

**PARLIAMENT OF VICTORIA**

**PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES  
(HANSARD)**

**LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL  
FIFTY-SIXTH PARLIAMENT  
FIRST SESSION**

**Wednesday, 25 February 2009  
(Extract from book 3)**

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**Wednesday, 25 February 2009**

**The PRESIDENT (Hon. R. F Smith) took the chair at 9.34 a.m. and read the prayer.**

**CONDOLENCES**

**Bushfires: Victoria**

**Debate resumed from 24 February; motion of Mr LENDERS (Treasurer):**

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, others 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.

**Mr P. DAVIS** (Eastern Victoria) — Yesterday and today we have been here to honour those who in tragic circumstances have lost their lives, lost loved ones and lost members of a family and to mourn for those families who have been lost entirely.

We are here to mourn and honour all those who have been affected and to have regard to the impact on the thousands of people for whom the bushfires this summer have caused so much discomfort, dislocation and sorrow.

In trying to prepare some words for today I found that every time I faced a notepad with pen in hand to put together some thoughts I remained poised but unable to write for significant periods. I simply could not think what I should say. How can we in this chamber have any comprehension of what people have been through in this most devastating event, which is not over?

In speaking today we should remind ourselves that this is not just about honouring those who are deceased as a

result of the bushfires; we are reflecting on the fact that we still have people at serious risk. We have thousands of firefighters, both volunteers and professionals in the field, who are putting themselves at risk as we speak. There are families who prospectively are yet to lose their homes, and potentially there are people who are yet to lose their lives, although I hope what has occurred has given the community sufficient warning that loss of life can be avoided. But inevitably there will be injuries. There will be people who are hurt either as a consequence of being caught in the fires or indeed of fighting the fires, which may go on for weeks. We only have to remember the campaign fires of 2003 and 2006–07 to know they may go on for a couple of months.

Although I feel completely drained — indeed I can only use the term ‘empty’ to describe how I feel — I want to join in the consideration of the motion before the house to express my deep personal sorrow. I do so in the context of the notion of responsibility. As I was walking into Parliament today I was given the idea for the text of my speech by listening to a certain radio journalist pontificating about how he and his broadcasting station had done all that could possibly be done. He said the media had done a great job by warning the community about the risks of 7 February. That inspired me to make some remarks today about responsibility and what I think it means to be a community leader, as by definition we are, and for that matter as the opportunity is given professionally to people who work in the media, in public office, in government agencies and in community organisations to be leaders.

I want to pick up on something Mr Pakula said. I do not mean to verbal him, but essentially he said that it is a privilege to be a member of the Parliament which will have the responsibility of leading the recovery. I agree with him; it is a rare privilege indeed to be a member of Parliament, and in particular it will be a privilege to serve in this Parliament over the next less than two years as the opportunity arises for us to take action to help communities to be rehabilitated. Certainly, it will be a privilege to work with the community to help people recover from such an ordeal.

In using the word ‘responsibility’ we need to understand how we have failed as leaders in this regard. I do not need or intend to go where I think, inevitably, discussion will go at another time in this chamber, at the royal commission and elsewhere, about the causes and impact of successive government policies. I say advisedly ‘successive governments’ because, as has been alluded to before, it is 70 years since Black Friday; had successive governments been adroit, they would

have kept the community informed and had appropriate policies, and Black Friday would not have recurred as Black Saturday on 7 February last.

What I really want to say about responsibility is that we all share the burden of having failed our community in allowing what happened on 7 February to occur, because we have an obligation collectively to ensure that our community is protected as best it can be, and there will be discussion about that at another time. But that comes back to communication, in part.

I have been inspired, I have to say, by some comments on the radio this morning, which I just could not believe. I will give due credit as both the *Herald Sun* and the *Age*, on page 3 of their Friday, 6 February, editions, carried the necessary warnings that there would be an exceptional set of weather circumstances prevailing on the following day, Saturday, 7 February.

However, if you go to the *Herald Sun* of 7 February, when you might think that the claimed 650 000 or so editions of that newspaper would carry the significant information that would inform people they needed to be very watchful on that day, you have to turn to pages 10 and 11 before you find a reference to the threat posed to the Victorian community by the conditions predicted for that day.

On page 10 the predominant image is partying. There is a photograph of young people with colourful Mexican hats, another photograph of young girls in Australian flag T-shirts — apparently this was at a cricket match — and of course the statutory photograph of a girl at St Kilda beach in a bikini, under the heading ‘Take cover as the heat comes back’. On page 11 admittedly there are some comments about bushfire survival tips.

In my view that reflects part of the collective failure for us — and I say ‘us’ as community leaders in the broader sense, as I have laid out — to be responsible for what perhaps could have been lessened as a tragedy, and I will be the first to admit that the circumstances were such that there would have been fires to some extent, whatever preparations had been made, because the weather conditions were such that that was inevitable. But knowing that fire is inevitable is a critical part of preparation, and I think we have therefore failed in that regard.

I also want to make some brief comments in regard to the situation the community is now in. Edward O’Donohue said the community is waiting in fear and apprehension, and I saw that fear and apprehension in 2003 and in 2006–07.

As I said earlier, these campaign fires ran for months, and communities were waiting, on a daily basis, for the monster of a fire to come over the horizon and deal with their community. The stress I have seen in people in Gippsland, in my electorate, in those circumstances is phenomenal. I have to say the stress for communities that I am engaged with now is similar, because the fires continue to blaze. I know many people who simply do not know how they should deal with the circumstances, and I feel for them. But that is the nature of fire in the Australian landscape.

The rehabilitation and recovery phase will be critically important, and I think we need to work as honestly and earnestly as we can to achieve a proper outcome for the community. But I am interested in how well the community understands the issues and how slowly we become aware of the enormity of the tragedy.

I was mystified, full well knowing by Saturday evening the scale of what had occurred, that when I saw the papers on the following day, Sunday, 8 February, the front pages missed the point of the tragedy that had occurred. The *Herald Sun* headline was ‘Firestorm’, with the subheading ‘Three hurt and dozens of homes lost’. I cannot imagine when that edition of the paper was printed, because certainly I was well aware by Saturday evening of the enormity of the tragedy. At least the *Sunday Age* made a better stab at it. Its headlines read ‘At least seven dead’, ‘More than 100 homes destroyed’ and ‘Bushfires threaten Melbourne’.

In a civilised society and in this information age, would you not think that, firstly, people would be warned adequately about the risk to their homes, their lives and the lives of their families by the systems of communication we have in place, by the people who are responsible to provide that care and protection — by the people who work in the media, by government and government agencies and by us, as members of Parliament? Yet that warning was not provided.

Worse still is the fact that, even though, I regret to say, people were dying literally in their hundreds, we were unable to be aware of that fact. I find that the most extraordinary thing: that even when people woke up on Sunday morning, they did not know about the scale of the tragedy, and it was not really until the news cycle of Sunday evening that people started to become aware of what had occurred. I find, in a contemporary society, this to be one of the most remarkable aspects of this tragedy. For that, I say there is a disconnect between what we think we do as community leaders and, in fact, the practice. I am sure this will have to be addressed

both in terms of the inquiry by the royal commission, but importantly by our own practice.

As I said, I cannot imagine what it is like to be involved in such an event. I served with the CFA (Country Fire Authority) for more than 20 years and attended a number of fires. I was involved in dealing with fires and other threats when I worked at the Longford gas plant. I understand the adrenalin, the fear and the impact of being in a situation where you are not in control, but I cannot imagine what it is like to be surrounded by fire and to believe there is no chance of saving your life.

Following the 2003 fires, which affected the alpine areas, one community group predominantly made up of people from the Omeo-Benamبرا area in East Gippsland put together the stories of individuals as they retold their experiences and then published it as a book called *Flames across the Mountains*. It was an important story in that it gave the opportunity for individuals and the community to share the emotional thread of being in a circumstance of perpetual threat over a long period. As Mr O'Donohue said, the fear and apprehension was real then as it is in many of these campaign fires and as it will be going forward for perhaps the next couple of months, until the autumn rains come.

I do not wish to speak at length because to do so would be to miss the point of what we are here to do. This is not about us; it is about having a very brief moment to express our share of sorrow.

But I want to give thanks, also. I am not sure who to thank. To thank the Lord is not necessarily appropriate in this place, but I think I will, for those families who have been spared. This is not the time to give a sermon as in a church, but it is time to give thanks for the individual valiant efforts made by people to save lives. I talk not just about firefighters but about friends, neighbours, and family members who perhaps, in some circumstances as the stories will be told, sacrificed their own lives for others.

