek,

Strathewen, Toolangi, Upper Plenty, Whittlesea and Yarra Glen. Their friends and relatives come from all over Victoria and Australia.

Many words of sympathy and condolence have been said in the 17 days since this terrible tragedy, but words can never truly convey the pain that the mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, grandparents, aunties, uncles, cousins, partners, friends, neighbours and workmates of the people we have lost are feeling every hour of every day. We can only express our very deepest sympathy to every person who has lost someone close to them and to those communities that have been so devastated by those deaths. Their grief and loss are profound. We grieve with them. We know the people who have survived will need our help and support for many years to come. We pledge our ongoing support.

More than 70 people were hospitalised, with serious injuries. Many have now been released, but they may have weeks or months of recovery ahead. The emotional recovery may take much longer, but with the support of their families, friends and the community it can be achieved. A small number of very seriously injured people remain in hospital; some are yet to emerge from sedation, so terrible are their wounds. They are yet to learn of the extent of their injuries or in some cases of the people and homes they have lost to the fires. We know the road ahead for them will be very painful and difficult. I think of them every day, and I will do whatever I can to help them along that road. Sadly one of those patients died in hospital just yesterday.

More than 2000 homes have been lost across more than 70 affected communities. While it is true that houses can be rebuilt, to lose your home and in many cases your community is a great trauma. To replace those involves more than just bricks and mortar: to go near replacing what has been lost and to heal the emotional trauma will require ongoing support and assistance from the wider community. Personal memorabilia can never be replaced.

It is in these times of disaster and terrible loss that we see the very best of humanity. The outpouring of compassion and donations from so many Australians and people around the world has been amazing. Hopefully it brings some comfort to those who have lost so much. Just as when there have been earthquakes, cyclones, hurricanes, landslides, bushfires or tsunamis anywhere in the world, the local people have rallied to provide immediate rescue and relief, and people from everywhere have reacted with compassion and given generously to aid in the recovery of survivors and their communities.

The courage of those who risk their lives to save others in danger is truly inspiring. The Country Fire Authority and the State Emergency Service, staffed largely by volunteers, come out to help us in every fire, flood, windstorm or other natural phenomenon that threatens our safety. We almost take them for granted. This terrible day was an ordeal beyond anyone's previous experience, and it stretched those volunteers to the limits of human endurance. Everyone has been inspired and moved by their courage, self-sacrifice and dedication to the people in trouble who needed them. We thank them profoundly.

We thank the Department of Sustainability and Environment fire management staff, the Metropolitan Fire Brigade crews, the army and the interstate and overseas firefighters who have all put themselves at risk to help others in need and who have worked to the point of exhaustion. They continue to work, containing fires that are still burning and new fires that have started.

We thank the ambulance personnel, doctors, nurses and other medical staff who have worked around the clock to help those injured in the fires and their aftermath. We thank the members of Victoria Police who are also in the front line, evacuating people, checking homes, roads and communities, and performing the myriad other tasks that become their responsibility in these types of chaotic and confusing circumstances.

Staff in various state and commonwealth departments have made great efforts to bypass red tape so that immediate assistance could be arranged for those who have lost everything, including their personal papers and means of identification. While there have been a couple of glitches, it really has been a great effort in compassion and cooperation. We thank them too. Hundreds of local council staff have been there on the ground to help their local communities.

We are acutely aware of the terrible task that has faced the Victoria Police disaster victim identification team, who are sifting through the ashes to try to find and accurately identify people who have lost their lives. The task facing them and the State Coroner's Office is harrowing and painstaking. It is vital that loved ones receive accurate and timely information in these terrible circumstances. It is a very difficult business. We thank them for their work.

Hundreds of ordinary Victorians from areas near the devastation have worked day and night to help survivors with food, clothing, shelter, funds and shoulders to cry on.

The value of our public broadcaster, the ABC, has really come to the fore. ABC radio has done an outstanding job in keeping communities updated and informed about the fires locally and on a statewide basis. Familiar local broadcasters have been heard at all times of the day and night, and this must have also taken a massive effort on the part of the technical and other support staff. We thank them for their work.

The sheer scale of the efforts of relief centre volunteers, emergency services staff, government department staff and others in providing immediate relief and ongoing support is truly inspiring. I know there is frustration right across the country; everybody wants to help, but not everybody can do so in a direct way. For a number of very good reasons there is a limit to the number of people who can go into the affected areas and lend a hand directly. But we can all help in our own way, especially through groups that have the experience and the infrastructure to work effectively in devastated communities. We can be ready to keep supporting these communities in the long term as they rebuild their lives in whatever way suits them best.

At this time of immediate tragedy, I would like to remember those people who have been killed or injured or who have lost their homes in previous bushfires. Many people who have lived through past events will find the events of 7 February especially harrowing. My late father used to speak often of the 1939 bushfires, which occurred when he was 18 years old. That event obviously had a profound effect on him, as it must have had on the Victorian community at that time, in a manner similar to the effect that this event is having on us now. I lived in Anglesea at the time of the 1983 fires, and I saw the effect they had on people — although I suffered no personal loss myself. I spent some time volunteering to help the CFA go to the back of the town to put out spot fires in the days following the fire.

The Greens are supporting the state government Red Cross Victorian bushfire appeal. At last count I believe it had raised over \$100 million in donations from all around Australia and the world. That is an absolutely amazing effort, and as I said before hopefully it brings some comfort to people who have lost so much.

While we must rightly focus on the terrible human tragedy of the fires, we know it has also been a catastrophe for animals and for the land itself. More than 400 000 hectares have been burnt. It is estimated that hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of native animals have been lost. Many have been terribly injured. Some species may have been pushed to the brink of extinction. Thousands of companion and agricultural animals have perished, and many have been

injured. The plight of the animals has been covered in the press, and people have rallied to help with the rescue and care of injured pets, farm animals and wildlife. I am supporting Wildlife Victoria and have been collecting donated veterinary supplies for local wildlife help and rescue teams. Given that the charities cannot receive any more donated goods for affected people at this point in time, the people in Southern Metropolitan Region can contribute in a concrete way by supporting people who are assisting animals, as people have expressed feelings of helplessness and not knowing what to do.

I acknowledge the cash grants to wildlife carers announced by Minister Jennings last week. The Greens also acknowledge the non-partisan way in which all members of Parliament have approached this tragedy that has touched us all in a very human way. The Premier has shown great compassion, sensitivity and calm in the face of such terrible circumstances and great stress. Government ministers have worked night and day. Members of Parliament in the fire-affected areas have been working tirelessly in their communities. All MPs have done whatever they can to be of assistance — and that is what MPs are for — and our combined and individual efforts will be needed for a long time to come.

The Greens support the establishment of a royal commission to investigate the immediate causes of the fires and to work through the complex issues involved in how to inhabit one of the most bushfire-prone areas on earth in a way that is both ecologically sustainable and as safe as possible for people and communities.

We have lived through a seminal event. Every experienced firefighter I have heard has described the fires of 7 February as like nothing they had ever seen before. The day was right off the scale in terms of the bushfire index. Temperatures all over Victoria were in the high 40s. The winds gusted at more than 100 kilometres per hour. Survivors spoke of the wind, the heat, the speed and the sound of the fire as being like several 747 aircraft flying low overhead.

Victoria has changed. It is not the same as the place in which I grew up. Over the past 10 years it has become much drier and warmer. I do not think this will change or that the old Victoria will somehow come back to us. This is what we must come to terms with. Even this fire season is not yet over, as we experience continued and fresh outbreaks of fire around the state, with high temperatures and strong winds being predicted for next Friday. Let us hope that we lose no more people, places or animals.

The Greens support this motion of condolence and the suspension of the usual business of the Parliament as a mark of respect to those we lost in the fires of 7 February and to acknowledge those left behind and the terrible pain they are going through. We assure the government and the people of Victoria of our support, now and in the future, to help the people who have suffered in this tragedy and in preventing future disasters.

We support this motion in sincere appreciation of and gratitude to the ordinary citizens, volunteers and professionals who have pulled together in a massive effort of rescue and relief for the survivors of this terrible tragedy.

Mr KAVANAGH (Western Victoria) — On behalf of the Democratic Labor Party and the people of Western Victoria Region, I rise to support the sentiments expressed by other members on this condolence motion today. Recently there have been quite significant fires in western Victoria, including those at Daylesford yesterday and today; however, our primary focus is naturally on the fires of Black Saturday, due to their sheer scale.

Victoria has suffered a terrible loss from this natural disaster, on a scale previously unknown in Australian history. We have lost vast tracts of forest and millions of animals. We have lost businesses, 2000 houses and entire towns. Most tragically, hundreds of our fellow Australians have died, many in horrific circumstances, and others have been seriously injured. Today we should particularly consider two categories of people: firstly, the victims of these tragedies, and secondly, the many people who have helped, particularly emergency service workers.

It is one of the great frustrations of life that we cannot help the dead, but we can all do things to honour those who perished and perhaps give meaning to their deaths. It is often said that we do not know what we have got until it is gone, and it is a true claim. My experience is that the death of another person brings with it a sudden realisation of the great value of that person. It is often only when we know that they are gone forever that we see the uniqueness of that person and how irreplaceable he or she was and how the world is poorer for his or her loss.

We have lost hundreds of our fellow countrymen and women. It seems to me that if we could take from their loss a profound understanding that each person is unique and irreplaceable and from that a determination to try, in spite of all our flaws, to be kinder, more generous and more patient with others, even strangers,

that that would be doing genuine honour and paying appropriate tribute to the hundreds of Victorians who have lost their lives.

We have obligations not only to the dead but also to the living. This is a time of mourning, so blame and recrimination is inappropriate, but we must do all that we can to prevent such disasters happening again. We need to learn from this disaster, minimise the chance of fires happening again and mitigate the loss and impact if they do occur.

The loss of homes, personal property, cars and businesses is devastating, but at least those things are replaceable. A range of charities, organisations and agencies and the commonwealth and state governments have been active and generous in helping victims in this respect. I applaud the Treasurer's recent announcement of providing land tax and stamp duty relief to those who have lost property.

The Australian people have reacted generously in all kinds of ways to help their fellow Australians. The amount of money that has been raised to help victims is unprecedented. From all parts of Australia around \$150 million has already been raised and an ocean of household and personal goods has been given. Mr Lenders mentioned that donations of blood have surged as Australians have rushed to give this precious part of themselves to burns victims. These responses from millions of individuals around Australia warrant not only gratitude for but pride in our fellow Australians.

A vast range of individuals who are not members of agencies or organisations have made contributions — often heroic contributions — to fighting bushfires or providing relief to victims. They cannot all be mentioned here, but, like Mr Jennings, I would like to refer specifically to a couple of them.

Mr Peter Thorneycroft, who was still recovering from serious injury himself on Black Saturday, stood on the roof of Kinglake's National Park Hotel. With the inferno raging around him, flames on all sides, houses in the immediate vicinity bursting into flames and almost engulfed in smoke, Mr Thorneycroft poured water from buckets onto spot fires as they broke out in the hotel beneath him. Mr Thorneycroft's heroism probably saved the lives of 20 people sheltering in the hotel beneath his feet.

Mr Ranald Webster was badly hurt in the Ash Wednesday fires of a quarter of a century ago. Photographs show that after those fires he was very badly scarred. Now, thankfully, his face shows few

signs of burns or scarring. He is 87 years old, but he has been visiting victims of this fire in hospital to show them that there is hope, by demonstrating that many injuries can heal and that their scars may not be terrible.

In the context of efforts made by individuals, like Ms Pennicuik I would like to recognise the Premier and to acknowledge how he has been supported and assisted by the Treasurer and other ministers. In my opinion the Premier has done as well as any leader could have done in giving comfort and support to the survivors of this tragedy.

Cynicism about politicians, as we all know, is rife throughout the community, but I am absolutely sure there is not one of us in this entire Parliament who would not be genuinely and profoundly moved by coming face to face with any of the victims of this tragedy, particularly those who are burns victims.

Doctors and nurses have gone beyond the terms of any contract of employment in treating the injured. It is apparent to any observer that medical staff are doing everything they possibly can for victims and that they are giving not only their professional expertise but loving care, compassion and dedication. This was epitomised for me by the photographs of a burns victim who was bandaged from head to toe, with only his eyes visible — I say ‘his’, but it could have been a woman — and he or she was being cared for with obvious tenderness, compassion and love by a nurse.

All the medical personnel, including ambulance drivers and other ambulance personnel, who were involved in the treatment of burns deserve thanks and admiration not only from the victims and their families but from every one of us.

Similarly many police officers went beyond the call of duty in rescuing people during the fires and protecting communities in their aftermath. Many police officers from New South Wales have volunteered and are volunteering to come to Victoria to assist recovery efforts and to relieve Victorian police officers; also, forensic experts have come voluntarily from the Northern Territory. I thank all police involved, and I thank the governments of New South Wales and the Northern Territory for facilitating this assistance.