I want to give thanks for my own family because I can recall my emotion on the day. For the first time in a year I had my family together. My daughters had just returned from being overseas — one had arrived home within 36 hours. It was my wife's birthday, and we had a family gathering to be together. During the course of that day I knew full well there would be fires, but I had not imagined the extent. But on the Saturday afternoon I was tuned into what was developing, and the weather conditions were such that I thought my own family home might be potentially at risk. I sat down with the

family and had a family meeting about what might occur and our fire plan for our home and family. I thank God that we did not have to implement it. But all those families who had to make choices on that day will thank all the people who assisted them and who have been assisting them since.

In conclusion I want to thank those people who have given an amount now approaching \$200 million in cash contributions as well as the manifest amount of material goods which have been donated to such an extent that the agencies have all had to say, 'Stop, we cannot cope anymore with the physical handling of donated goods'. In my lifetime there has never been such an outpouring of community goodwill for the victims of any event, as far as I am aware. The fact that I have shared in this experience has restored some of my faith in the humanity of our society. I do not wish to retell stories of individuals who have been affected by fires at this time, but I do want to reflect the gratitude I have seen for the community's response to the threat and the challenges those families now face.

This is a very difficult motion to speak on because it has touched us all deeply in so many ways. No matter what I say today it will fall so short of anything meaningful that I can possibly do to share in that sorrow, but I earnestly say I am here to mourn and honour those who have lost their lives and to share the sorrow with those they have left behind.

**Ms BROAD** (Northern Victoria) — I also wish to contribute to the condolence motion before the house. In my remarks I wish to do three things: express my condolences to all those who have experienced loss as a result of the recent bushfires; thank everyone involved in dealing with the emergency created by the fires; and thank all those individuals, families, communities and organisations who have been so compassionate in helping with the response to the emergency. I do these three things as a member for Northern Victoria Region, a region that comprises almost half of Victoria and the region most affected by the fires. I indicate to the house that my colleague in Northern Victoria Region Kaye Darveniza is unable to attend Parliament due to her undergoing a medical procedure. She requested that I speak on her behalf as well.

As my good friend Julia Gillard, the Deputy Prime Minister, remarked in federal Parliament recently, it is beyond words to express sympathy to the families and loved ones of those who perished in the recent bushfires. So many people across Victoria have been affected by the loss of friends, neighbours and workmates, and so many of them are constituents of Northern Victoria Region. I hope the memorial service

held at Rod Laver Arena last Sunday together with the services and gatherings in communities across Victoria go some small way towards comforting those who have lost so much. It was a privilege to participate in the memorial service at Kilmore on Sunday together with my colleague Donna Petrovich, who is also a member for Northern Victoria Region, and to pay my respects.

As a member for Northern Victoria Region I wish to acknowledge the courage of those who helped to deal with the emergency created by the bushfires and to record my thanks to them. First on the scene were the volunteers of the local CFA brigades along with local Victoria Police officers and SES (State Emergency Service) volunteers and employees. Those volunteers included my colleagues in the lower house Danielle Green and Ben Hardman. Ben and his wife, Gail, are members of the Tallarook brigade, and they attended the fire at Reedy Creek. When I attended the meeting at Reedy Creek with Ben and Gail a few days later and surveyed the devastation, I admit I could not help feeling relief that I had not been there on a fire truck that night.

Ben, Gail and Danielle are just a few members of a vast army of volunteers across Victoria who have shown great courage in helping to deal with the fire emergency and in helping family members, neighbours, their local communities and communities far from their homes, as well as pets, stock and wildlife. They all deserve our deep gratitude. I was personally reminded of the debt of gratitude we all owe our community volunteers when I learnt that there were some 70 fire trucks helping to protect my local community in Daylesford and surrounding areas yesterday and during the previous night from fires that are still burning.

As well as all the volunteers there are the workers from local government, DSE (Department of Sustainability and Environment) and the emergency services, as well as workers from industry not only from local areas but also from across Victoria, from other areas of Australia and from other nations. Many of them are with us still, working to control fires and prepare for the fires that are yet to come this fire season.

Following the fire emergency is the immediate recovery that so many Victorians have generously contributed to. As I have travelled around to community meetings and relief centres in Northern Victoria Region, along with my colleague Kaye Darveniza as well as many other MPs and state and federal ministers, it has been enormously reassuring to witness the compassion and practical assistance being rendered to those who need it.

Not for the first time I have wondered, as I did as a member of previous bushfire task forces established by the government to respond to bushfires, whether there is another way to build resilient communities — a way that does not involve first experiencing a terrible catastrophe.

I could not help observing that the government's endeavours to help build more resilient communities through initiatives like the Kinglake Ranges community building initiative in Kinglake, Kinglake Central, Kinglake West, Pheasant Creek, Flowerdale, Toolangi, Castella and Hazeldene — names that have become very familiar to all Victorians in recent weeks — have assisted communities in dealing with the immediate recovery. And they will assist in the long recovery to come as communities plan their futures in partnership with all levels of government.

Thanks are due to the many representatives of community organisations, businesses and government agencies who have pitched in. They include but are by no means limited to the Red Cross, Salvation Army, Kildonan, Loddon Mallee Housing Services, the Rural Housing Network, La Trobe University, Rotary and Lions.

Then there is the Australian Defence Force. It is good to know that as well as defending our nation and helping to make other nations safer, often doing dangerous things, the ADF can do the small practical things to help families and communities affected by a disaster. The army did a great job pitching tents at Yea and cooking meals at Kinglake, and I think the army very much enjoyed pointing out that it was members of the air force who were washing people's clothes at Kinglake!

Then there are the workers from Centrelink, DHS (Department of Human Services) and local government, including Mitchell Shire Council, Murrindindi Shire Council, Indigo Shire Council, Alpine Shire Council and many others who have pitched in. And there are the workers from industry and unions. It is not often that you see a crowd of people applauding a spokesperson for a power company, as I did at Kinglake when a representative of SPI PowerNet explained what was being done to return power to the community. In short, the cooperation and can-do approach to solving problems in fire-affected communities shown by community organisations, government agencies and business has been outstanding.

Leading the way and setting an example for all to follow has been the Premier, who has given new

meaning to governing for all Victorians, no matter who you are or where you live. I thank him for his leadership and his compassion, just as so many of my constituents have asked me to do.

In many communities we are now embarking on a new stage of the recovery as local businesses, like the bakery at Kinglake, resume more normal operations and the army closes up its kitchens. It is very important that as soon as it is safe to do so, we support businesses in fire-affected communities by visiting and purchasing their goods and services.

It is impossible not to wonder at the resilience being shown by communities that have experienced so much death and destruction. But resilient they are — and make no mistake about their determination to rebuild! Finding the right balance between supporting communities to rebuild and not getting in their way will not be easy. I am pleased to see that there is no shortage of willing contributions from the wider community, from business, from local government, from the Brumby government, from the Rudd government, from this Parliament and especially from children who want to help other children, like the year 6 children at Kerang Primary School who last week earnestly explained to me their plans for fundraising and impressed upon me that these were their plans, not their teacher's plans.

Before I conclude I would like to make some remarks on behalf of my colleague Kaye Darveniza. I am speaking as Kaye here, so I hope Hansard can deal with that:

On my visits to bushfire-affected regions, attendance at various community meetings and operational briefings I have been deeply affected by the grief and loss faced by those whose homes and families have been devastated by Victoria's worst ever bush fires. I have also been greatly moved by, and have huge admiration for, the incredible efforts of our emergency service personnel, DHS staff and all those people who have volunteered their time and offered their support — often well beyond the call of duty — during these terrible fires and in the aftermath of these tragic events. I also applaud the huge amount of support offered by the people of Victoria, Australia and overseas countries to our distraught and distressed communities.

I have a long and strong connection to many of the close-knit towns in my electorate that have been destroyed by these fires. I admire the stoicism and goodwill of the many, many people in these shattered communities who, despite losing everything dear and important to them, are already looking to the future and supporting each other and are fiercely determined to rebuild their lives, homes and townships.

For 10 or so years I lived in Toolangi. My daughters attended the Kinglake kinder that was destroyed in the fires, and I know many folk in the area who have lost everything. Hearing of these terrible events and learning of people's heartbreak and loss has made me feel even closer to these communities.

Rebuilding these towns will take time. I welcome the commitment by Premier John Brumby and Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to assist these communities as they face the huge job of reconstructing their lives, hopes and dreams in the wake of these traumatic events.

Can I now conclude on my own behalf as well as Kaye's by extending our condolences and deepest sympathy to the families and loved ones of those who perished in the recent bushfires and recording our pledge to assist communities in Northern Victoria Region as long as necessary while we are their MPs.

**Mr KOCH** (Western Victoria) — I, like everyone else in the house, express my condolences to all those communities in the west, central, north-central and Gippsland regions who have suffered serious loss as a result of the disastrous fires of recent weeks, but especially those on Saturday, 7 February 2009.

I stayed in Melbourne on the Friday evening and returned to Geelong early on the Saturday. The early part of the morning was calm, with no wind and temperatures of around 20 degrees. One's early thoughts suggested the day might not be too bad, and certainly not as bad as was forecast. When I returned home I had some fencing that needed attending to, and by about 11.00 a.m. I was amazed at the increase in wind speed and temperature that was taking place at coastal Mount Duneed.

By 11.30 a.m. my wife had come down the paddock and told me that in the previous 10 minutes the temperature had risen from 32 degrees to 41 degrees and the wind speed had increased to a point where it was howling at speeds exceeding 60 kilometres an hour. My wife suggested we should not remain in the paddocks, and we returned to the house. Importantly, these changes took only minutes.

On returning to the house I heard on regional radio my good friend and experienced Country Fire Authority regional fire incident controller, Bill Speirs, based at CFA headquarters in Hamilton. Bill was describing a fire outbreak at my old hometown of Coleraine and expressing his concerns about being able to manage that fire in the shocking prevailing weather conditions, which continued to get worse. At the same time, reports were coming in on a fire at Horsham that had apparently started on the Natimuk Road and of another fire at Weerite, east of Camperdown, that was well under way in difficult stony barrier country. As the day continued we became aware of the tragic situation that beset country north and east of Melbourne, especially in the Kinglake, Marysville and Churchill districts.

Victoria had not seen these conditions or the events that were unfolding for some 26 years, since the fires of Ash Wednesday ravaged this state. In the previous week we had already seen fire raze many parts of Gippsland, but not with the ferocity that we experienced on Black Saturday.

Having served with the CFA (Country Fire Authority) in a volunteer capacity for 35 years from the age of 16, attended many training opportunities and been brigade captain for six years, including during the period of Ash Wednesday, I have attended both forest and grassfire outbreaks. These incidents continued to demonstrate the treachery of wildfire where low humidity, high winds, heat and large fuel loads can become explosive and overbearing, sometimes beyond human capacity to withstand. I have experienced extremes of heat where CFA-issued helmets have changed shape on firemen's heads, paint has blistered on water tanks even when they were full of water, where the howl of crowning fires is terrifying, but what took place on 7 February exceeded any of my earlier experiences. As a regional parliamentarian from western Victoria I believe it is important that reports of the losses and injuries that occurred in western Victoria earlier in the day of 7 February are not lost in the horrific and tragic outcomes that occurred further east in the afternoon and evening of the same day.

Many people in western Victoria also lost homes, working assets such as shedding, fencing, stock shelter and plantations and the last of critical farm water supplies, and people suffered injury, one critically at Coleraine. I have called on many people in both Horsham and Coleraine. One should never forget how resilient and proud country Victorians are and how they want to get on with their lives and get their livelihoods back in place.

I appreciate that the experience of these fires in its own way has left many memories that will last forever in those communities. As I say, people are going about rebuilding their lives and giving themselves space to do so. This is extremely important from our point of view.

The compassion and community spirit and the support of cash, kind, and material gifts to those who have suffered such terrible losses is to be commended, and hopefully will go some way towards replacing the material losses that so many people experienced. In Geelong the Breakwater collection centre was but one example of this type of generosity. Over 1000 pallets were packed and prepared there for distribution to fire victims, along with many thousands of dollars that had been raised for this most worthy cause. I attended this centre on several occasions and was pleased that my

colleague in the other place Louise Asher, the member for Brighton, could join me when she was in Geelong. The volunteers were very appreciative of our concerns and support as we were of theirs, as they sorted and packed the many pallets with the essential non-perishable items so eagerly sought by those who had lost so much.

In closing, it is important to note that the Teague royal commission has been put in place. It is important that balance is returned to the way we manage these situations so that far greater security can be provided to our lands, flora and fauna and to the people who choose to live in these landscapes. Land management, fire management, building codes and warning practices are all in need of review. It is important that people in the community take up the opportunity to make submissions to the inquiry where they realise they can make a contribution, and I encourage them to do that.

I again extend my condolences and sympathy to all who have experienced these horrific and tragic events, especially those who have been critically injured or have lost parents, partners, children, extended family or friends and also, in many cases, companion animals and pets. I thank all those who gave of their time, especially the volunteers from all walks of life, in defending lives, assets and community wellbeing and later in recovering those not so lucky on this tragic occasion.

On a brighter note, it was good yesterday to welcome to Parliament councillors from the Horsham Rural City Council and Southern Grampians Shire Council. I acknowledge both mayors, Bernard Gross and Marcus Rentsch respectively, and thank them for the efforts of their shires in supporting our firefighters as they went about their duties.

Importantly, it was marvellous also that Lorraine Smeets was also able to join Marcus Rentsch here yesterday. Mrs Smeets's husband, John, was badly burnt. He was assisting in livestock movements on Balochile Road, Coleraine, when he was struck by the fire front. John is making a brave and slow recovery in the Alfred hospital here in Melbourne, supported, of course, by Lorraine and his family. I, along with all John's friends in Coleraine, wish him well. We look forward to his good and full recovery, and his return to his home town.

My thoughts are with all those people as they attempt to regain their lives and rebuild the strength of the communities they live in. These communities have always been and will continue to be an important part of regional Victoria. I wish everyone who has experienced these recent events well. I say to them that

all members of this chamber are thinking of them at this very important time.

**Mr LEANE** (Eastern Metropolitan) — Every Victorian would appreciate the opportunity and privilege that we as members of this chamber have — that is, to place on public record their condolences, thoughts and well wishes to the victims of the tragedy in the form of the worst bushfires this state has ever endured.

Like many others, I find it very hard to comprehend that one horrible, filthy, hot Saturday can blow in and blow out, resulting in families and friends of more than 200 people losing someone so precious to them. It is almost too sad to think about.

In moving this motion, the Leader of the Government mentioned that at times we have lost loved ones, but we could not fully relate to how people who have lost loved ones to this fire feel. I fully concur with that. My mother, who had been sick for some time, passed away at Christmas. My family knew and accepted that we were going to lose her, but I have to say that when we did lose her, it was a huge kick in the guts.

How can we put ourselves in the shoes of someone who lost a mother, father, son, daughter, husband or wife so suddenly in the fires that were generated on that one horrible, filthy, hot day? I do not think many of us in the community can fully understand how devastating that must be. While we cannot fully understand the grief, we can do everything possible to assist the people left behind to get back on their feet and to assist the brave people who are still fighting the fires, protecting lives and property. They will still be doing that right up until next month and then again next year. Members of the emergency services, the police, the CFA (Country Fire Authority), the State Emergency Service, the recovery centre personnel, the power crews and the members of many other organisations cannot be commended highly enough for the amazing efforts they have made in the past few weeks.

I commend the Premier on establishing a royal commission to look into the bushfires. This will be a good process to flush and tease out every question about this tragedy and to get the best possible answers to those questions so that we can prepare ourselves for the future. In saying that, I have to say that CFA personnel have always done and continue to do a great job in working with members of communities in developing their bushfire plans. As has been stated by many people who experienced the horror of living through the bushfires, although they had the best plans

in place, those plans were just not enough with fires of the magnitude of those on Black Saturday.

A royal commission will give people the opportunity to express views and ideas, which is very important because we live in a country where bushfires have happened for thousands of years, and no doubt they will be continue to happen for thousands of years to come.

There has been discussion about looking at the building codes for bushfire-prone regions. That should be done and the code should be amended as a matter of urgency. There has been some media talk about the cost of changing the code. The people who return to their homes should be assisted if there are any costs and if there are any changes to the building code. As for people who move into bushfire prone areas in the future — and that does not include people who are going back to their homes following the bushfires — further costs should not be an issue in their using the right types of materials for their houses. Even if only one life is saved in a future bushfire because the correct types of materials have been used in the construction of houses, the costs will be fully paid for in the future.

I want to thank a couple of colleagues from the other place for their efforts in the last few weeks: Danielle Green and Ben Hardman, the members for Yan Yean and Seymour. On one day last week I had the pleasure of accompanying Danielle Green, who was working two mobile phones while I was driving her around; she also had an assistant in the back seat working two mobile phones. I watched her work a number of pads and doing what good MPs do. She was networking with people in her community. She joined the dots — and it is important to join the dots — and worked out who could assist whom. It was a privilege for me to watch her at work. I know Ben Hardman had been doing exactly the same thing. On the weekend they were physically with their CFA units, fighting fires, which was amazing. They are great community leaders.

I want to acknowledge Ms Pennicuik of the Greens and Mr Kavanagh of the Democratic Labor Party for their generous assessment of the Premier's leadership in this difficult situation. I am biased when it comes to his leadership as I am a member of his party. I think he is a great leader, and I appreciate the generosity of people of other political parties in acknowledging that at this time. I also appreciate Mr O'Donohue saying that all the members in both parliamentary chambers that he has come across have done great work for their communities. I would like to reiterate that from what I have seen, all members of the chamber, no matter what their political persuasion, have done great work across the board.