Of course our firefighters, particularly the volunteers, are true heroes of this disaster. A recent letter to a Melbourne newspaper editor said it very well. It was written by an American immigrant. He wrote that the volunteers of the Country Fire Authority made him proud to be an Australian. Many of us, whether born

locally or overseas, would wholeheartedly share his sentiments.

We often admire stars of the screen, sporting arena or stage for their great accomplishments, but the volunteer firefighters and State Emergency Service workers are our genuine heroes. Without financial reward, they train over extended periods to develop firefighting skills. In the most difficult and dangerous conditions, they give their all in their struggle to protect lives and property. Their sacrifice, dedication and courage are an inspiration to, and an icon of, our nation.

Two particular groups of firefighters warrant special mention. First are those who have volunteered from other states and territories to come to battle the fires in Victoria. They have come from Tasmania, New South Wales, South Australia, the Australian Capital Territory, Western Australia, and Queensland. From every part of our island continent, people have volunteered to come to Victoria to give their skill, their strength, their courage, their expertise and their extraordinary effort. Every single one of them knew that they were volunteering for dirty, dangerous, gruelling and exhausting work, battling infernos. Unfortunately, as recognised by Mr Jennings, one of these volunteers, Mr David Balfour of the Australian Capital Territory, has been killed helping us. We honour his memory and express our deepest sympathies to his wife and three children.

Even from beyond Australia volunteers have come to help fight Victoria’s fires. From across the Tasman Sea and from across the Pacific Ocean — from New Zealand, Canada and the United States of America — heroes have come to Victoria to help us in our hour of need. We should never forget them and always be thankful for their heroic contributions.

I am sure that I represent the vast majority of people in this state when I offer condolences to all those who have lost loved ones in these fires. May we find some solace and comfort in the generosity, the efforts and in many cases the heroism of those who have helped. To all those who fought the bushfires or helped its victims, I offer sincerest praise, deepest admiration and gratitude from the bottom of my heart.

Ms LOVELL (Northern Victoria) — The fires that ravaged Victoria on 7 February were a tragedy of enormous proportions that shocked the entire Victorian community to the core. As we speak, many of those fires are still burning, and communities are still under threat. My heart goes out to all Victorians affected by these fires. To the families and friends of those who perished, including the family and friends of Australian

Capital Territory firefighter David Balfour, I extend my deepest condolences. No words can soothe the pain of your loss, and no words can express the depth of my sorrow for what you are going through.

To those who have lost homes, pets or property, you have my sympathy and support, and I sincerely hope the outpouring of love and support shown towards you by fellow community members will bring some comfort as you reassemble the threads of your life. Devastation caused by wind, flood or fire is often referred to as an act of God, but the fires that ravaged Victoria on 7 February were no act of God. They were truly hell on earth. The acts of God were the brave acts of our firefighters and community members who stood and stared back at the flames, who fought the fires and who extended help to family members, friends, neighbours and total strangers.

The efforts of our dedicated Country Fire Authority (CFA) volunteers should be commended, as should the efforts of all emergency services personnel, power and timber industry workers, welfare and relief agencies, service clubs and community volunteers, our hospitals and medical personnel, and local governments in bushfire-affected areas.

We have all heard stories of unselfish and genuinely heroic deeds performed during the fires. These stories have served to remind us that, no matter what our personal circumstances, above all else the human capacity to assist others and to have compassion for others is one of our strongest attributes. We have heard the brave stories, and I will just repeat a couple of those, including the story of Kinglake's National Park Hotel where 20 women and children had sought shelter with up to 400 others gathered around the hotel in cars. Over 400 lives were at risk if the hotel caught fire. But Peter Thorneycroft was not about to let that happen. He climbed on the roof and, assisted by locals constantly supplying him with buckets of water, he managed to fight off the deadly embers, saving the hotel and over 400 lives.

Another is the story of 19 people, including seven toddlers and babies, who were camping at a scenic park in Murrindindi. They were saved because Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) firefighters recognised that there would be people in the park and fought their way in. They then guided the eight families into the river and parked their fire truck and cars in the river to protect them. These brave firefighters hosed the campers under a fire blanket until the danger had passed.

No words can express our gratitude to the CFA personnel, both volunteer and career firefighters, who were on the ground throughout Victoria on that day. Many of our CFA volunteers risked their homes and left to fight fires in other areas. Some of them returned to find they no longer had homes. Some of these firefighters would have belonged to the CFA brigade at Flowerdale, which had despatched its tankers to assist others, leaving its town unprotected when the fire engulfed it. The fire destroyed 80 per cent of the homes in the area and took eight lives.

Other firefighters experienced near misses while they were off fighting fires. At the memorial service in Eaglehawk on the national day of mourning I was told of Dennis and Shane Sells, who as volunteers were fighting the fires in the Long Gully area and returned home to find that some of their sheds and outbuildings had suffered fire damage but fortunately their home was still standing.

On 7 February my electorate of Northern Victoria Region was literally ablaze, with fires burning in urban areas of Bendigo, south of Bendigo in the Redesdale area, from Kilmore through to Wandong, Kinglake, Healesville and north through Narbethong, Marysville, Buxton, Murrindindi, Flowerdale and many other towns and districts within that fire complex. Fires also burnt in the Mansfield area and around Beechworth and Stanley. These fires were relentless, and my region is the area that has suffered the greatest loss of life and property. As a whole Victoria has suffered the loss of at least 210 lives; unfortunately this may not be the final tally, as we still may see more names added to the list of those who lost their lives in these horrific fires.

Yesterday, together with the Leader of the Opposition in the other place, Ted Baillieu, and Matthew Guy I attended a memorial service for three members of the O'Gorman family from Humevale: Allan, Carolyn and their 18-year-old son, Stuart. Allan and Carolyn are survived by their 21-year-old twins, Patrick and Bronwyn, to whom I extend my deepest condolences. Allan, Carolyn and Stuart were not only father, mother and brother to Patrick and Bronwyn, they were also son, daughter, grandson, brother, sister, nephew, uncle, aunt and cousin to their extended family, who are all suffering so much grief. They were much-loved friends and valued members of the community. During the eulogies we heard how much they meant to the thousands who had gathered to pay their respects to Allan, Carolyn and Stuart. Yesterday's service highlighted the tragedy we have endured. Families have been ripped apart, communities have been destroyed and there has been a senseless loss of life that none of us will come to terms with. The truly devastating

element of this tragic loss is that Allan had foreseen the potential for bushfires to impact on their home and had installed a fireproof bunker on their property. Unfortunately they did not make it to the bunker.

The fires have destroyed over 2000 homes and impacted on 78 Victorian towns. To date they have burnt an area of approximately 350 000 hectares. I have visited relief and recovery centres at Bendigo, Wallan, Wandong, Whittlesea, Yea, Alexandra and Buxton, witnessing firsthand the grief and devastation the survivors of these fires have endured. I grieve for all those affected, but particularly for the little children. I can only imagine the horror they endured, and I am concerned about the long-term effect it will have on their lives. At the Alexandra relief centre I spoke with several families from Buxton. Some had lost homes; others had homes to return to. Fortunately they had not lost family members, but they spoke of the impact on the children and the fear the children had of returning to their homes. One little girl, who was about six years old, kept pleading with her mother not to take her back because she feared the fire would come back to get her.

My electorate has also lost significant community infrastructure. We have lost three primary schools — in Marysville, Kinglake and Strathewen; three kindergartens — in Flowerdale, Kinglake and Marysville; three churches — in Kinglake and Marysville; two police stations — in Kinglake and Marysville; the State Emergency Service depot in Kinglake; two communication towers in Kinglake; a power substation and a water treatment plant in Kinglake; a football club and a sports centre in Kinglake; nine community and government facilities; one timber mill; at least 61 businesses and shops; and hundreds of sheds and other structures. There has also been massive loss of livestock and fodder and enormous damage to farming properties. These facilities will need to be replaced as soon as possible to allow communities to return to some semblance of normality as they strive to regroup and rebuild.

Some of these communities will never be the same. They have lost community members, amongst them many of their leaders. They have lost homes, schools, footy clubs and many of the other things that importantly bring us together as a community. As leaders in this state we, the members of Parliament, must give these communities as much assistance as possible to rebuild, and that assistance must come as a matter of urgency and without bureaucratic barriers. Planning permits must be streamlined to allow families to return to their communities and rebuild as soon as possible.

However, it is important that in the haste to clear debris away authorities do not strip communities until their members have had time to preserve what is valuable to them. Some communities such as Marysville will have lost much of their historical memorabilia and some of the smallest things, such as a scorched sign from the primary school or church or a cup from the local church hall, may be the things that form an important start to a new collection. For other communities some of these things will add to existing memorabilia, and only the community can decide what is important to it.

Fire has been present in Victoria since well before white settlement. We were told by Aunty Joy Murphy at the national day of mourning that her ancestors conducted fuel reduction burnings every seven years. Major fires in Victoria since 1851 are documented on the Department of Sustainability and Environment website. They include a fire in 1851 known as Black Thursday that burnt approximately 5 million hectares. It cost 12 lives, a million sheep and a thousand cattle. On 1 February 1898 the Red Tuesday fires burnt 260 000 hectares in Gippsland, costing 12 lives and destroying more than 2000 buildings. Between February and March 1926 fires burnt across large areas of Gippsland and 60 lives were lost in addition to widespread damage to farms, homes and forests. On 13 January 1939 — Black Friday — fires burnt between 1.5 and 2 million hectares in Victoria. The fires caused 71 fatalities and destroyed more than 650 buildings, including the township of Narbethong, which again suffered major losses in these fires. On 22 December 1943 a fire near Wangaratta killed 10 people and burnt hundreds of hectares of grassland. In 1944 fires in the Western District destroyed over 500 houses and cost between 15 and 20 lives. In 1952 a fire on the Hume Highway near Benalla burnt approximately 100 000 hectares and caused the deaths of several people.

In 1962 fires in the Dandenong Ranges caused 32 fatalities and destroyed over 450 houses. In 1965 a major grassfire near Longwood caused 7 fatalities and burnt 6 houses. On 8 January 1969, 280 fires broke out, costing the lives of 23 people, including 17 motorists at Lara. These fires also destroyed 230 houses, 21 other buildings and more than 12 000 head of stock. On 12 February 1977 in the Western District of Victoria fires caused the deaths of 4 people and burnt approximately 103 000 hectares, while more than 198 500 stock, 116 houses and 340 buildings were lost. On 16 February 1983 there were the fires that stand out in the memory of all of us, Ash Wednesday. The over 100 fires that contributed to Ash Wednesday burnt 210 000 hectares and caused 47 fatalities. More than 27 000 head of stock were lost, and 2000 houses were

lost. In 1997 fires in the Dandenong Ranges caused 3 fatalities, destroyed 41 houses and burnt 400 hectares. In 2003 the north-eastern alpine fires joined together to form the largest fire in Victoria since the 1939 Black Friday fires, and it was more than 59 days before they could be contained. They burnt over 1.3 million hectares, cost 41 homes and killed over 9000 head of livestock. One life was lost, although not directly from the fire. In 2006 the great alpine fires and fires in the Western District burnt more than 1.2 million hectares and cost 5 lives and 108 homes.

Since 1939 each major fire event has been the subject of either a royal commission or an inquiry. Many of the recommendations from these reports are very similar, including increased fuel reduction and better warning systems. If you talk to local landowners in the regions where lives and property were lost on 7 February, they will tell you what is needed to protect these areas, and a major part of this protection starts with better land management and fuel reduction. They will also tell you how important it is that they are allowed to clear areas close to their homes. The royal commission into the February 2009 fires will provide the opportunity for all these issues to be placed on the table. It is my hope that the royal commission will provide recommendations that address these concerns and provide for better protection of communities in bushfire-prone areas.

In closing, I acknowledge the generosity and compassion shown by all Victorians. The outpouring of support from the community is a sign of the human capacity for generosity and compassion in times of need and an indication of the depth of the community spirit that exists in Victoria. That community spirit will be the strength we draw on as we rebuild. These fires have taken so much from us — loved ones, homes, pets and property — but we will not allow the fires to destroy our community spirit. We will rebuild.

Mr SCHEFFER (Eastern Victoria) — The fires that continue to ravage Victoria have resulted in the deaths of 210 people. They have destroyed many homes and buildings and burnt thousands of hectares of farmland and forests. The suffering and grief is immense. The fire season is not over, and we have seen new flare-ups in the area of Upwey, Tecoma and Belgrave, around Won Wron and Yarram and also at Bunyip Ridge and Wilsons Promontory. The situation remains volatile.