I represent a region that has not been as adversely affected by the bushfires as other regions, but many people have contacted my office wanting to know how they can help the bushfire situation, whether it be by donating goods and cash or offering accommodation and trade skills and so on. An amazing ripple of goodwill has developed into a huge wave of goodwill right across the country.

A notion that is not always held as a priority in a community, but which I think is always there and has come to the fore in recent weeks, is that we are all in this together. If someone needs a lift, do not think about it — just give them a lift and do what you can. Do anything you can to help someone who needs a hand up. As other members have said, there has been a huge wave of goodwill.

The response to the Red Cross appeal has been absolutely amazing. The number of people who have offered to give blood has increased tenfold compared to the normal number who did so before the bushfires; that, too, is amazing. As members of Parliament we have had the privilege of hearing the stories, which might be just a ripple, but those stories are just as heartening as the big waves that we all know the media has highlighted.

One story that I find heartening could be said to be just a ripple. A not-for-profit organisation operates in Croydon; it runs an op shop which funds the operation of a crisis centre. It is not a big organisation; it is a group of people who believe this is a good thing. Their crisis centre had been inactive due to their getting some work done by way of renovations. As soon as members of the group heard about the bushfires they personally cleaned and tidied their crisis accommodation to make sure it would be available for people who had been adversely affected by the bushfires.

They told me that during their cleaning operation, they took a lot of linen, including doonas and bedsheets, to a drycleaner to get them cleaned in case some people who were affected by the bushfires had to use their accommodation. They were getting the accommodation ready. When they went to pick up the dry-cleaning the drycleaner asked them what they were using the stuff for. When they told the drycleaner they were getting accommodation ready for temporarily accommodating people affected by the bushfires, the drycleaner said, 'I cannot take your money. Don't give me any money. I want to feel like I have physically done something'.

Ms Pennicuik said that in her electorate, Southern Metropolitan Region, people wanted to feel that they had contributed. There is a real want to contribute, but

they do not know how. On top of donating money they want to do something physical, and the drycleaner is one example. He was able to do something physical to assist, and he did it. It is very important for people in the community to be able to do that. I have seen it many times over in the inquiries that have come into my office.

I agree that we cannot let people die in vain when something horrible like this happens, but it is hard to establish whether or not someone has died in vain. Death is such a personal thing to the people left behind. A legacy from this tragedy would be for the community spirit and goodwill to last for as long as possible and flow into other areas. Let us hope more people are inspired to join fantastic organisations like the Country Fire Authority and the State Emergency Service. If that is not what people can do, perhaps they will be inspired to join other, smaller non-government organisations or charities that do great work every day.

One aspect of being a member of Parliament that I have appreciated over the last two years is that you meet groups who do fantastic things, and it makes you realise that people are good. That good has really been shown in the last weeks. Let us hope that stays as a legacy and we all keep the notion that we are all in it together and should do what we can if someone needs a lift. Once again I give my condolences to the people who have been so horribly affected. All our hearts go out to them.

**Mrs PEULICH** (South Eastern Metropolitan) — I rise to support the condolence motion. Like many from metropolitan Melbourne and further afield, including many international friends and acquaintances of mine, I have been aghast with shocked disbelief and sorrow at the unfolding of a tragedy we have felt powerless to do very much about. For us it has been a vicarious experience which has been shared through the images, the reports and the stories. We are anguished and at a loss to understand how this has been able to occur, given we live in the most flammable nation in the world and given the history of Australia, a history and character which has been forged by the challenges of drought, flood and fire and the relationship of men and women to them.

On behalf of the communities across South Eastern Metropolitan Region I would like to record our deepest condolences, in particular to the families and friends of those who have been directly impacted upon, for the treasured lives that have been lost and have left gaps that will never be filled. Communities which have been obliterated must be remembered, and, along with the loss of flora and fauna, there are the much-loved pets, livestock and wildlife that never stood a chance against

the firestorms caused by extraordinary temperatures and winds that will leave the day of 7 February 2009 to be known as Black Saturday in our history books. It caused the loss of more than 200 lives and 2000 homes, dispossessed 7000 people from their homes and left hundreds of thousands of hectares of land scarred by tragedy that no-one will soon forget.

Australia is a flammable country, and whether or not you believe in climate change is irrelevant. This tragedy is beyond precedent or intensity and is beyond comprehension insofar as it eclipses the devastation of any previous fires that posed challenges to our forebears. I believe there are many lessons to be learnt; no doubt the royal commission will bring them forward and expose them to us, especially in the context of present day landscape managers and policy-makers who are more skilled and better informed and have better equipment than the Victorians who faced previous well-documented fires. They include the fires on 6 February 1851, known as Black Thursday, Red Tuesday in 1898, and fires in 1926, 1939, 1944, 1962, 1968, 1969 and 1983.

Since 7 February I have read a lot of reports, including reports of inquiries into some of the major bushfires. It seems to me that there are many common themes, and I think that is the most astounding thing; there are so many common themes for a nation whose history demonstrates that it contains the most fire-prone state in the world. Bushfires occur more frequently and extensively in Victoria and the neighbouring areas in south-eastern Australia than anywhere else.

After reading the whole 35 pages of the 1938 royal commission report I remembered a book that had been a high school favourite of mine, *Fahrenheit 451*. That is probably about one-third of the temperature endured by some of the victims who suffered as a result of the fires. The book is called *Fahrenheit 451* because it is the temperature at which books burn — a temperature much lower than the inferno which obliterated life and landscape. I would like to quote from the book, which shows quite clearly something that struck me as I read through the reports — that glory paid to our ashes unfortunately comes too late. The quote is from a passage spoken by the chief fireman, Granger, who makes reference to the phoenix, a mythical bird that many speakers have referred to in the context of these and previous fires, trying to express the hope that some good will be born out of tragedy and that we will learn some lessons. He says:

There was a silly damn bird called a phoenix back before Christ: every few years he built a pyre and burnt himself up. He must have been first cousin to man. But every time he burnt himself up he sprang out of the ashes, he got himself

born all over again. And it looks like we're doing the same thing, over and over ... some day we'll stop making the goddamn funeral pyres and jumping into the middle of them.

That is a very instructive paragraph in terms of our bushfires and our history.

In my view real victories are those that protect human life, not those that result from its destruction or which emerge from its ashes. Every life lost — the 200-plus Victorians — is a life that will never be replaced. And while we are all grateful to the firefighters who risked their lives, the support services who mopped up the devastation and those who will assist in the rebuilding, I am mindful that not all can be rebuilt or restored.

All those whose inspiration was the protection of life have the admiration of all and the gratitude of the state and the nation. To each person who fought these fires and continues to fight the remaining fires, and particularly those who have come from other states and nations and communities — including some from my own community, like Max from Aspendale and Cr John Ronke from Kingston, and those from other metropolitan communities as well — I say thank you.

The nation's condolences are moving. Although we must go through this process of grieving, at the end of the day we must convert it to purposeful action. As decision-makers here in Victoria we must carry the burden of our state and make sure we stop the funeral pyres referred to in *Fahrenheit 451*.

We must do this and let 7 February, recently announced as a national day of mourning, be a reminder of the darkest day in Australia's history. We must make sure this day is an annual stocktake of our efforts to ensure that history is not repeated with such devastating effects. On 7 February every year we should take stock of what we have been doing to avert future tragedies like those we have seen unfold and devastate communities at Beechworth, Bendigo, Kilmore, Churchill, Murrindindi and Bunyip Ridge and towns affected by the Kinglake complex and the Maroondah-Yarra complex — all of which suffered cruel and incomprehensible blows that will take time to recover from. The picturesque towns of Kinglake, St Andrews, Wandong, Marysville, Narbethong, Flowerdale, Hazeldene, Strathewen, Steels Creek, Buxton, Dixons Creek and Labertouche are no more. Countless properties — homes, farms and businesses — owned by good, honest, peace-loving folk have been lost. Irreplaceable contents — photographs of loved ones, memories of family life and beloved mementoes — have all been destroyed. But more important of course are the countless dead, including those injured fighting the fires, the state of

families directly impacted and the people who are yet to be found.

Unfortunately some of those tragedies are now occurring in metropolitan Melbourne with the urban fires. Mr Drum referred to the Bendigo fires. Narre Warren South and Narre Warren North in my electorate have endured small fires that were deliberately started. These are very sad reflections on our community and our society. Disasters such as these bring out the best, the most courageous and the most noble of people, and they bring out the spirit of volunteerism, which is a defining characteristic of the Australian way of life. It is still hard to comprehend that somebody would deliberately start fires. We must get to the bottom of this, and we must make sure the delinquency of some is not given fuel to destroy the lives of others.

I admire those who felt powerless to do anything about the fires but tried to make a difference. There were those in my community like the linedancers of Frankston who decided to hold a fundraiser because they wanted to make a contribution. There was the Red Cross across the state, in particular the ladies at Frankston with whom I shared a table when I took the condolence book to the Karingal shopping centre in the suburbs to make sure those who were powerless to make an impact could still be involved and understand the grief of the state and the nation. There were also the sporting clubs that organised fundraisers. There was Chelsea Rotary that raised over \$90 000 in one night — all donated goods. There were the hundreds of people who signed the condolence books, including a woman who was wheelchair bound and could virtually only move one hand. She painstakingly dictated a message she wanted recorded in the condolence book and then took several minutes to sign the book.

We all feel the rallying call of this tragedy and the outpouring of compassion. We feel the rallying call of the inspirational and courageous stories of our firefighters, our neighbours and our police as well as those leading the rescue, recovery and rebuilding efforts. We feel the call of the specialists — the mental health workers, the psychologists, the counsellors and the welfare workers — who worked to support the victims, and we feel the call of the engineers and those working at the coalface. If we do not take action, those rallying calls will be futile. This is our responsibility. Our pledge must be to make sure that we honour the lives that have been lost, that we honour our history and our landscape, pockmarked by the tragedies of natural disasters, bushfires, floods and drought, and that we make a difference for the generations to follow. As many have said, no stone should be left unturned. The tough decisions that need to be made must be made to

honour those who died and to honour the losses of our state and our nation.

I will close by reciting one stanza of the poem *My Country* by Dorothea Mackellar. It is an iconic poem about Australia, but never has it painted a truer image of Australia. For those members who do not know it, the second stanza reads:

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!

And of course it is browner and blacker than ever before. At no other time have these words meant so much to so many. It is not her country, it is our country, and we must do all we can to protect not only the country but also the people who live in it.

**Ms TIERNEY** (Western Victoria) — I rise to lend my support to the condolence motion before the house. From the outset I also express my condolences to the families who have lost loved ones — 210 people confirmed dead so far; 210 people who were and will continue to be cherished. Hundreds of people have been injured, and many remain seriously injured in the Alfred hospital. I wish them a very speedy recovery.

It has been just over two weeks since the start of the 7 February bushfires, and it has been two weeks, so far, of a very intensive rollercoaster. For many, the rollercoaster has caused and is still causing very deep, cavernous feelings which will continue for a very long time. The shock, the horror, the fear, the sobbing, the anxiety, the loss of a life that once was — how can we have words for this terrible disaster? It is all too near, and it is all too raw. Grief that is now being experienced will be a whole new emotion for some; it will be uncharted mental and physical territory. For others the grief and loss will not be new, but it will be experienced under different circumstances and it will reconnect with the grief of old.

But grief during its most terrible time can be displaced momentarily when we are told or when we know of the many generous actions being taken, and have we not seen so much of our great collective humanity in recent times — the actions of our firefighters, our emergency services personnel, our CFA (Country Fire Authority) firefighters, our army personnel and ordinary Australians who just got up and got involved to help out? I wish to convey my absolute admiration for them

and to record my thanks to all of them. It is our collective commitment to you that we will ensure you are also supported and cared for over the coming months.

I express my thanks to ABC radio and its staff, to DHS (Department of Human Services) and other government departmental personnel, to the Red Cross, to local councils, to charitable organisations and to community organisations. There are so many — too many to count. I also acknowledge the generosity of those who have not been directly affected by the fires and thank them for their donations of goods and money, their help, and their deep concern and care.

There are also those who have not been directly affected that have continued to search for new ideas to assist. For example, there is a coastal town in my electorate where the local community has taken up a project to audit and support services within their own community so they can work up a proposal to enable people from bushfire-affected communities who wish to relocate to do so and to ensure that they are cared for and supported by that community.

Whilst most of this condolence motion is primarily focused on the fires in the eastern and northern parts of the state, it is also important to mention the bushfires in western Victoria, in the area I represent: at Haven near Horsham; near Coleraine; and east of Camperdown on 7 February; and currently at Muskvale, south of Daylesford. There have been property losses including houses, a golf clubhouse and loss of stock. Thankfully no lives have been lost, but John Smeets, who was seriously injured, continues to be treated in the Alfred hospital. Along with a number of other members of Parliament, I met with his wife, Lorraine, yesterday and was provided with an update on his condition; it is heartening that he is recovering, slowly but surely.

I also wish to thank those who fought so hard in western Victoria to bring those fires under control. I want also to thank Mandy Kirsopp and her sons and friends who fought the fires and were able to retain most of her property at Haven. Mandy showed me the aftermath and shared with me her feelings, concerns and ideas; she talked me through the Haven fire.

I also wish to thank the Horsham Rural City Council, the Southern Grampians Shire Council, the Corangamite Shire Council and the Colac Otway Shire Council for all their hard work and coordination. Whether or not you live in an area that was affected directly this time, most of regional Victoria at some time or another has suffered the effects of bushfires, and whether that be in the Grampians, Linton or

Anakie, in 1983 or 1939, those memories are very fresh and draw our connectivity together.

Over the ensuing weeks that connectivity will continue to be lived at funeral services, but it will also continue to grow as we commit to rebuilding lives. Importantly connectivity must continue as we learn from this disaster. Integral to this is our approach to the royal commission. A bipartisan approach to this commission is the only true measure of our commitment to our word to listen, learn and implement measures that will enable our communities to be even more resilient in the future.

In closing I wish to register my thanks to the Premier for his leadership, compassion and sheer hard work, and for being a very important role model for those in our community who may contemplate leadership roles. Men and women across this state know it will be a long road to recovery. I say to those individuals directly involved: my ongoing daily wish will be that you get through each day and that in time each day, each week, each month gets better. And I do pray that on every morning in the future you will be able to meet each morning with joy and optimism.

**Mr DALLA-RIVA** (Eastern Metropolitan) — I rise with much regret to support the motion, because I think it is a motion that many, if not all, of us would not like to be debating today. It is interesting that we use the word ‘debate’ here. It is more that each member from their respective areas is making a statement, expressing an understanding of the concerns of our citizens and acknowledging that Parliament is mourning the loss of the many people who died. We are thinking of those who have suffered injury, and we are hoping to work with the families that have lost their homes, properties and personal possessions, as is outlined in the motion.

I thank members who have made contributions so far. I, as a member representing a region that has been left pretty much untouched, have been listening intently to them. Eastern Metropolitan Region includes the outskirts of Eltham and parts of Ferntree Gully, but the events of 7 February were really something that most of us watched and listened to, I guess with some form of relief that we were actually not directly involved in those events, because, as has been said, it was like hell on earth.

As you listen to the stories told by members in this chamber, as you read about the circumstances of people who lived through the firestorm, and as you visit areas where you see the remnants of the fires’ destruction on motor vehicles, houses, humans, wildlife, farm animals and businesses — and the list goes on — you realise

the ferocity of the fires that just ripped through at such an enormous speed.

In speaking to his motion the Leader of the Government read a quote, and I think most members knew where he was coming from: he was quoting a description of the 1939 bushfires, because it seems they were very similar in their ferocity and destruction of lives to the fires that occurred on 7 February this year. I recall that at the time, a couple of days after the fires, I was participating in a citizenship ceremony in Manningham council offices in Doncaster. I looked down on the new faces of people who have come from overseas and areas that probably do not have the extent of threat by fire that we have here in Victoria. As I stood in those offices and looked across to my left, or to their right, I could still see the bushfires burning up in the hills of Kinglake and surrounding areas.

It made me realise at the time that one of the things that was borne out of this devastation could be summed up in one word. I had a speech prepared on that day, as most MPs do, and made some notes, but I threw them out and just spoke about the issue of mateship. I think mateship is the main thing that has come out of these tragic circumstances: the mateship of everyone getting together, putting their heads down and working to remove the continual threat, because, as was said by Ms Broad and others, there are still fires in Victoria burning out of control.

That mateship includes dipping into their pockets and making donations — I think the total collected at this stage is something like \$200 million — to assist those who are fighting, and the mateship of the people working at relief centres. Everyone was prepared to put their hand up to do the work, and it is still going on.

One thing we have to be mindful of in the regions that have not been touched is that we have to continuously remind the people that the threat still has not subsided, that there are still literally thousands of people without homes, that thousands of homes have been destroyed. Businesses, people's incomes and the whole lot have been destroyed. Whole towns have been wiped out. We have heard about it from many members in this place. I think it is important for us and incumbent on us as MPs who represent areas that were not directly affected to remind our constituents that when they see rain, as we did this morning, that does not necessarily mean rain is falling in the areas that are under threat.

This is a motion that covers a broad ambit of issues: human life, including people killed and injured, and property lost, including income and businesses — it covers the whole lot. It covers firefighters, emergency

services, police, Country Fire Authority (CFA) and Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE), and the list goes on.