I offer my deep sympathy to the families and friends of those who lost their lives, and to those who are injured I offer my best wishes for a sound recovery. The great hardship that the fires continue to inflict is still raw and incomprehensible, and while these events will never

make sense, experience does show that over time there will be a measure of healing.

Along with other members of this house, especially those who represent rural, regional and urban interface communities, I have spent time with people who have been directly affected by this calamity and with those who are stretching out a helping hand. We have seen hectare upon hectare of burnt-out forest and grassland, ruined farms and destroyed animals. We have listened to the sad and terrifying stories of those coming into the relief centres and watched the firefighters, police officers, health workers and volunteers go about their difficult tasks. We have attended town information meetings and witnessed local communities come to a collective grip on the gravity of the situation. Gippsland is no stranger to the natural calamities of fire and flood, and there have been a number of such events in recent years. The region is well prepared to handle emergencies, and this was evident in the order and speed of the responses.

It is hard to find words that do justice to the extraordinary and heroic work of the emergency services staff, firefighters, police officers, health workers, hospital staff, local government workers, staff of state government departments and non-government organisations, and the thousands of volunteers. The ABC has been universally and justifiably applauded for the phenomenal information service it provides. Not least, the wider public has been recognised for the very generous donation of millions of dollars.

The Country Fire Authority and Victoria Police briefings at the public information meetings were magnificently handled. CFA situation reports were clear and professional, and the police stepped communities through the security issues relating to road closures and the reasons for them in a measured and sensitive way. Many of those who attended were still in shock, and I was deeply impressed by the respect the CFA and police showed in their good humour and the way they valued everyone's contributions. This is no easy thing at the height of a crisis, and it deserves great admiration.

Mention should also be made of the fantastic direct support that so many agencies and volunteers are providing to individuals and families whose homes have been destroyed and whose lives have been torn apart. The relief centre in Traralgon, for example, was set up in the space of 2 hours. Relief centres that have been set up across Gippsland and Victoria have done a phenomenal job of providing a one-stop shop to people coming forward to seek help.

I guess that one of the things that is truly impressive is the depth of community know-how. It does not happen by accident. It comes out of huge public investment in community building that supports neighbourhood houses, Landcare groups, sporting clubs, schools and health centres, for example, and the array of non-government community organisations, from the Gippsland Trades and Labour Council, the Gippsland Asbestos Related Disease Support group and the Victorian Farmers Federation to Rotary and the Lions clubs, just as some examples. Those organisations collaborate to strengthen community bonds and activity. This is the work of generations and powerfully comes to the fore during emergencies such as those we face currently.

This huge capacity is what has enabled Victorians to be so incredibly resilient. We have been able to help ourselves to help each other. It comes from being rich, both economically and socially — and it comes from being organised. But Victoria is part of a larger nation and part of a region in which we have overall built sound relationships with our neighbours. The support of the commonwealth government and people from all over the country has been a critical element in Victoria's capacity to respond both materially and spiritually. We give thanks to the firefighters from New South Wales, Tasmania, South Australia, Western Australia and the Australian Capital Territory for their phenomenal support, and we of course extend our sympathy to the family of David Balfour of the Australian Capital Territory, who tragically lost his life in the Yarra Ranges National Park.

Our experience tells us that where others care for and value us, we grow stronger. So the statements of support and the financial and material donations have strengthened resilience. I know that many people were thankful for the support that was received from overseas. On behalf of the people of Eastern Victoria Region I pay tribute to the Indonesian people, through their government and President Yudhoyono, for the kind words of support and a donation of \$1.5 million to assist in reconstruction and for sending a forensic team to help identify victims of the fires. I know that my friend Mr Budiarkan Bahar, the Indonesian consul-general in Victoria, will have played an important role in securing this support, and I place on record my gratitude to him for that. I would like to pay tribute also to the people and government of Papua New Guinea for a donation of \$2 million to assist those affected by the bushfires in Victoria and also those affected by the floods in Queensland. I know that very many people have appreciated and were moved by this act of great generosity.

Representatives of the international contingent from the United States of America, Canada and New Zealand were present last Tuesday at the public meeting at Langwarrin, where they were warmly welcomed. I am aware that there have been countless messages of support from all kinds of overseas organisations and individuals too numerous to list. But it is important to acknowledge this reservoir of support and feeling for what has happened here.

It is important to place on the record also on behalf of the people of Eastern Victoria Region appreciation of the leadership shown by the Victorian and commonwealth governments, specifically the Premier, John Brumby, and the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd. I also commend the work of our ministers and all Victorian and commonwealth MPs of all parties, who have worked side by side to do whatever was possible to assist those we represent. Many ministers have visited a number of the fire-affected communities in Eastern Victoria Region; the Premier has made a number of visits, and I know the Deputy Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, visited Traralgon and other towns in the area. Both the state and commonwealth governments have made many announcements of measures that will provide direct support to those who have been affected by the fires, those left homeless or whose property has been damaged, those who have sustained injury and those whose businesses have been harmed.

This is a great tragedy for our state. I express my sorrow to all who suffer under its burden and give my deepest gratitude to those who have fought the fires, those who mourn the dead and those who help the survivors.

Mrs PETROVICH (Northern Victoria) — It is with deepest sympathy and great sadness that I rise to speak in support of this condolence motion today for those who have suffered as a result of the bushfires of Saturday, 7 February 2009. My condolences go out to the people of the towns and cities of Kinglake, Kinglake West, Pheasant Creek, Narbethong, Flowerdale, Wandong, Clonbinane, Heathcote Junction, Reedy Creek, Alexandra, Taggerty, Buxton, Yarra Glen, Healesville, Yea, Yackandandah, Stanley, Bruarong, Dederang, Kancoona, Kancoona South, Coral Bank, Glen Creek, Running Creek, Mudgegonga, Kergunyah, Gundowring, Eskdale, Myrtleford, Bendigo, Long Gully, Eaglehawk, Maiden Gully, California Gully, West Bendigo, Baynton, Glenhope, Longwarry, Drouin West, Hazelwood South, Traralgon South, Jeeralang, Budgeree East, Yarram, Woodside, Gormandale, Willung South, Won Wron, Ferny Creek,

Sherbrooke, Kallista, Tecoma, Belgrave, Narre Warren, Yanakie and Sandy Point.

My condolences go to all the people in all those towns, but in particular to the people of the towns of Kinglake, Kinglake West, Pheasant Creek, Marysville, Narbethong, Strathewen and Flowerdale. To even begin to understand what has occurred in those places requires taking the time to listen to those who have lived through one of the greatest disasters we have ever experienced in the state of Victoria. It was a fire so intense that it has been described to me by a resident of Kinglake as being like a meteor shower, because of the speed and ferocity with which it travelled from Kilmore East through Wandong to Kinglake, devastating those communities. If you look at the geography of that country, you can see that it travelled 40 or 50 kilometres from Kilmore East to reach the top of Kinglake. It did that in half an hour, which demonstrates the speed and ferocity with which that fire travelled.

Now 7 February has been marked as a memorial day for those 210 souls lost on that most terrible day. Many of those 210 souls were constituents who lived in the Northern Victoria Region. The fire did not discriminate on the basis of age or profession. It was indiscriminate in its attack on humanity, wildlife, domestic animals, and built and natural assets.

The images that I will take with me forever are those of the overwhelming destruction of some of the most beautiful hills, magnificent trees and lush fern gullies. They were in the areas of Kinglake and Marysville. I had travelled through those areas during the week before the fires. I wonder at the areas that have burnt, as some of those areas would not traditionally have been able to burn, because of their lushness, greenness and dampness — the lovely fern gullies and dells that I have referred to.

As of last Saturday lost in the firestorm were 450 000 hectares or 1.1 million acres. They were all destroyed. My condolences are for the loss of biodiversity, our catchment areas and our wildlife, which were all destroyed. My condolences are especially for those people who have chosen to live in those areas and places because of their love of that environment and that biodiversity.

In total, 1834 houses have been destroyed, and many thousands more have been damaged. That has left more than 7500 people homeless. My condolences go to those who have lost property, as does my commitment that we will rebuild. I say to them: where appropriate, your commitment and connection to that land should be respected, and many hands will be there to help you do

that. With 210 people confirmed dead and 500 people with fire-related injuries, my condolences go to all those affected. My heart aches for your loss and the loss to your communities of those who were treasured and loved by you.

In places around Yea, Marysville, Flowerdale and Kinglake, the sorrow is tangible. It hangs in the air like the smoke. Yet I have a poignant story that was told amidst the smoke and misery. In the car park of the Wallan recovery centre I was told that a baby had been born with the assistance of an army medical officer, and supplies were being couriered to the baby's parents by a dear friend, who had trolley loads of tiny nappies, formula and a whole range of other baby paraphernalia. I think that story is quite symbolic of the hope that those communities have and of their resilience. That little baby being born amidst all that destruction and devastation was, I thought, quite a sign of hope.

It is important that I mention the great community spirit of the people who have assisted so many. I have met many of them and have become extraordinarily fond of them. They are great Australians who, without question, have rolled up their sleeves and done whatever has needed to be done. I will not name them because they would be embarrassed by that. They are people who are not always from the immediate areas affected by fire, but they are people who have left their family homes in metropolitan Melbourne and have gone to recovery centres, not quite knowing what to do, but who have found a job there.

I met a team of young blokes who had a utility and a will to get supplies to the community of Kinglake on the Tuesday after the fires. At that stage we had reports that the community there had no water or power, and were running out of food. The team loaded up the ute and were ready to go well before it was probably safe to do so. But with a CFA (Country Fire Authority) escort, they got those much-needed supplies up the hill to that community. They are the unsung heroes; they know who they are, but, as I said, they would be embarrassed to be named. Some of them are still working there — one of them is probably cooking a barbecue today.

I am also buoyed by the overwhelming generosity of neighbours, strangers and members of the Australian community. There has been an unprecedented level of support from the public, bipartisan support from governments, both state and federal, and support from businesses and agencies for the affected communities. They have all, without question, dived in to help these people in such dire need.

The fact that the Red Cross appeal has donations of over \$100 million that will go to bushfire victims is remarkable; and it was collected over such a short period of time. This money must be used to rebuild in all of the right ways and in all of the ways the communities want.

As I said, I was in Kinglake on the Tuesday after the fire. I met with a number of people, including my colleagues Matthew Guy, Damian Drum and Andrew McIntosh, the member for Kew in the other place, at Whittlesea and also at the recovery centre. We were able to help some of those people to have power restored. There was an old generator that had been sitting in a shed — it was a monster of a thing weighing about 500 kilograms. Ten men and one woman moved it so that it could be used to restore power to Kinglake and provide hot water for much-needed showers and to run a cool room for those communities so they could have perishable food available. I feel very proud to have been there on that day with those people and to have been able to assist them in that way.

I would also like to acknowledge the volunteers of all types but particularly those in emergency services. Regardless of the colour of their uniform or any uniform and the fact that they are exhausted, they continue their great work. Also I would like to acknowledge the other volunteers who do not wear any uniform — they are the CFA ladies committees, the Red Cross ladies who sometimes just get in and do what they do, and community people who are community leaders who have seen there is a job to be done, rolled up their sleeves and got on with it.

I would also like to acknowledge the interstate and overseas fire brigades and police officers who have provided assistance to Victoria's brigades and police officers who have been exhausted by the experience. Their workload has been prolonged. I know that more than 4000 officers from the CFA and the Department of Sustainability and Environment have been working with firefighting personnel from New South Wales, South Australia, the Australian Capital Territory, Tasmania, Western Australia and New Zealand. I would like to send them my personal message of appreciation for their unbelievable efforts.

I think any of us who have witnessed the magnitude of the job know that it is nothing like anything any of us have witnessed before. Once the smoke clears completely — and members need to remember there are some areas of Victoria which are still burning — the magnitude of what has occurred will be truly revealed. The important thing I would like to acknowledge is the priority of the building process and

the continual work that that will involve. It is not a matter of days or months — it will take years.

I think the long-term impact on those communities is something we cannot forget about. They will need our help and support to re-establish themselves. Great care must be taken to ensure that these people and traumatised communities are treated with dignity, that their needs and their vision for the future are met, and that, in some way, bureaucracies do not take over and tell them what is best for them, because those people have a sense of place and commitment to their community. So some sensitivity will be required in the rebuilding effort.

I think the important thing to acknowledge regarding the strength of the communities and the way they have come together is their understanding of what they have been through. None of us can understand what they have been through. They are the only ones who can truly support each other. They are the only ones who have the common belief and common goal of rebuilding and re-establishing those communities as they were. They are setting about doing that in a whole range of ways already. I have already spoken about why many of these people have chosen to live in beautiful locations such as Marysville, Kinglake and Flowerdale; it is because of the natural features and their love of the bush. They will want to return there.