In terms of volunteers, many members have spoken about individuals who volunteered their time and effort. The one that stuck in my mind was a gentleman whose name I do not recall but who was severely burnt in the Ash Wednesday fires and who is now at the age of 87 going to victims of bushfires and saying, 'Look, it is not all that bad'. I think that shows mateship, fortitude and courage. There is generosity across this great state and nation.

The one thing I do not see in the motion has to do with a long-term effect, the post-traumatic stress disorders that will result from this event. I think it is fair to say, after listening to MPs from the areas directly affected, that the impact is not only on victims themselves but also on the police, the volunteers, the emergency service workers and the firefighters who have faced some very confronting issues. In the longer term we are going to see a need for counsellors, and it is important to ensure that people understand what has occurred so they feel they can get on. The worst thing we can do after such a vicious attack by the fires is to assume that people have moved on.

For those like me who attended some of the relief centres, it is surreal. The only word I could give it was 'surreal'. I think people are still wandering around in a daze, and they will be in a daze for months, if not years. The issue for us as parliamentarians and governments is to ensure that those people are not lost in the desire to rebuild with bricks and mortar and to rebuild roads and everything else. The one effect that may be severe and that cannot be seen is the emotional and psychological damage to these people and the many workers and volunteers.

Having said that, it is a motion I would prefer not to be discussing today, but in the end it is important that we as a Parliament recognise all the issues that have been outlined by the Leader of the Government in his motion. I know members will support the motion as it stands.

**Mr EIDEH** (Western Metropolitan) — With the horror of the bushfires still inflicting harm upon our state it is appropriate that I speak in support of the condolence motion.

The death toll from these tragic fires is awful: so many families, so many children, so many lives lost. We all grieve for them as we also grieve for their families and

their friends who must now try to cope with this pain and anguish in their hearts, possibly forever.

We also grieve for the great loss of wildlife that is so important to us as Australians and of the livestock that meant economic survival to many within those communities.

We grieve for the firefighter who came down from Canberra and died whilst helping us. He died in the truest tradition of Aussies helping other Aussies without concern for their own safety.

I admire and wish to thank the great emergency services personnel and the firefighters who lost their homes while helping save the lives of others. I admire the countless volunteers who have helped so much, the people all across the state who have raised funds and sent clothing, toys, food parcels and other items for the victims of this horror.

I wish to pay my respects to some members of Parliament from both houses for their dedication and commitment to their communities during the recent tragedy. In particular I want to speak of Danielle Green, the Assembly member for Yan Yean and a member of the Country Fire Authority, and Ben Hardman, the Assembly member for Seymour and also a member of the CFA. These two outstanding members of Parliament give back more to the community than they receive. Also I admire our Premier, the Honourable John Brumby, and our Prime Minister, the Honourable Kevin Rudd, who were horrified and deeply affected by this disaster.

We all have a responsibility ahead of us to rebuild communities, to help them re-establish and to support them. This is not a simple, one-year project. To that end I must also praise the municipal councils within my electorate that have already committed so much. I congratulate Moonee Valley Council for declaring that it will adopt a town and support it over the many years to come. Like my colleagues I offer heartfelt condolences to the families of those who have lost loved ones.

**Mr RICH-PHILLIPS** (South Eastern Metropolitan) — In 1983 Narre Warren was a very different place from what it is today. The township consisted of around 50 streets between Princes Highway and the railway line, and the rest of the area was farmland and paddocks up to Berwick and Hallam and down to Cranbourne. On 16 February 1983 the Ash Wednesday bushfires could be seen from Narre Warren on the hills over Berwick as they burnt through Upper Beaconsfield. That night the hills were glowing as those

fires continued to burn. At no point during that grim day did those fires come any closer than about 5 kilometres to Narre Warren. Nonetheless they had a profound impact on what was then a very small community

In late January 1983 the country newspaper the *Berwick-Pakenham Gazette*, the local organ of record, carried a front-page story on the Narre Warren Country Fire Authority brigade receiving a new tanker. Three weeks later the six members who were crewing that tanker were lost in the fire in Upper Beaconsfield on the night of 16 February 1983. That had a profound impact on what was still at that stage a very small community, because many of those members or their extended families were well known across the Narre Warren community.

In 2009 Narre Warren is a very different place; almost all the farmland has given way to urban sprawl and it is now virtually solid housing from Hallam all the way through into Berwick, down to Cranbourne and through much further to Pakenham. What in 1983 seemed a possibility — a risk — of the bushfires that were then in Upper Beaconsfield spreading across the short distance to Narre Warren, by 2009, 26 years later, seemed a remote possibility. It seemed highly unlikely that what was virtually a fully urbanised area would experience the impact of fires on what was again a very difficult bushfire day.

Yet on 7 February fires again touched Narre Warren, and this time in a more direct way. By 2 o'clock on the afternoon of 7 February a small grassfire had started in Crawley Road in Narre Warren North, 300 or 400 metres from the Hallam bypass. It started by accident as a small grassfire and rapidly burnt behind the homes along Crawley Road, accelerating as it did so. The fire climbed the hill over Robinson Road into Harkaway Road and went on to destroy four homes and burn a number of outbuildings and roughly 80 or 90 hectares of land.

A couple of hours later, about 4 o'clock, in Narre Warren South — an even more urbanised area — unbelievably two fires started, one in Cranbourne North which bridged the South Gippsland Highway and another in Narre Warren South which burnt along a high-tension line easement and went on to destroy six homes in Langbourne Drive. Again Narre Warren was touched in a very direct way by the bushfires, although it was very fortunate to record that there were no fatalities in that area. However, for the 10 families who lost their homes in Narre Warren North and South it is every bit as traumatic as it is for the families in the

more heavily impacted areas such as Marysville and Kinglake.

While the crisis of 7 February has passed, the risk has not. Last week I had the opportunity to have a good look at where the fires had impacted. It was extraordinary to see which homes had been spared and which had been burnt on what appeared to be a largely random basis as the Narre Warren South fire burnt along the backs of the houses, destroying some and leaving others. At the same time, looking out across the hills, you could see that fires continued to burn. A substantial number of fires still continue to burn in Victoria, in the Dandenongs and up towards the affected areas in the ranges. It is a signal that the problem is not over.

As a state we mourn the 210 people who have lost their lives and we feel sympathy for the 2000 families who have lost their homes, but as time passes that grief will give way to disbelief and it will give way to anger and many questions will be asked — questions about our preparedness, questions about our land management practices and questions about whether we have forgotten the lessons learnt at such cost over the last 70 years. The Teague royal commission has a role to play in providing answers to these questions, and so does this Parliament. As we mourn today and express our condolences through this motion, we must ensure that as a Parliament we do not fail the victims of this tragedy in the months and years to come when they seek answers to those questions.

**Mr TEE** (Eastern Metropolitan) — I too wish to speak in favour of this motion and express my sincerest sympathies to those who have lost family, friends and other loved ones in the fires.

On the Tuesday after the fires I visited Trawool and Wallan and attended a community meeting at which I saw the fear of those who were at that stage concerned that their communities, their friends and indeed their lives could be next. At some of the relief centres I also saw an outpouring of generosity. People were donating food, clothing, bedding and money to help. People were giving their time freely and unconditionally. Volunteers and other people were working long hours to ensure that those in need did not go without.

I spoke to a number of volunteers who told me of families who had lost everything and who were coming into the relief centres in a state of utter disbelief and shock. At that stage they were simply unable to comprehend or digest the magnitude of what had happened to them. When they came to the relief centres to collect basic essentials for themselves and their

families, some were really unable to focus or bring their minds to bear on the necessities they required. Volunteers told me that they had to work with these survivors to remind them to take basic items — toothpaste, underwear, socks and so on — such was the magnitude of what they had survived. I think it is clear that Saturday, 7 February 2009, will become a key marker in the psyche of our nation.

It will be remembered as the date of the worst natural disaster in our history. The day of 7 February was a shocking display of how our sometimes brutal environment can decimate communities by taking lives, homes and property. The conditions on the day of 7 February were unprecedented. For many parts of the state it was the hottest day since records began some 150 years ago. Parts of the state were suffering some of the worst drought conditions on record, and these tinder dry conditions and the lack of humidity were exacerbated by searing winds, so when the fires took hold, they raced. It has been estimated that they raced at 120 kilometres per hour. For many, by the time the warnings were issued the fires were very close. Indeed it has been described as a perfect storm in the context of those conditions, but I do not think it will be unique.

We know that temperatures will rise, that extreme weather conditions will increasingly become the norm and that Victoria may become drier. We also know that the experience and expertise gained and lessons learnt over generations may not be enough to cope with the future. Communities will return and rebuild, but I think we need a new understanding of what lies ahead in how we deal with those new conditions.