I would also like to acknowledge the stillness now of the bush. One of the most shocking things for me is that there is not a bird in the sky. Many of the animals have been burnt. I mourn for the loss of biodiversity as a result of the intensity of this fire. The Australian bush has a magnificent way of regenerating. I think we need to understand that will occur, but our forests and our animal population will be different to how they were before. The intensity of this incident will prevent our biodiversity from returning to its previously normal state.

There are lessons for us to learn from this event. I think many of the issues are far too raw to discuss now, but I look forward to the royal commission. I welcome the appointment of Justice Bernard Teague. It is important that we have a frank and full discussion and that we learn from what has occurred. Anyone who might feel guilty about what they could have or should have or might have done on a day of 38-degree heat with a hot northerly wind should rest easy in the knowledge that those of us who understand the nature of fire know it would be impossible to stop such a beast. However, we need to have the discussions about how we can learn to do things better. Prescribed burning, management of the land and looking at what our indigenous cousins used

to do in times gone by are things that we certainly need to understand, and we need to put in place checks and measures so that this sort of catastrophe can never happen again.

We must also understand that the fire season is not over. Currently a fire is burning in Daylesford. Many of my own community in the Macedon Ranges were on alert last evening as well as those in the communities of Trentham, Tilden and Daylesford. Many of the Macedon Ranges brigades have been out all night. I spoke to some of their members earlier this morning. They told me that it was a very difficult fire, but they seem to have subdued it now. They are to be commended for their work.

We have a lot of work to do. I know now is not the time to acknowledge the work that has been done. I think it is time to get on with the work at hand, which is about helping the communities and about listening to them and rebuilding and understanding. My thoughts today are with those who are living with the threat of the new fires, and they are also with the brave men and women of the Country Fire Authority who were able to defeat the dragon in some areas last evening and subdue it in others. My thoughts are with those who have suffered, with those who fought and with those who still live with the threat.

Mr VINEY (Eastern Victoria) — As a politician one is expected to come to most debates on motions before the house with a clear idea of what one is going to say. I came to this debate with very little idea of how I would be able to express my feelings and emotions about what took place on Black Saturday just two and a bit weeks ago. It is probably appropriate to record the emotions one feels, and that is probably why it has been difficult for me to form a set of words for this contribution, because the emotions I feel are also the emotions of the community.

They include the emotion of sadness at the loss — at the loss felt for people's lives as well as for their lives themselves and the things their lives represented. There is the emotion of wanting to express condolence that comes with that sadness, and of compassion — compassion for the suffering of many people in our community. And there is the emotion of fear. Certainly I felt fear on that day. It was fear not only of what was coming in my direct path, which I am happy to talk about a little later, but fear because of what from my house I could see occurring all around my town. When the weather and the wind changed I sat on my veranda and felt some degree of relief that the fire would be going away from me, but I also saw where it was travelling and the speed with which it was travelling. I

saw the smoke from the fire such a short distance away from suburban Drouin. It travelled from Labertouche to Drouin West in what appeared to be no time at all.

I feel a great sense of pride in our community for the incredible compassion, support and immediate response provided by everyone in the community almost without exception. I have seen great resilience in our communities and among the people who have suffered so much. I have seen the great sense of determination to create a future for the community out of the devastation.

As a member for Eastern Victoria Region I join with others in this house to formally express my condolences and sympathy to the families who have lost loved ones. During this time I have met some people who have lost so much, and as Mr Hall said, perhaps now is not the time for us to be telling other people's stories. They have lost family and neighbours. I have met families who have lost everything they owned. I have met families who can hardly believe their own survival. I met a family who survived by jumping into a dam, having transferred there from the swimming pool when the house was burning around them. I talked to a young fellow of about 16 years who with his father bravely protected the rest of the family and tried to defend their property. His one expression of loss was that, as a keen golfer, he had lost his clubs in his shed. There are countless stories not only of people facing intense fire but also of people who sacrificed so much in trying to defend and help others.

It was an extraordinary day in terms of the heat, the lack of humidity, the wind and of course the wind change. As members may be aware, I used to own a farm in Tonimbuk in the middle of the Bunyip State Park. I sold that property about a year ago and moved to Drouin — outer suburban Drouin if you like. Having spent much of my life in the middle of a forest and understanding the terrible threat of fire on a hot day, I have to confess to the house that I was poorly prepared for the potential for a fire to directly affect me in suburban Drouin. I know it is inappropriate to bring props into the house, but I advise the house that I have in my hand some of the embers that we put out. They are bits of bark that we put out in the backyard of my place in Drouin. At that time the fire was ripping through Labertouche, and I would say that if the bark were DNA tested it would be found to be from trees in Labertouche some 15 kilometres away.

That is the kind of intensity that occurred on this day. I watched the fire start on the other side of Warragul — it was a spot fire from the fire that was going through from Labertouche to Drouin West — and I want to

make a comment on the tragedy that occurred and the devastation and loss of life, not only in my community in eastern Victoria, particularly around Callignee and Churchill but also in the other towns of Kinglake, Marysville and so on that others have mentioned today.

It was extraordinary that there was no loss of life in the fire that went from Labertouche to Drouin West. I saw the intensity of that fire while I was driving up the Princes Highway as they were putting the fire out in Longwarry North — and if members want to see what happens to your car when you are travelling at 100 kilometres an hour on the Princes Highway and you hit a deer, they can go and have a look at mine — it was just extraordinary.

Not to lose any lives in that part of the fire was a tribute not just to the firefighters who so bravely defended properties and homes but also to the work that the Country Fire Authority did before the fire hit. Unlike what happened at Kinglake and Marysville, the CFA, with the assistance of the weather bureau — and I am glad Mr Jennings acknowledged the weather bureau — was able to track exactly where the Bunyip State Park fire would go. Its tracking proved to be 100 per cent accurate on the day. CFA volunteers doorknocked all of Labertouche on the Thursday, so that community was able to prepare itself and prevent the loss of life. A terrible number of houses were lost there, but because of the dedication of those CFA volunteers, no lives were lost.

There is also the extraordinary bravery of those who helped when the fire struck: the CFA and many others in the local community who defended their own homes and helped neighbours, and people who had burns, to escape the region. The CFA everywhere has been assisting, but I particularly want to acknowledge members of the CFA crew from Drouin West who were fighting the fire in Labertouche, knowing that it was heading to their area; and they continued that work afterwards.

I happened to be filling my car with petrol a few days ago, and the Drouin West CFA truck pulled in. I went over and talked to the crew and thanked them for what they were doing. One of the crew was the operator of the Glen Cromie Caravan Park, and he lost six vans in the fire. His entire business depends on the environment he operates in, and that has been devastated by the fire, but there was the operator of that caravan park, despite the threat to his own business, still out working at putting out spot fires and damping down hotspots.

That is but one example. There are countless examples of people who bravely fought that fire as volunteers and

as professional firefighters. I know there has been some negative media coverage about the Metropolitan Fire Brigade, but I can tell members that when I drove into Drouin and the fire was out the back of the Drouin golf club, it was the Metropolitan Fire Brigade units that were there to defend Drouin because the CFA units were out in the bush.

Countless people helped in the aftermath of the fires. They were in the relief centres helping friends and neighbours, and there have been hundreds of people working on the recovery effort. These people may be in paid positions but they deserve acknowledgement for their incredible dedication. They are people from the Department of Human Services, who have been at each of the recovery and relief centres when I have been there. They are people from the insurance industry, from banks; people from voluntary agencies, whether it be the Red Cross or, in my area, Anglicare. It is probably unfair to be singling these people out because there are dozens of organisations that have been doing this, and they all deserve acknowledgement and thanks.

When I mentioned my mixed emotions, I talked about the fear, and I guess part of my fear comes from having experienced a fire when I was 16 years old. At our farm in Tonimbuk, watching a fire that was nowhere near as intense as the one we had on that Saturday, I can recall standing in the middle of a paddock with my father and a CFA truck. I had a knapsack on my back — I think it was probably half full because they are pretty heavy when they are full — looking at the fire coming down, burning our fence lines and burning right through the forest, and I have to say that the level of fear one experiences in a fire is quite extraordinary.

I can only imagine the fear that people must have experienced in a much more intense fire, because in the fire that I experienced, the flames were twice the height of the eucalypts. The noise, the smoke and the heat were almost indescribable. When a eucalypt explodes, it does so like a bomb. It is not a crackle-and-burn, it is an extraordinary sound, and when there are a series of them going off, one after the other, it is extremely frightening.

My strongest memory of that time is of thinking about the knapsack on my back and concluding, ‘Well, damn! This is pretty useless’, so I can only imagine the fear people must have felt in a much more intense fire. That fear, of course, will live for a very long time with the people who survived. Mine still lives with me, and the experience I had on that Saturday brought back all those fears and concerns.

Some members have mentioned a number of MPs and the work they have done. It is worth acknowledging some of the work that members of Parliament from all sides of the house have done. The very next morning after the fires I went to the relief centre in Warragul, where 360 people had been staying the night before. I remember talking with people from Drouin West and Labertouche who had lost their homes, and there with me was Gary Blackwood, the member for Narracan in the Assembly. Whenever I have been at the other relief centres in Traralgon and Traralgon South I have bumped into Russell Northe. I have had conversations with Peter Hall about some of the work he has been doing — and he mentioned it — in terms of providing tools for people.

I want to particularly acknowledge the incredible work of Ben Hardman, the member for Seymour in the Assembly, and Danielle Green, the member for Yan Yean in the other place, who have been not only supporting their communities but have been CFA volunteers. I want to acknowledge a former MP and friend, Ian Maxfield, who is a member of the Drouin West brigade. I have talked to Ian about the work they were doing on the day in Labertouche. Ian described the fire as the worst he had experienced. I will not try to relate his story, but it is quite extraordinary — he told of the burnovers, the heat and the intensity and the difficulties they had. And of course Ian was one of the people whose own property was threatened by that same fire heading from Labertouche in the direction of his home.

I would also like to acknowledge the incredible work of the Premier, John Brumby, who has shown the compassion and concern that the whole community has been experiencing. I know he has been joined on a number of visits by both the Leader of The Nationals and the Leader of the Opposition. I think the Premier has demonstrated the compassion, the leadership, the fortitude and, if you like, the courage to call for the royal commission to allow the questions to be asked and deal with the issues all Victorians have been seeking to have asked and to be dealt with.

Finally, I join with all members of the house in extending my condolences and sympathy to the families who have lost relatives. I want to join in the expression of grief at the suffering and injury and the loss of properties and homes. I want to praise the incredible work of the firefighters and emergency service workers. I want to acknowledge the incredible work of the people who have been assisting in the relief and recovery efforts. And I sincerely want to thank all the people of Victoria and Australia who have demonstrated incredible generosity to help those who

have been affected by these bushfires. I feel inadequate as a member of Parliament in being able to express the words that need to be expressed, but I am able to express my sympathy by wholeheartedly supporting this motion.

Mr GUY (Northern Metropolitan) — I rise to support the motion of condolence that is before the house. Like the previous speaker, Mr Viney, I come to my contribution with a similar thought in mind — that there is little about the events of 7 February which can be put into words. It is difficult to describe not only my own feelings but also the feelings of the Victorian community and the feelings of all Australians about the devastation that has occurred in our state and about the extremely high loss of life in the bushfire emergency that has befallen Victoria over the last number of weeks. Indeed, as a number of speakers have stated, this bushfire emergency is not over for Victoria; a number of fires are still burning around the state and in some instances are yet to be controlled.

But, as we have said on a number of occasions, bushfire is not something that is new to Australia. It is certainly not an experience that is unknown to people living in rural and regional Australia. It is interesting to look at the words of Dorothea Mackellar from 1904, with which all of us would most likely be familiar. I will read two paragraphs which I am sure we are used to, but they remind all of us that the country we live in is sometimes exceptionally unforgiving to the people who live here:

I love a sunburnt country,
A land of sweeping plains,
Of ragged mountain ranges,
Of droughts and flooding rains.
I love her far horizons,
I love her jewel-sea,
Her beauty and her terror —
The wide brown land for me!
...
Core of my heart, my country!
Land of the rainbow gold,
For flood and fire and famine,
She pays us back threefold —
Over the thirsty paddocks,
Watch, after many days,
The filmy veil of greenness
That thickens as we gaze.

Indeed our country has paid us back threefold in the last number of weeks here in Victoria, and that is something I think all Victorians are certainly aware of — that the country we live in can be exceptionally unforgiving and tough for all those who inhabit it.

As Ms Lovell pointed out earlier, during European settlement in this country there have been a number of major fires that have devastated communities, going as far as back as 1851 when it is estimated that up to 5 million hectares of land was destroyed by bushfire. Of course the Black Friday fires of 1939 burnt around 2 million hectares and nearly 4000 buildings were lost. In the 1969 fires 230 homes were lost and in excess of 20 people were killed. I remember the Ash Wednesday fires. I grew up in the shire of Eltham, and I remember standing in our backyard, watching with my dad as the ash fell and listening to the Country Fire Authority trucks going north. In those fires 75 people were killed in Victoria and South Australia and over a quarter of a million hectares of land was destroyed in Victoria.