I thank the Premier and the Prime Minister for their leadership, which I welcome. I also welcome the announcement that new houses will be built to improved fire standards, and I welcome the royal commission. The commission will ensure that, as we move forward and rebuild, we are mindful that we are living in a harsher, less predictable and more brutal landscape.

I conclude by thanking those who have given so much to help others. For those who have suffered loss, my thoughts and the thoughts of all Victorians are with you.

**Mr ATKINSON** (Eastern Metropolitan) — A rare number of events define nations and communities and establish their own histories and, sadly, in Victoria very often those events have been bushfires. Victoria is recognised as the most bushfire-prone state in the world. It is followed closely by California, which ironically has adopted some of the vegetation which is a

significant contributor to our fire-prone status in Victoria. We have heard from a number of members about the role that eucalypts can play in exploding in a fire and fanning the conflagration.

This latest series of fires across Victoria on a fateful day, and indeed fires that led up to that day and fires that have occurred subsequently — even continuing this week in part near my own electorate of Eastern Metropolitan Region which I share with Mr Tee and Mr Leane and my colleagues Richard Dalla-Riva and Jan Kronberg — have been another reminder of just how fragile our environment is and the relationship we have with nature.

As a number of members have hastened to say on this condolence motion, this is not a time for blame. It is probably not even a time for analysis, because much of that analysis might well be knee-jerk and lean towards the obvious but miss some of the important lessons and pointers to what we might do in the future to ensure that our communities are safer. We need to learn from this event as we have learnt from the events that have gone before. It was interesting to note the survival of three members of a Country Fire Authority brigade in the Ferntree Gully fires that made the papers just this week. They sheltered in their fire truck as it was engulfed by flames, and mercifully they survived. They learnt what behaviour they ought to follow in those circumstances from the deaths of some of their colleagues who had gone before in fighting other fires.

In the planning of some of our communities we have learnt some lessons from the other fires, but clearly we have not paid sufficient heed to all of those lessons. We need to make a very thorough and considered examination of this event and other similar events that might well impact upon our lives in the future. Whether or not people accept that global warming is occurring, there are certainly indications that some of the seaside communities may be impacted by rising sea levels. There are issues that we need to address in terms of the way we plan our communities if we are to deal with what is suggested, by some scientists at least, as a possible issue for us to confront in the future.

As members of Parliament we meet many people who inspire us. On a day-to-day basis I meet people who I find inspiring. It is often nice to meet the celebrities of our community, but the real people who inspire me are invariably volunteers. When I go to sports organisations they are the people who man the canteen and who man and mark the boundary line. They are the people who support the players. In our schools they are the people who turn up at working bees. So many people who volunteer in our community I find inspiring.

Some people face personal challenges or disabilities that they overcome in their willingness to serve the community, but there is nobody who inspires me more than the people from the emergency services and those who volunteer in times of crisis such as these fires in a diverse range of organisations. The people in the CFA are at the pointy end, but many other groups of people are involved in supporting the CFA and providing its members with a supply chain, resources and, in some cases, comfort. In many cases there are people who minister to those who have become the victims of the disaster, the catastrophe.

These bushfires have brought out the very best in Victorians. Sadly they have also brought out a few people who have you shaking your head because of their behaviour in such circumstances. There is the prospect of people looting or taking funds that have been raised for bushfire victims. If the reports are true, there are also those who have looked to capitalise on this tragedy by trying to buy up land cheaply. It is shameful stuff. But fortunately they are behaviours that pale into insignificance when you consider the sacrifice, commitment, dedication and bravery of so many people who have fought these fires and who have come to the aid of the people who are the fires' victims. I congratulate all of them, as have colleagues in this debate.

I also extend congratulations to the Premier and his ministerial team, to the Leader of the Opposition in the other house and his shadow ministerial team and to the backbench members who have supported them as they have gone to do whatever they can with regard to these fire events.

Members in electorates not directly touched by fires have rallied. Many have run events or taken donations; they have gone to some of the centres with those donations and sought to try to provide what support they can to those communities, without getting in the way, at a time when there are people who know what they are doing and need to get on with the job. Others have been directly impacted. Some members have had the experience of fire events in the past, and some are new to this sort of tragedy. Certainly all of us are absolutely devastated by the scale of the tragedy on this occasion.

All members need to be congratulated for the leadership they have shown, notwithstanding that they are clearly not the central players in this event. Those are the emergency service workers, the people at the blood bank, the people at St Vinnies and at a range of organisations such as service clubs who have come in and done so much. These events are also a stage for so

many Victorians who have responded so generously and quickly to the need to help victims, and I commend the generosity of the community. That will remain an inspiration to me for as long as I stay in public office.

There are things we need to learn about the fires. We need to look into the future and build more communities that I would call fire safe. I am not going to lay blame in terms of some of the issues that have already started to circulate, and indeed the royal commission will provide an opportunity for testing and analysing and for recommending improved practices that will hopefully avoid the scale of loss of life and impact on our environment in terms of animals and native flora and fauna in the future. But it certainly occurs to me that we need to do more to create fire-safe communities. Communities that are served by one road in and one road out need to be looked at very carefully. Housing standards need to be looked at.

Some of the vegetation controls also need to be looked at, notwithstanding that, as somebody said to me just two days ago, it is not really sensible to talk about going into an area like Kinglake and clearing 50 metres around every house, because then all of a sudden you have Rowville, not Kinglake. That is a very astute observation. People have lived in these communities and many of us have used them for recreation and retreat because of some of their magnificent characteristics, which ought not be compromised by knee-jerk reactions. We need sensible regimes that manage the environment and reduce the potential impacts of fires but at the same time recognise some of the attributes of these areas. However, we do need fire-safe communities.

I lost a friend in the 7 February fires. I guess most of us have been touched by at least somebody; the six degrees of separation has been considerably closer than six degrees in this event. The friend I lost was a fellow called Marcel Smits, known to a number of people particularly in the Liberal Party and possibly to some government ministers, because he was an active and successful businessman. He was a larger-than-life character who had a retreat at St Andrews and had gone out there on the day of the fires; he was found dead in a shed.

I think the death of Brian Naylor and his wife made a lot of Victorians think they knew somebody in the fires even if perhaps they did not have a personal friendship or association with somebody who was killed, because Brian Naylor very much typified the humanity and goodness of people and set a fine example in the public life he led. I think it was a shock that somebody like him could have been a victim of the fires.

A woman I know very well — in fact my children have babysat for her over many years — lost her house in the bushfires in Marysville on 7 February. She left that house at 5.30 in the evening as she was concerned about the limited amount of information she had. In some ways that I have discussed with her she was more fortunate than some, because this was a retreat rather than the primary home, so it was not the repository of family heirlooms, photographs and all the things people hold dear. Nonetheless it was the first house she and her husband had bought together, and it was a house that was important to them; it symbolised much of their future. It was immediately in the path of the fire as it raced towards the oval, which had been the initial refuge of many people in Marysville. Fortunately people were herded away from that location by police who recognised that rather than it being a sanctuary the oval could well have become a far more sinister place because of the fires bearing down on it.

In its path the fire took my friend Rosaile Wallen's house. In fact today she is at a memorial service at Marysville with other people who are looking at not just grieving over the considerable loss in that community, as indeed there was considerable loss in other communities, particularly Strathewen and Kinglake, but who are also looking at drawing strength and courage from one another to go on and rebuild that community.

In the grounds of this Parliament there is a memorial to the Bali victims. When that memorial was proposed by previous presiding officers I was in two minds about it. Whilst the event was tragic, whilst it took the precious lives of some Victorians, it occurred to me that if we were to set up a memorial for Bali, then perhaps there would be a continuum of events of similar scale and similar impact on Victorians that ought to be recognised in the Parliament. It certainly occurs to me that perhaps we might consider some sort of poignant reminder of the bushfire tragedies in the grounds of the Parliament — and not just for this fire.

While 7 February and the weeks before and after it are much top of mind at this point, are fresh and stark, the reality is, as I said at the outset, Victoria has been the victim of many major bushfire events, including the 1939 Black Friday fires and the Ash Wednesday fires. My grandparents were involved in bushfires on Ash Wednesday, and they were also in bushfires in, I think, 1961 up around Upwey. Perhaps we ought to have a memorial or reminder within the grounds of Parliament House that recognises bushfire tragedy over the continuum — not just this latest one but certainly inspired by the scale of it. Such a memorial ought to be here in the Parliament's grounds, to remind us as

policymakers of the importance of developing laws and regulations and working with our communities to ensure a greater level of safety and security for them. It would be a recognition of the contribution so many people have made above and beyond in each of the fire events that have occurred in this country, and would particularly recognise the loss of lives across a number of events — most recently in the bushfires of 7 February.

I think one of the major issues for us as policy-makers is that we recognise that this event is not one that has simply required an immediate and massive response from government resources and the community but is indeed an event that requires a long-term commitment to the people who have been victims of it.