We all remember in the life of this and the previous Parliament the fires in the alpine areas which in 2003 burnt over 1.3 million hectares of land and in 2006–07 burnt over a million hectares again. A quite extraordinary amount of the Victorian landmass was devastated by fires. That leads me to where we are today. Two hundred and ten people — and, sadly, possibly more may be found — have died in the fires that have consumed around 2000 buildings and 450 000 hectares of Victoria.

Indeed the fires that have burnt around this state in western Victoria, eastern Victoria, northern Victoria and central Victoria, some of which have affected my own seat of Northern Metropolitan Region, I think bring home to many people, as the Ash Wednesday fires did, that these bushfires have touched the edge of the metropolitan area and the built-up areas. As I said before, bushfire is certainly not something that is unknown to the people of rural and regional Victoria, but in the peri-urban, urban and outer urban areas of Melbourne it is something that is still not a known quantity on a regular scale. This certainly brings the terror home to us where we live and makes us understand the ferocity of the country we live in. There are some affected areas which are either very close to or in my region — that is, Kinglake, Kinglake West, Pheasant Creek, St Andrews, Strathewen and Humevale. I know a lot of people who live in those areas. I grew up with a lot of people who live in those areas, and I am friends with many people who still live there today. In my view it is certainly one of the most beautiful parts of Victoria. It has always been a most physically attractive area which has offered a beautiful lifestyle, which is close to Melbourne and which has a wonderful, relaxed atmosphere. To see the devastation that has been wrought on some of those communities is truly heartbreaking.

Like other members I want to express my thanks to the Country Fire Authority volunteers, who have been absolutely magnificent in this crisis. I think the performance of the CFA firefighters and volunteers truly astounds all of us in this chamber. As a member of Parliament I want to place on record my deep gratitude to the CFA crews not only in my area but also across Victoria; the fire authorities from the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales, South Australia and other states, whose staff have come to assist us in this most tragic situation in Victoria; the departmental staff; people from overseas; the police; and people who off their own bat have come to ensure that people living in these areas do not go unaided. There are many examples of friends who have come to help other friends and people who, on hearing of the devastation in the area that I represent, have come with fuel for generators, food for people stuck in the area who cannot get to supermarkets or whatever it is — the assistance has just been astounding.

The Sunday after the fires I was in the Whittlesea area trying to get some supplies to some families I know who managed to survive but were stuck on their properties in the fire zone. I would like to briefly talk about three families I know who lived in the fire zone and the experiences they went through. Their situations represent three very different examples of a story I think needs to be told.

The first is the Taylor family who lived in Humevale. I have known the Taylors for a number of years. They are members of the local agricultural society and the Victorian Farmers Federation, and they are contributors to the community. I go to church with them. They have farmed in Humevale for a number of decades. It is tough land to farm; there are issues with the urban fringe approaching their farm, but they have made their living there and, as for all farmers, the farm is their asset — it is their business.

Gordon, Lois, Sue and James Taylor stayed on their property to defend their asset. I have spoken to James on many occasions since 7 February, and he said that while he had seen a number of bushfires and threats to the property they live on, he had never seen something move so quickly and so viciously as the fires did on 7 February. Indeed he said he had asked for help from ‘the guy upstairs’ when he saw the flames first take hold of a eucalypt on his property. He thought this one was going to be harder than the others to get around, and it was. The fire came exceptionally close to the Taylors’ house, but James, his father, his mother and his wife managed to save the farmhouse. Their courageousness went further than their own house: they managed to save a number of other properties in

Humevale. While they did lose some stock, a number of their stock survived, and that is a tribute to their efforts to save them. I pay tribute to them as a family who has been through a lot but who did what a lot of people did — they stood and fought on their own property, believing it was fire ready. It has now been shown that it was fire ready. They had a fire plan, and they enacted it; they did the right thing by themselves and managed to survive.

The next example is the Edmonds family. Phil and Marie moved to Kinglake fairly recently from Diamond Creek. They are very decent, salt-of-the-earth people who moved to Kinglake for what I think most people move there for — a relaxing kind of peri-urban lifestyle. We know Kinglake to be a beautiful town near the forest, but Phil said to me that on 7 February he heard what he thought was a 747 in the valley. He said to his wife, 'I'm sure there's a plane in the valley'. She replied, 'Don't be ridiculous'. So he said, 'I'll go and check what's happening'. He walked to the bottom of his driveway, and he said that out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of his neighbour throwing material into a trailer attached to his car. The neighbour looked at him and said, 'Phil, what are you doing? Get out of here!'. As he looked the other way he noticed flames coming up the bottom end of his street. He ran inside to grab his two grandchildren, his daughter and his wife and get them into two cars. They drove to Kinglake Central. He would have had less than 2 minutes from the time he first saw the fire to when it reached his house. Two minutes was all the notice he got. I suspect, unfortunately, that was similar to the notice many people in Kinglake got.

This guy is no fool. He is a Vietnam veteran. He is smart, he knows what to do in an emergency and he is calm, cool and collected, but even he said he was terrified because he knew the extent of the fire and how close it was to his home and that it was going to be a very close call. Indeed it was. In two cars, they sheltered behind a solidly constructed public toilet. They kept the engines going, put the air conditioners on recirculate and kept the kids in the car. They stayed there for an hour and a half or 2 hours until the fires had passed. They spent the night in the Kinglake hall. Phil said he went back the next day to check his house by himself. He did not want to take his wife. Of course, nothing was there.

They had moved to Kinglake for a new, relaxed lifestyle, and within a few months, maybe a year or so, that dream has been wiped away. Phil also told me that that 90 seconds was in many ways the difference between life and death, because he saw that his neighbour's car and trailer were standing burnt out in

his driveway and that his house was also burnt out. I think that gives an indication of just how fierce and quick the fires were.

The third family I will mention is one I and others here knew well, the O'Gorman family. Along with Ms Lovell and the Leader of the Opposition in the other place, Ted Baillieu, yesterday I went to the funeral of Allan O'Gorman, his wife, Carolyn, and his younger son, Stuart. Allan O'Gorman was a decent, hardworking, honest Australian. He was a decent man; he was a very good man. I liked him very much. I think yesterday was an exceptionally difficult day for a lot of people. Anyone who has seen the events of the last couple of weeks knows that they can touch many people personally. The attendance at the funeral for those three family members yesterday was a testament to the fact that he was indeed a very well liked man and someone I am proud to say was a good Liberal.

I know he was someone who would have wanted me to say that he was a good Liberal — not just at a party level but at a personal level, as he was friends with many people in the Liberal Party in the Whittlesea area. He was also an exceptionally decent community man who gave back to his community, as did his wife. They gave back to the community in which they lived. His youngest son, Stuart, was an exceptionally popular student at Ivanhoe Grammar School in Mernda. The number of Stuart's friends and classmates who were at the funeral yesterday, to farewell him with his mum and dad, was astounding; it was a testament to the fact of just how popular this family was and how cruel and indiscriminate a bushfire can be.

Indeed the O'Gormans did not live far from another family which I think everyone who has lived in Victoria for any length of time would know — that is, the Naylor family, who lived atop the hill at Humevale. I did not know them personally but, like many Victorians, it gives a very public face to this disaster when someone like Brian Naylor and his wife pass away. Brian Naylor moved to the area to farm it decades ago — a very different lifestyle choice at that time. The loss of a community figure as public and prominent as Brian Naylor puts a public face to a disaster that many times and on many occasions can somehow be faceless for many people who do not experience it, do not live near it or do not see it. This disaster is one that has touched many people across Victoria.

The response to this tragedy has been overwhelming. It has been heartening to see the response of Victorians and other Australians and people in overseas countries, who have responded to this crisis. I put out a simple

email to friends to come together for support. The response was astounding. People brought non-perishable food, blankets and clothes for people who had become homeless. I asked them to give any kind of support they could.

I offered my home and my office as drop-off points. My wife collected baby clothes from our friends to send them north. By the time we had our third load and had gone up north the people in Whittlesea said to us, 'We are actually full, we have so much material here. This is fabulous'. It was an unbelievable example of how Victorians had come together as a state and a community to support those people. There was an overwhelming outpouring of help to people who needed it. It was heartening to see Victorians from all walks of life come out to support people with whom they may not have had any contact but who were affected by the fires. They felt it was so important that we help fellow Victorians in a crisis like this.

The work that churches and charities have done over the past two or three weeks has been outstanding. At a local level the churches in the Diamond Valley area came together, and the Diamond Valley Baptist Church in Greensborough was used as a drop-off point. When I went there to drop off material, dozens of people were working there voluntarily. They were old, young, male, female, married and single. They were there simply giving their time to assist people who in many cases had lost everything. As I said, it was an exceptionally powerful and wonderful sight to see so many people working voluntarily, knowing that they were getting no recognition — nor did they want any recognition except the knowledge that they were helping people who were in a deep crisis of their own.

Again I place on record my own appreciation, and I am sure the appreciation of everyone in this chamber, of all those who have voluntarily worked for people who have lost everything. It is wonderful to see that that spirit of generosity exists in our community.

As the Premier, Ted Baillieu, Malcolm Turnbull and the Prime Minister have said, we will do everything we can to rebuild the communities that have been affected. We will rebuild the homes, schools, shops and halls and other things that have been lost in this fire. As I said at the start of my speech, fire is not unique to Victoria — indeed we are in one of the three major fire zones in the world, the others being southern California and the south of France — so we are used to fire. However, we are not used to fires coming as close to built-up areas as these fires have come.

As a community we will have to face the task of rebuilding the physical structures we have lost. We will also have to face the challenge of how we manage that rebuilding. The rebuilding process will present us with such issues as housing design and managing fuel loads which are close to those homes, and also planning laws. These issues are not ones for this week's debate, but I am sure they will arise before and during the royal commission. I have no doubt that these issues will be discussed sensibly and properly.

A number of previous speakers have mentioned some people who have worked tirelessly for their communities from the minute these fires impacted upon Victoria up until now. I know it is wrong to single out 1, 2 or 10 people, but there is one politician who I think deserves recognition. I offer this with no prompting except my own admiration. I refer to Fran Bailey, the federal member for McEwen. She has shown herself yet again to be an outstanding community worker. When I saw her on Sunday at Whittlesea, her own home was under threat. I said to her, 'What are you doing here? There is a fire going towards your place'. She said, 'I have got everything in the car. I am not going to defend it. I have all my photo albums that I need. I have the pictures of my kids. That is all I want. But I have to be here today'. She put everything aside to be there, and I believe she deserves recognition for the work she has put in for her community. For me, as a new parliamentarian, she is an outstanding example.

In conclusion, sometimes we ask ourselves what it is to be an Australian and what we think stands out as the image and attitude of an Australian. Earlier in my speech I mentioned Phil Edmonds, who lost his home. I went and saw him again on Sunday. He did not want pity or tears. He only wanted to talk to me about how to get the Remar drug and alcohol rehabilitation facility, which was burnt down, back on its feet and on track. That was foremost in his mind.

He is an example to me, and I have so much admiration for him. After everything he has been through in the last three weeks, he called me to say, 'Listen, mate, I need some help'. In fact it was not help for himself but for people in our society who need rehabilitation. I could not believe that, after what this man had been through, the first thought on his mind was about others. These examples mean that the qualities of being an Australian include bravery, courage, generosity and a caring nature. While we are all deeply sad about the events of 7 February, seeing the response of our nation has made me exceptionally proud to say that I am an Australian.

Hon. J. M. MADDEN (Minister for Planning) — ‘What is, is’. These are words that I recently heard spoken with a degree of wisdom in relation to the circumstances we have before us. As the smoke begins to clear and the dust begins to settle on the events of Black Saturday, we see that they have challenged many of the assumptions we have made about ourselves and the assumptions we base our existence on, raising the great, profound questions of our lives. These events bring into focus the two biggest questions of our lives, birth and death, whose profound meaning and nature we still — for all our scientific knowledge, understanding, art and wisdom — do not adequately understand. Events such as those of Black Saturday challenge our assumptions about not only these big questions but how they fit into issues like our destiny, our self-determination and, to put it frankly, luck.

In travelling around, many of us no doubt will have heard many stories — and we have heard many compelling stories today and will no doubt hear many more in the future — of people who were completely prepared and did everything right but perished, and of people who were blasé, did not really consider the nature of the events and somehow survived. The more I hear of such stories the more they confirm what is in many ways the indiscriminate nature of these bushfire events. At the end of the day there were those who were lucky and those who were not. But what we do know about luck is that in life, no matter how lucky one is, one cannot rely on luck, because eventually it runs out.

When you hear these stories it is hard to comprehend the pain, loss and suffering of individuals. Today many statistics have been presented to us, and I suppose we try to quantify and qualify loss. But you can never empirically quantify the magnitude of grief and loss that many individuals and community members are suffering and will continue to suffer for many years to come. We try to find measures for that, because we like to think that the only way is up.

The enormity of the reservoir of goodwill we see in the community will assist in much of the healing that is needed to support many individuals in the losses they have sustained. But whilst we feel empathy and try to do justice to all this, it is incredibly hard to give meaning to it all. In recent weeks many of us have probably not had a conversation with friends or family at gatherings or functions where the bushfires have not been the core and centre, because we are still trying to digest, understand and do justice to the circumstances that could have resulted in such a comprehensive loss of life and such destruction. The temptation for many is to try to categorise individuals or groups of people — to generalise. So many of us try to synthesise the

circumstances, saying that people lived in certain areas for a particular reason or that people had a particular style of house or chose to live in certain circumstances. However, amidst the loss of life — loss of family and loss of friends — every individual story is exactly that, an individual story from an individual life. And the long-term loss of those people from their lives will reverberate and leave a long-enduring scar on the lives of the people who knew and loved them. The extent and magnitude of that trauma is something you cannot measure, and you cannot measure the enormity of the loss.

More than ever, we know now that the force of Mother Nature is in many ways greater than all of us. That again challenges many of the assumptions we have about our lives. We live lives that are organised, structured and surrounded by many things that assist us in having an ordered life, but the adversity that volunteers, householders, other individuals and service providers had to face on that day and in the weeks afterwards and that they will have to face in the months ahead will continue to challenge us in many ways.

On many occasions at briefings in incident control centres I visited I heard that the events of Black Saturday set new benchmarks in terms of wind velocity, dryness, temperature, flame heat, loss of life and loss of property. Those technical briefings from the individuals in those control centres reinforced that the pace at which the fires moved through valleys — and you can see this when you look at the contours on the maps and see where the roads were — meant that many people were simply unable to escape those circumstances. No doubt that will all be part and parcel of what the royal commission considers, but there are stories about people not even seeing flames: the radiant heat just exploded sheds and cars before anybody saw any smoke or flame. People did not know the fire was there until it was, in a sense, upon them.

That is the recurring theme in many of the stories being told at the relief centres. Members of this chamber have visited those relief centres. The ability of so many people to come together at such short notice and to organise themselves, whether they are volunteers, professionals or people who are paid in a particular field and suddenly have to give new meaning to their job descriptions, is truly inspirational.

I would like to endorse the comments made by other members about the incredible work being done by so many individuals and organisations in terms of the immediate and longer term voluntary work being undertaken. It has not yet been mentioned today, but I want to take the opportunity to commend local

government for its enormous amount of work undertaken in these circumstances.

One of the things that has impressed me at these relief centres is that local government has been part and parcel of that work. Administrators, particularly in local government, have downed their normal administrative work and taken on roles they may not be familiar with — and they have done so for long hours. They are locals from the area. In many of my visits in the first week I sensed that while people whose lives had been affected directly, the survivors, were dealing with their lives moment by moment, hour by hour, and were being assisted in many ways — no doubt they were still in shock — the workers from local government who were trying to coordinate many of the service providers and to direct people, who were also locals, were hearing all the stories from the locals and dealing with them. You could see that under everything else, they were comprehensively traumatised; yet they were still assisting people.

As we move forward we need to be aware that while we will rebuild and focus on all the people who have been directly affected, there will be an enormous number of locals around the edges who will be affected because of the roles they have played. They have had to call upon enormous reserves of energy, both emotional and physical, and we need to be conscious of how they deal with that in the weeks, months and years ahead. Some who have taken on new roles will question whether they have done what needed to be done, whether they did it adequately and whether they did justice to the work they were involved in. Those people will need to be assisted and supported.

They will also need some relief. I was pleased to be made aware that the MAV (Municipal Association of Victoria) and other local governments are bringing in staff from areas that are not affected to fill those spots as people need and seek relief from their roles and as many of the administrative duties of local government have been put on hold. I would like to acknowledge the work local government has done and will continue to do in that support. Other local governments and the MAV will play a major part in assisting communities with this work as we go forward.

No doubt the royal commission will make many recommendations, and I look forward to them. I know Mr Guy has mentioned these matters but I would also like to mention that issues involving building types and urban settlement patterns will need to be resolved. I look forward to resolving those matters with a consistent approach across all sides of politics.

We have heard mention of the history of fire in this state throughout and before white settlement; one thing we know is that there will be more bushfires. Every time we have had significant bushfires, we have learnt from them, but we know that no matter what we do and how we do it, we will always have to confront the fact that Victoria is located in a bushfire-prone area.

I look forward to recommendations being made. I look forward to our continuing the commitment we have seen in recent days and weeks — even last weekend — across the community to ensure that we recognise, support and endure with our commitment to the future of everybody affected now and those who may be affected by other bushfires in years to come. I hope that in years to come, when we consider what happens, that it is never as terrible as what we have seen in recent weeks.

There are some things we will always disagree on when it comes to politics, but we can do a great service to our community if today we ensure our commitment is one and the same in this place: to make sure that we endure what we have faced recently and what those we know have faced recently and that whatever we have to endure in the future is overcome with the same sense of goodwill and commitment that we have seen in recent weeks.

Mr DRUM (Northern Victoria) — In rising to join other members in this condolence motion today I would firstly like to put on the record that my thoughts are with those Victorians right across the state who have lost loved ones. In Bendigo we tend to think we were lucky in the sense that we lost only one life. As tragic as that is, it could and should have been, under all of the prevailing circumstances, significantly worse. But it was not, due to the amazing luck of the fire turning on itself as it was about to engulf another number of hundreds of homes.

We then faced the issue of many Bendigonians losing loved ones in other parts of the state. That hit home in the days after Black Saturday. As tragic as the fire was in my hometown of Bendigo, where we lost a significant number of houses — about 60 — that material loss paled into insignificance when you travelled across to the Kinglake area where people were not only dealing with the loss of material belongings but also grappling with the loss of loved ones, friends, their children's friends, neighbours and relatives.

All members are aware of how far that network of relationships extends in the normal life of all of us and how many of those people in those affected areas were touched not just once or twice but many times. They

lost friends from work and from their social networks, they lost neighbours and they may have lost relatives. Many of the people who survived the fires in those areas were hit on many fronts. That put them in a situation where you could not even begin to understand the sense of loss and grief they were experiencing.

When you first toured the affected areas in my hometown of Bendigo the loss of houses was staggering and shocking. When you talked to the survivors who had been able to flee their burning houses, there was an amazingly raw look of blankness in their eyes. They simply could not believe what they had been put through. We all acknowledge that many support agencies have done a tremendous job. As they were trying to work these victims and survivors through the various steps they were going to take in the upcoming days and weeks, there was again that blank look. It was very difficult for these people to comprehend the enormity of what they had been put through.

Our hearts go out to those who have lost loved ones, their houses and their worldly possessions. Our hearts also go out to the people who have been injured and burnt by these horrific fires. We understand the pain they are going through and the healing process they will embark upon, and it will take some time for those injuries to be healed. We hope they are able to come through the pain in the best possible way. Over 2000 Victorian families are now without a house. It must be a horrendous feeling to have nothing left. People have been left with literally the shirts on their backs. Maybe they grabbed a wallet and a mobile phone as they ran out the door, jumped into the car and headed off down the road. In some instances the tyres on their cars were melting as they drove away to escape the flames. The stories are harrowing.

When talking to these survivors about their options I was trying to empathise with them and to understand what it would be like. An analogy would be that it is like going camping forever. In normal circumstances you go away to camp and it is not a bad experience. You go down to the river and all you take is a bag and a handful of clothes, and you go fishing. It is fantastic when you know you can go back to your own house and life and to the little things that give you a sense of self, but when you take away that sense of self — your couch, bed, television, coffee mug and those little things — it is a harrowing and gutting experience. These people have been put through that experience.

Mr Viney used the expression, 'You feel helpless'. Mr Guy used the same expression. It is a sense of helplessness that people feel in trying to ease their pain

and loss. Most members of Parliament would have shared that sense of inability to do enough, that sense of helplessness in not being able to help these people through their loss.

We also understand that in the affected areas that I have had most contact with — Bendigo, Long Gully, Maiden Gully and places in the Murrindindi shire at Kinglake, areas where predominantly people from low socioeconomic backgrounds have been affected — many houses will be uninsured or underinsured, for a whole raft of reasons. When the survivors get over the shock they will be faced with the daunting reality of finding hope for the future and deciding what direction to take. We need to be cognisant of the stages our constituents will be going through and how we can help them through those stages. That will be very important.

There has been tremendous loss of property and stock. I heard a figure mentioned in the chamber today of over 9000 stock losses. The financial cost has also been brought home to members of the chamber, and we need to be aware of that.

As other members have said, we need also to be aware of the stress and anxiety levels of the communities that have been stalked by these fires now for nearly three weeks. The Healesville community is a great example. Residents of Healesville have been spared the damage, but effectively they have been living on a knife's edge for two weeks. They have packed up, moved out of the valley, gone back home again, packed up again a day later and moved away again in anticipation that as the weather changes so, too, does the urgency of the fire risk. As these communities under threat react to every wind change they will have to continue to be on this knife's edge until we get the substantial change in weather patterns that we are all crying out for.

It is impossible to talk about this issue without paying respect to the Country Fire Authority volunteers, who have been our heroes. It has been mentioned that the member for Seymour, Ben Hardman, and the member for Yan Yean, Danielle Green, members in the other chamber, are CFA members. I know The Nationals member for Rodney in the other place, Paul Weller, is also an active member of the CFA. He has fought three fires this summer and does it without any need for recognition, fanfare, kudos or thanks. He has long been a member of the CFA and has always put his hand up to help his local community in that way.

The State Emergency Service was there shoulder to shoulder with the CFA, the Department of Sustainability and Environment and the Red Cross. The volunteers from those organisations were magnificent.

You do not get a better snapshot of Australia than by seeing our volunteers working in those emergency relief centres. There are other community groups that volunteered their time, effort and energy in helping those who suffered in the fires. There are simply too many to mention.

Then there was our army of armies. A large number of army personnel moved into the fire-affected areas and set up the myriad services that we needed: water purifiers, power generators and cooking facilities. We were able to call on army personnel to supply so many of those services, and to them we say thank you.

There were also members of professional organisations, led in a sense by Department of Human Services people, who were there at the control and recovery centres. Today they are still there, helping to process grant applications and taking people through the maze of different applications and registrations they have to go through in order to get the support they need. There were members of the Department of Sustainability and Environment professional firefighting outfit there along with Centrelink officers to help people with their claims. I even saw people from Telstra Country Wide there, handing out mobile phones with chargers and getting people connected to the internet so they could let their loved ones know they were okay or get in touch with their employees or employers. The sort of work they were doing needs to be commended.

Justin Madden acknowledged and paid tribute to the work done by local government. Local government stepped up in the three or four days following the fires, when so many offers of goodwill were flooding in. In some ways these offers were overwhelming: they all started to get in the way of each other and were starting to become non-productive. Then local government stepped in and started to coordinate the many offers of fundraising events, the donations of goods and other offers. Right around the fire-affected areas local government offices seconded staff from non-fire-affected areas to use their expertise. They need to be acknowledged. Many local government council workers seconded from non-fire-affected areas came to places such as Whittlesea to help run the recovery centres. We need to thank those people who did that.

I fully support the decision taken by the Premier, which I think the Prime Minister also had a role in, to allocate from within government departments an individual case manager to each and every family that has suffered loss. It will be absolutely critical that that be followed through for people who have lost their homes. As I said, three or four days after the fires very little information was getting through to the people affected.

Their loss was of such an enormous magnitude that they were not necessarily taking in all the advice being given to them. There will be a continued need for the case managers to work with the families and individuals who have been through this harrowing experience. The individual case managers will have to be there for many weeks into the future. This is not a situation where people will be able to have one or two interviews, be sorted out with the respective grant and given some finances and then effectively be allowed to get on their way. These families will need so much ongoing help and support that the only way it can work is as the Premier has structured it — that is, each and every family will have an individual case manager, and the case managers will work with those families to ensure that they are able to work through the whole process of getting back on their feet.

On behalf of all Victorians we need to thank the rest of Australia and indeed the international charity family for rising to the occasion and the task of contributing to the Australian Red Cross bushfire appeal. I think we have all been amazed by the generosity of everyday Australians, who are going through tough economic times of their own. Quite often we are asked to put our hands in our pockets and contribute, and that is fine because most of us can afford to do that. To see so many people who we know are doing it tough also putting their hands in their pockets and contributing is a credit to each and every Australian who has contributed. We need to thank those people.

There is no doubt that we have been saddened by the tragedy and humbled by the generosity that has arisen from the tragedy. We have all been amazed by the inner strength and resilience that has emanated from those individuals and communities who have been put to the sword. It has been quite an experience for us all to have watched that reaction unfold before our eyes.

As we rebuild the affected towns and communities and, in Bendigo's case, the suburbs, we need to look back as we move forward. The Bendigo experience was so frightening because of where the fire could have gone. In a sense it was beyond belief. It was not a bushfire that affected Bendigo; it was actually an urban fire — a grassfire that picked up a little bit of scrub or bush. Bendigo is and brands itself as a city within a forest. The fire could have been so much worse than it was had it started in a slightly different location and taken hold of any of the forests that surround many of the houses in Bendigo. That would have been a tragedy beyond comprehension. It would have been a disaster, but it was not. The threat to the great city of Bendigo was always in the areas that coexist with the forests that so many of the residents enjoy and live within. To think

that the threat that became a reality came from a grassfire in what people in the CFA and Department of Sustainability and Environment would describe as a non-threatened area, and yet it could have such terrible consequences, sends a shudder through all of us who believe we have our situation under control. Quite clearly we do not have it under control at all.

In closing, I would like to thank Victoria Police. When Matthew Guy, Andrew McIntosh, the member for Kew in the other place, Donna Petrovich and I were working around Whittlesea, trying to help constituents in Kinglake, we had a lot to do with Victorian police officers. The work they were doing was not easy. They had to control a group of residents who were trying to get back up the mountain, media representatives who were trying to get forward and a whole range of emergency workers and volunteers. I take my hat off to the Victoria Police. They were able to pull their resources from around the state to help maintain order and make sure the recovery effort proceeded in the best way it possibly could. The job of the police officers was a very difficult one. I believe they did it to the very best of their ability.

In relation to the royal commission, I look forward to its findings and recommendations. I look forward also to being a member of a Parliament that enacts the measures that will reduce the likelihood of this ever happening again. It reminds me of those distraught family members who have just suffered loss of life, whether it be from a freak accident, a car accident or any other of those horrible tragedies that happen in our society and community. Quite often on television you see members of those families looking into a camera and effectively saying, 'We need to change what happened here to make sure no other family ever goes through what we're going through'. I think that is the message that will emanate from the people who have been affected by these fires. They will want to feel that the lives of their loved ones have not been lost in vain.

Our bushfire preparedness policies need to be pulled apart fully and put back together, and if changes need to be made, then those changes should be made. If they are given a clean bill of health in relation to the way we are doing things now and if that is the way to do things going forward, then so be it.

I hope that the royal commission looks into each and every aspect of fire preparedness and the management of our forests, our Crown land and government parks. I hope they fully investigate the issue, tear it apart, put it back together and give us a genuine opportunity to go forward. I have no doubt that these findings will be very strident. I hope Justice Teague will be given all the

support he needs — and I am sure he will. Some poor evidence emanated from the 1939 royal commission. The findings were less than honourable — by that, I mean that the findings stated that the evidence given was less than honest. We hope that does not again happen in this instance.

I say in conclusion that my thoughts are with those who have suffered loss over the last three weeks. Hopefully in time they will be able to move forward to a life of prosperity. Hopefully everybody in this Parliament is doing their absolute most to ensure in the very best way they can that those people overcome that sense of loss.

Hon. M. P. PAKULA (Minister for Industry and Trade) — I should say at the outset that it is a privilege to participate in this debate and to be a member of the Parliament that will have the responsibility for leading the effort to rebuild and reconstruct the communities that have been devastated by these fires. It is a bit difficult to know what to add to so many fine sentiments that have been uttered in this place today. I think what we would all acknowledge is that Saturday, 7 February, was one of the darkest days in the history of our state.

It was a day of tragedy and a day of terror for individuals, households, communities and emergency services workers and volunteers who fought so valiantly to turn back the flames that came with the worst blazes as a part of the worst, or among the worst, weather conditions that this state has ever experienced and hopefully will ever experience.

The story of these bushfires that did not occur just on 7 February but, as Mr Hall reminded us earlier, also occurred a week earlier has many chapters. Some of those chapters are still being written as we speak today. They are chapters of terror, loss and sorrow; they are chapters of love, compassion, service, heroism and, ultimately, resilience, recovery and reconstruction.

Whilst resilience, recovery and reconstruction are fine things for all of us to focus on as we move forward, there are nevertheless no words any of us can say here that help us or allow us to deny the fact that for many of our citizens, Black Saturday was a day of irreplaceable loss, sorrow and unimaginable terror — sorrow for the loss of people who were loved, whether they were family, neighbours or friends; sorrow for the loss of their homes; and sorrow for the loss of the precious belongings of a lifetime.

Mr Drum eloquently alluded to the sense of loss of place that comes from having all the things you have acquired and surrounded yourself with throughout your

life disappearing within an instant. So for all those things we in this place, as the representatives of those communities, are deeply sorry, but, I think more importantly, as fellow Victorians and fellow members of the human race we are sorry for the suffering of others.

I cannot begin to comprehend the terror of the day. I am someone who has grown up and lived in an urban setting for my whole life. I have never had to deal with a house fire let alone a wildfire in a forest. The terror must have been unimaginable and compounded by the fact that for so many of the victims, the day would have begun much like any other day. They would have been going about their normal business; they would have been going to the shops to buy the paper. They would have been planning to see a local cricket match. They were probably doing their grocery shopping, or visiting friends and family. So in many respects that day would have been a day like any other albeit being extremely hot and extremely windy.

What would have been a normal day's activities would have turned in what must have seemed an instant. It must have turned into a day where everything they had ever known — their homes, their belongings and their very lives — were in peril in what must have seemed no time at all.

I think for the rest of us, the day serves as a realisation and a recognition that nature and her terror sometimes just cannot be commanded by human beings. It is a force all of its own. We also saw in the fire and its aftermath, love and compassion in its saddest forms and in its most noble forms. There were images of love that I suppose we consider normal in the circumstances — the images of a friend lost or a family member found.

There were also the less conventional manifestations of love: a neighbour protecting his neighbour's property even though his own might be in danger, or the demonstration of love that people have for their community; choosing in the days after the fire to live in tents, in caravans, in local halls and in local relief centres, because they wanted to stay within the community they loved rather than moving to more comfortable lodgings somewhere else.

We have seen evidence of the compassion shown by the entire Victorian — indeed, the entire Australian — community for the victims of the fires. Compassion has been shown not only in their tears but also in the extraordinary donations that have been remarked upon by so many members of this chamber.

In the days of the fires and in subsequent days some of the tales of heroism and service have been extensively remarked upon here and in the media, but others not so much. Many members of this chamber have already indicated that the speed and the skill with which the local emergency response teams swung into action to try to combat the blazes was nothing short of extraordinary.

There were Country Fire Authority (CFA) volunteers whose own homes succumbed to the flames while they were protecting the homes of others and their local community more generally. Volunteers came in from interstate and from overseas. They pitched in and did their bit as part of what they understood was a greater cause. Many members have already remarked upon the fact that David Balfour from the Australian Capital Territory lost his life, and his family lost a husband and a father, because of his sense of duty and service and his decision to repay a debt that he believed was owed by his community as a result of the Canberra fires not so long ago.

All in all, the response to these fires has been marked by superhuman examples of heroism and most markedly of selflessness. We see it so often, and we probably should not be surprised by it but we always are, that the worst of circumstances demonstrates the best of human nature. It gives an opportunity for those instincts in human nature to come to the fore.

I suppose in some respects it is a shame that in so many circumstances it takes this level of dislocation, grief and sorrow for the better angels of our nature to emerge in the way they do. Yet again the emergency services staff and the CFA volunteers have proved themselves to be second to none; despite the terrible toll of Black Saturday, undoubtedly it would have been far, far worse had their hard work not been as magnificent as it was.

I want to talk also about notions of service, because again we have seen service to the community come forward in the very best of ways in the time since 7 February. I want to record my admiration for all the members of this place who represent northern and eastern Victoria for the almost pastoral work they have done servicing their communities in the days since 7 February. I want to make particular mention of Mr Viney who did that while his home was under considerable threat. If other members also found themselves in a similar situation, I apologise, but Mr Viney's situation is the one I am aware of.

I also want to refer to a couple of members in the other place. I am quite certain that this has taken a personal

toll on the members for Morwell and Gippsland, but I have not seen it personally. What I have seen is the toll it has taken on the members for Yan Yean and Seymour. Their resilience in the face of this tragedy and the care they have demonstrated for members of their community have been nothing short of outstanding, notwithstanding it is — in their own minds at least — absolutely what they believe to be required in the circumstances, given the toll on their communities.

I also want to make mention of the Premier. I have only been able to witness the Premier at close quarters for a very brief period. I will not labour the point but the energy, the empathy, the judgement and the steadiness he has demonstrated in this period has left me quite awestruck. I do not want to go on about it any more than that, but, if nothing else, in the period since 7 February, his has been a remarkable effort of stamina.

I also want to note briefly the response of the call to service by the Victorian business community and the Victorian trade union movement. The financial contributions by companies, businesses and individuals have been well observed, but not so well known are the donations of in-kind support, with labourers, tradespeople, tools of trade, food, business counsellors, grief counsellors and technical support.

Nobody that I have spoken to, whether it was the Australian Industry Group, the Victorian Employers Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Victorian Trades Hall Council or individual unions or businesses, hesitated for a moment when they were asked to provide assistance of any kind. Indeed most had already made their contributions well before they needed to be asked. Their generosity, like that of the whole community, has been extraordinary, and I want to remark upon it in this contribution.

That generosity and the spirit that has been shown by the community very rapidly and impressively has transformed itself into efforts for recovery and rebuilding. The quality of the communities that I have visited and which has impressed me most has been that of resilience. In the last couple of weeks I have visited places such as Warragul, Yarra Glen and Wallan. I saw there examples of communities bonding together very quickly, and I just want to ventilate them for a moment.

I was in Warragul on the Monday two days after the fires. The relief centre, which had been taking people from communities like Labertouche, was already winding down; those people had already started returning to their homes. The recovery effort was well under way, and even the local circus had donated its big top so people could house their animals while they

stayed in the relief centre. That might not sound necessary, but when you consider that some of the animals, including snakes, were fairly exotic, the contribution by the local circus was absolutely welcomed and important for the community at that time.

At Wallan I caught up with the chief executive officer of the Shire of Mitchell, Bill Braithwaite. He took me around the shire's recovery centre. It was almost military in its precision and in terms of the range of services which were on offer. Computer rooms were being used. There was a room with landline telephones so that people who had lost their mobile phones could start making the calls necessary to get themselves back on their feet. That was quite apart from all the agencies that were there, providing support. The local church group was doing the food handouts, and the relief centre across the road, which was a double indoor basketball centre, was literally packed to the ceiling with donations of food, baby clothes, toys and nappies. I do not choke up easily, but that was the image that made me choke up for the first time. It was an extraordinary demonstration of the generosity of the community. This was not people's cast-offs, this was new stuff. People had clearly given enormous amounts of their time, their goods and their own possessions to help that community.

On the day I was there, the recovery centre at Yarra Glen was full. Every agency had someone at the table, with a number of people waiting to see them. The staff were completely unflustered; they took everything in their stride. They were cheery, they were professional, and there was not a single complaint from anybody about anything — just absolute dedication and professionalism. The person who was running that centre was not even from the local community. I think she was the chief executive officer of the City of Manningham, who had been offered to that community for a period of time.

The dedication, the level of organisation, the steadiness and the support that was being shown to that community was fantastic. All I can say to the volunteers, the agency staff and all of the people who worked in the relief centres and recovery centres I visited is: 'I salute you. Your efforts have been absolutely remarkable'.

I will finish up by simply saying that no amount of condolence statements made here can console those who grieve for lost loved ones. All we can really do as representatives of the community is to offer our sincere condolences and our thanks to the volunteers and the heroes of the fires. We can only offer our thanks to the

people of Victoria and Australia who have contributed so magnificently so far, and who I know will continue to do so, and offer to make unyielding efforts to work with those communities until their restoration is complete.

Mr O'DONOHUE (Eastern Victoria) — I also rise to speak in favour of the motion that has been moved today. It is ironic that during the last sitting week all five members of Eastern Victorian Region made contributions about the fires that were then burning in Gippsland. Sadly, those fires, some of which are still burning, were only a precursor to the day that has become known as Black Saturday — Saturday, 7 February. Those fires have been widespread throughout virtually all parts of Victoria, and my sympathies go to all who have lost loved ones and to those who have lost property. I also extend my thanks to all of the service organisations, the State Emergency Service, the CFA (Country Fire Authority), local governments and others.

I want to restrict my comments to my electorate of Eastern Victoria. At this stage it appears that 11 lives have been lost in Eastern Victoria Region. Over 250 homes and tens of thousands of hectares have been destroyed. Major fires have occurred in all parts of this region, save the Mornington Peninsula and far East Gippsland. We have had fires in west and central Gippsland, the Latrobe Valley, the Strzelecki Ranges, and in South Gippsland at Wilsons Promontory. Now the township of Yarram and others are under threat, as is Dargo, and just yesterday the Dandenong Ranges. Townships in the Upper Yarra area have been on high alert for several days and are still under threat.

As an MP it has been quite humbling to visit the emergency response centres, the municipal emergency control centres, staging points and other locations and to see the work and heroism of the CFA firefighters, the DSE, the police, the Red Cross and all of the other volunteer organisations, government departments and others who have responded so magnificently to the fires that have burnt and continue to burn in the electorate I represent.

I know other members have already done so, but I want to highlight a few examples that give a practical and real meaning to our words of thanks to those groups. With my colleague, Christine Fyffe, the member for Evelyn in the Legislative Assembly, I visited Yarra Glen, and we got talking to some of the police. They were part of a group associated with victim identification. These policemen and policewomen were away from home and working around the clock, but they did so without complaint, knowing their work was

helping to deliver dignity to those who have passed away and give peace to the families left behind. It is hard for us in this place to understand the work they do, but we do understand how important their role is.

One of my constituents, Rosie Hopgood of Beaconsfield, together with a group of her friends, her sister and others and with the assistance of my office, organised around six carloads of food, clothes, nappies and other supplies to go to the Salvation Army in Warragul, which then collated and distributed the goods. Philip Davis and I were at the emergency relief centre in Traralgon when we came across some Red Cross volunteers from Lindenow who were rotated through Traralgon for what I think was four days. For the three nights they were there they slept on the floor of the emergency centre; for the rest of the time they gave support, comfort and assistance to those who came through that facility.

Yesterday I had occasion to speak to the captain of the Officer Country Fire Authority brigade. He mentioned to me that he ran his own business. Since Christmas he had only worked three days on that business. When he came home from the fire front he found he had received bills with red ink on them — in other words, overdue bills. This was because he had not been home, firstly, to collect his mail and, secondly — and perhaps more importantly — to earn income, as he had been away fighting the fires.

In one sense these snapshots are not extraordinary, but when they are repeated tens of thousands of times, as they have been throughout Victoria, they collectively demonstrate an extraordinary community response to a terrible chapter in our history — sadly, a chapter that is still being written. We collectively hope the fires that still burn will be controlled and extinguished without significant additional loss.

I echo the comments of members who have referred to the role of local government, because it is my sense from the commentary and media reports thus far that the work of local government may have been underrecognised. Many of the municipalities in Eastern Victoria Region are, unfortunately, well versed in fire and flood. The Wellington and East Gippsland shires and the City of Latrobe, in particular, are well versed in dealing with these issues. These fires have also demanded emergency response from the Cardinia, Baw Baw, South Gippsland and Yarra Ranges shires and, to a degree, the City of Casey. I visited many of the municipal emergency coordination centres and relief centres that these municipalities have organised. The role of local government in delivering services on the ground is critical, and I have been overwhelmed by the

way this challenge has been approached, and by the work ethic and can-do attitude of those municipalities. The chief executive officer of the Shire of Yarra Ranges, Glenn Patterson, has been sending out email updates on the bushfires to MPs, councillors and others. I was amazed to note the times emails were sent — invariably something like 2.00 a.m., 5.00 a.m., midnight or 11.00 p.m. I know he is working around the clock, and that pattern is replicated throughout many other local government areas.

We have heard much in the public domain and indeed in the chamber today about the loss people have experienced; my sympathies also go out to those who are waiting in anticipation or with fear. The communities through the Dandenong Ranges, the hills into the Upper Yarra Valley, have in effect been on high alert for two weeks. Some of the townships in the area have been evacuated. Over the weekend Warburton was largely deserted; at other times Emerald was under threat from the Bunyip Ridge fire. It is incredibly stressful. At the meetings I attended throughout the region the sense of fear, tension and apprehension was palpable. If you have been living with fear of fire for several weeks, your nerves are jaded, you have not had enough sleep and you are anxious. My concern is for the people of those communities as well. They are in a very stressful situation, and we can only hope that the emergency they continue to face is resolved as quickly as possible.

I have always felt very proud and privileged to be Australian. It is the old cliché that when you get back after a trip overseas, you go through customs and there is a sense of gratitude, relief and happiness at being back in Australia. I have had that same sense these last two and a half weeks when watching the response of the wider Victorian and Australian community.

I have always believed, even as a child, that the role of a member of Parliament is a worthwhile and worthy one that is to be respected. Indeed, it is a noble profession. I know many people in our society would disagree, but having seen my colleagues of all political persuasions over the last two and a half weeks, my belief in the worthiness of my chosen profession has been reaffirmed. As Mr Pakula said, we have a responsibility to ensure that lessons learnt from these fires and indeed from previous fires are implemented.

In many ways animals are more attuned and sensitive to their environment than are humans. Animals sense danger and it fills them with fear. There have been reports of the deaths of over a million animals. The fact that a million animals would have sensed danger, felt fear and suffered pain is an enormous tragedy that

cannot be told. Just at lunchtime today I was discussing this issue with Mr Blackwood, the member for Narracan in another place, and he recounted to me a visit he paid to a burnt-out area in our mutual electorate just on Sunday. The overwhelming feeling he had was the sense of silence. The absolute silence, the absence of any life whatsoever, was deafening.

Going forward will present many challenges. We welcome, as I believe all sides of the house have done, the establishment of the royal commission. Many questions need to be asked and answered, and from that many actions need to be taken. Those issues and questions are for another day.

I have grave concerns about the future for businesses and communities in parts of Gippsland, in the Yarra Ranges, and in the Yarra Valley. After the fire and flood events in Gippsland of recent years one could be forgiven for believing the entire district was shut down. On Friday I met with tourism representatives and businesspeople from the Dandenong Ranges. Until yesterday the Dandenong Ranges had not suffered any direct fire threat, but it has been reported to me that restaurants, B&Bs, sandwich shops and other businesses have seen a huge slowdown in business. This is of great concern for the viability of these communities and businesses. If we want to do something as members of the community and members of Parliament, I would implore everyone who reads this speech in *Hansard* or is listening to me now to go and buy some Yarra Valley wine, take a trip on *Puffing Billy*, book in for lunch in April or May at a restaurant in the Dandenongs and plan a holiday in South or East Gippsland. I implore them to visit these areas once it is safe to do so and help generate economic activity into the future. By deciding or choosing to spend our money in these places we can all play a part in helping these communities to rebuild into the future.

There has been commentary in the recent past, but more generally over recent years, about the age profile of many of our volunteer organisations, whether it be the CFA, the Red Cross, Lions, Rotary or others, and the difficulty of attracting younger members to these organisations. One of my great hopes is that from this tragedy younger generations, people under the age of 45, will re-engage with volunteer groups, service clubs and their communities so that the next generation of community-minded people, firefighters and Red Cross organisers will be there when this generation, deservedly, decides to step down.

In summary, we mourn for and pay our respects to those who have died. We express our sympathy and condolences to those who have lost, and we give thanks

to the emergency services and all those who have rallied to help mitigate the effects of these fires.

Ms MIKAKOS (Northern Metropolitan) — It is with great sadness that I rise today to extend my deepest condolences to the victims of Victoria's recent bushfires, particularly the bushfires that ravaged our state on Saturday, 7 February 2009 and the days that followed. The devastating loss experienced by so many will be remembered forever as Victoria's darkest time and one which resulted in the greatest loss of life in Australia's peacetime history.

Over 250 000 hectares of land has been burnt out, thousands of head of livestock have been destroyed, towns have gone, and communities have been left in shock. More than 2000 homes have been destroyed and many more thousands of people have been left homeless. The beautiful townships of Marysville, Kinglake and Narbethong took the full force of the fires and were all but wiped from the map. Perhaps the hardest figure to deal with, however, is that of lives lost. As it stands the death toll from Victoria's deadly bushfires is 210.

On the northernmost tip of my electorate of Northern Metropolitan Region alone there were a reported 81 deaths in the townships of Kinglake West, Humevale, St Andrews, Strathewen and Whittlesea, so I know many of my constituents are now grieving. All 210 precious lives lost translates to thousands of surviving family members, friends and neighbours suffering most profoundly, so my sorrow is deepest for those who lost their loved ones.

One conversation I had with a survivor at the Whittlesea relief centre stands in my mind. This man had fled with his children and headed to Whittlesea township when the fire threatened his home. His home was lost, as were all his family's possessions, because they did not have time to pack their car. But as I struggled to console him, he told me that he counted himself lucky to have got out alive with all of his family. He told me there were so many who had lost so much more.

These fires have produced great suffering amongst our fellow Victorians, but they have also brought out the finest amongst our community. They have brought out generosity, bravery and self-sacrifice. One word that embodies the spirit of self-sacrifice is 'hero'. Countless men and women have dedicated their time to help those affected by this disaster. In my mind they are all heroes. I especially want to pay tribute to the more than 1200 Country Fire Authority brigades in Victoria, the police, Australian Defence Force personnel and other

emergency workers, who have shown selflessness and courage in fighting to save lives and homes, even when their own homes or families may have been in danger. No words can ever describe the admiration and gratitude that we owe these men and women. They are modest and humble, they demand no appreciation, yet we owe them so much.

I also want to thank those firefighters who have come to Victoria from interstate and even from overseas. On 17 February 2009 a senior firefighter from Canberra, David Balfour, was the first — and hopefully will be the only — firefighter to die in Victoria's bushfire emergency. He was killed by a falling tree near Marysville, repaying what he told his wife, Celia, was a debt to Victoria for those firefighters who had assisted in the Canberra fire disaster in 2003. I would like to pay my respects to his family for his service and sacrifice and to thank them for the lives and livelihoods that he helped to save.

There are so many people who deserve our thanks: the medical workers in our hospitals working tirelessly to help burns victims cope with the enormity of their injuries. I also want to pay tribute to the charitable sector: the Red Cross, the Salvation Army and countless other organisations, churches and many thousands of volunteers helping out at our relief centres across the state. Such an unexpected tragedy with such catastrophic consequences calls for immediate action. Within days of the fires, the state government launched the Victorian Bushfire Relief Fund, which to this day has displayed the kindness and generosity of the Australian public. The combined contributions, which have now exceeded almost \$190 million, are unprecedented but very much appreciated and needed.

I have been greatly impressed with the organisation of local, state and commonwealth government agencies working together with the many non-government organisations involved in helping our community recover and rebuild. Working together with staff from the Department of Human Services, these organisations have helped process financial assistance to struggling families through various grants available to them. They have provided counselling and emotional support, and have assisted many families in finding alternative housing.

I want to thank everyone involved in assisting the bushfire victims. Their work has been tireless, and they deserve the gratitude of all Australians.

As well as responding to the immediate needs of the bushfire victims and the rebuilding effort, I want to congratulate the Premier and the Prime Minister on

moving quickly to establish the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority to coordinate bushfire recovery activity across the state. I also want to commend them on moving so quickly to establish a royal commission to enable a thorough inquiry into the circumstances surrounding these fires and to ensure that everything possible is done in future so such a tragedy will never be repeated.

As we stand here today, the fires continue to ravage our state, with two volunteer firefighters suffering injuries yesterday in Belgrave Heights as they fought fires only 40 kilometres from Melbourne's central business district. As fires continue to burn today, our thoughts turn to the emergency workers and volunteers who face immediate danger. Our desire is for their safety and speedy return to their families.

Once again I extend my condolences to the victims of this disaster and offer my thoughts and heartfelt prayers to everyone touched by these tragic events.

Debate adjourned on motion of Mr P. DAVIS (Eastern Victoria).

Debate adjourned until next day.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Standing and sessional orders

Mr VINEY (Eastern Victoria) — I move, by leave:

That so much of the standing and sessional orders be suspended as necessary to enable —

- (1) the only business to be transacted on Wednesday, 25 February 2009, to be the resumption of debate on the condolence motion for the victims of the Victorian bushfires; and
- (2) the following business to be taken on Thursday, 26 February 2009 —
 - (a) messages;
 - (b) formal business;
 - (c) members statements;
 - (d) statements on reports and papers;
 - (e) government business;
 - (f) answers to questions on notice; and
 - (g) adjournment.

Mr BARBER (Northern Metropolitan) — On the latter part of Mr Viney's motion, with the greatest of respect to the very serious and sombre matters we are

dealing with, it has been our view, I think communicated to the other parties, that a day in which we have a full slate of government business should also have a question time. But having put that on the record, I say that we will offer no particular opposition to the motion.

Motion agreed to.

House adjourned 6.13 p.m.