It occurs to me that there are many people still walking around in absolute shock these days after the fire; they are still not comprehending what has happened and are still not understanding what response they can make to this tragedy. They are uncertain of what their futures are and are disbelieving of the scale of the event. In some ways those people are fortunate that at the moment so many people in the community have rallied around them and supported them with goods and services. They draw strength from one another and their experience. In many cases they rally at the fact they have survived this conflagration.

There are some, obviously, who feel guilt about those who did not survive — neighbours, friends, family. There are always questions in those circumstances: could I have done something to save my neighbour, my daughter, my son, my mother or my father or whatever kin it was, or my friend?

A key difficulty for these people will be in the future as they go back to rebuild their houses in a more lonely circumstance. They will not necessarily have the whole community at their shoulder. Victorians in places that were not touched directly by the bushfires will perhaps be moving on to other issues and other demands in their lives. The thoughts of these fires will still be clear in their minds, and they will still be prepared to continue their generosity; but they may not have an appreciation of just how they might contribute.

The reality is that the government and a range of community agencies need to be there for these people as they go about their work over months and maybe even years into the future. This is not a short-term event, this is an event that requires an application and a commitment by the community to these people over a much longer period.

I conclude by simply saying again that I find the actions and the bravery of so many people in this event and the generosity of so many people in their response to these bushfires to be inspirational. I congratulate Victorians for their response along with the people from other states and indeed overseas who have supported us. I congratulate them on what they have contributed to us during what has been one of our most calamitous events. Hopefully we will learn and heed the lessons, and hopefully we will never again see the scale of disaster that we saw on 7 February.

**Ms HUPPERT** (Southern Metropolitan) — It is with great sadness that I rise to add my support to the motion of condolence. I have been deeply moved by the words of those who have spoken before me, especially those who live in and represent the communities directly affected by the devastating bushfires which ripped through Victoria on Saturday, 7 February 2009, as well as before and after that date in what is the worst natural disaster Victoria has faced.

The stifling heat experienced by all of us around Victoria on 7 February gave us an indication that it would be a different day, but nothing could have prepared us for the horror that unfolded across our state. I find it difficult to put into words my feelings about these events.

I extend my deepest sympathy to the families and friends of those killed in the bushfires. The statistics are terrible to recite. It has been confirmed that 210 people lost their lives on or in the aftermath of Black Saturday, and this figure may still rise. As a result of this, many people across Victoria are mourning the loss of family members, friends, neighbours, schoolmates, work colleagues, sporting team mates, and community members. I also pass on my best wishes to those who have been injured and people who have lost their homes, property and personal possessions. I am conscious that the risk to life and property is not over and that bushfires continue to burn around the state.

That the damage and destruction has not been greater is due to the extraordinary efforts of the volunteer and professional firefighters and emergency services personnel who battled to control the fires and who helped people to safety from areas under threat. I wish to express my sincere gratitude to them and also express my admiration for their continuing efforts.

I join with others in this place in expressing my thanks and appreciation to the volunteers who have given and continue to give their time and skills to the many communities affected by the bushfires and to those employed in the local government and community

sectors who have contributed above and beyond their normal duties. This includes the medical staff treating the injured at hospitals, both in regional areas and in Melbourne, the people who have staffed the relief centres and other community facilities, the vets who are devoting hours to treating injured animals and the members of the Australian Defence Forces who are providing emergency accommodation and other services.

I also want to mention the role of the ABC, in particular ABC local radio. As well as fulfilling the important role of keeping Victorians informed of the threats posed by the bushfires, ABC radio has provided an important community service, connecting those in the bushfire-affected areas with the rest of Victoria, linking those with particular needs with those able to meet those needs and creating a real sense of community.

I want to acknowledge the amazing generosity of the people of Victoria and Australia, and even those overseas, who have donated over \$150 million towards the Victorian Bushfire Relief Fund, including individuals, community organisations and businesses both big and small in the Southern Metropolitan Region. Many of the businesses I have visited in the electorate have donated goods and profits towards the relief fund and have collected donations from their customers. Many community groups and schools have been very active in collecting donations.

In particular I have been moved by stories of schoolchildren adopting schools in towns ravaged by the bushfires, sending their messages of support as well as collecting much-needed goods and donations. This includes my son's school, which has an ongoing relationship with Labertouche Primary School and chose to raise money for the families at that school who have lost their homes.

By the evening of Sunday, 8 February, we started receiving emails from individuals and community groups in the electorate who were collecting clothing, household goods and non-perishable foods for the victims of the bushfires and calling for volunteers to help sort and deliver the donated items to where they were needed. The efforts of people from all walks of life in providing support to those in need have been truly amazing.

I have been struck by the resilience and determination of the people living in the areas affected by the fires, such as the people I have heard interviewed in the media who are working to hold their communities together in the absence of facilities and infrastructure

but who are dedicated to rebuilding what has been destroyed.

Many of the people living in the areas devastated by the bushfires rely on tourism for a large part of their livelihoods. I have many happy memories of holidays spent in Marysville and surrounds, both as a child and now with my own family. As a Venturer scout leader I camped in the scout hall in Marysville with members of my unit while teaching them to ski at Lake Mountain. I look forward to visiting Marysville and other bushfire-affected areas in the not-too-distant future and playing a small part in their rebuilding.

Our task as members of Parliament is to work with all levels of government and the communities themselves to ensure that the devastated communities across the state are rebuilt. As others in this place have said, it is a great privilege to be part of this rebuilding effort. Finally, I pass on my condolences to the many people who have lost family and friends in this terrible tragedy facing our state.

**Mr VOGELS** (Western Victoria) — I thank the house for the opportunity to join in the condolence motion. I shall read the motion, because it says it all. It moves 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, others 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.

The work is not done. The fires are still burning. It is ironic that today is the anniversary of Ash Wednesday; it was 26 years ago that the Ash Wednesday fires ravaged Victoria. As many members have already said, we will all remember exactly where we were and what we were doing on Saturday, 7 February.

I was at home, and I said to my two sons, 'Stay home. The weather bureau has said today is going to be one of the worst days on record, so make sure you are ready for anything that may occur'. Saturday morning in the Western District started off quite cool. At 10 or 11 o'clock I thought the weather bureau must have got its forecast wrong, because the temperature was only 28 or 29 degrees and there was not much wind about.

We knew there was a change coming in the afternoon, so I thought that maybe western Victoria would miss out. However, at about midday to 1 o'clock the wind started roaring. I went outside to have a look, and the temperature was probably in the mid-30s. Within 5 minutes of my being outside the temperature had climbed to 40 degrees, the wind was gusting and there were whirlwinds. As I looked across the valley where my sons are farming, towards the dairy and the houses, I could see whirlwinds of leaves going high into the atmosphere. The wind was going north, south, east and west and roaring. I thought to myself, 'If a fire starts, it will be just about impossible to defend'.

I turned on the garden hose and started to water around the house, as you do, and started thinking back to Ash Wednesday and the terrible tragedy that occurred in western Victoria at that time. I made sure this time I was listening to ABC radio, because, as everybody has mentioned, it was doing a fantastic job of keeping us informed.

It was not long until the messages started coming through that there were fires east of Camperdown at Horsham and at Coleraine and that they were big fires. At Horsham some 10 or 11 houses were burnt down along with a lot of fencing and sheds. A neighbour trying to help a farmer shift a flock of sheep was badly burnt. In Coleraine fencing and farming property was burnt, but luckily for it the wind changed at the right time. As my colleague Mr Koch told me, Coleraine probably would have disappeared off the map if that had not happened. Then at Pomborneit once again a lot of farming property was destroyed.

On the Saturday I did not realise how bad the fires were in the rest of the state, just as I did not realise on Ash Wednesday, because the wind changed for us at probably 2, 2.30 or 3 o'clock and in the Western District we were basically on top of the fires. I did not realise until later that night how bad the fires north of Melbourne, in Gippsland et cetera had become.

I want to reiterate just a couple of things. One is how important the warnings are. I remember Ash Wednesday very well. I was an Apexian in the Timboon Apex Club and we were helping the shire to

build a youth camp at the old prison farm down there, called Camp Coorimungle. We were actually pouring a concrete tank on Ash Wednesday in 1983. There were about 10 of us. It was a big job, and we finished building the tank at about 1 o'clock. It was hot, so someone produced a slab of beer and we sat in the shed and drank the beer. We did not even realise that the Ash Wednesday fires were creeping up behind us that day. Luckily I had to go to milk, so at about 3.30 p.m. I said, 'I'd better go home to milk'. I opened the shed door and looked out and all I could see was smoke. It was dark and windy. I often think that if I had not had to go to milk, we could even have been burnt in that shed, because we would not have known what was happening. Communications are much better these days. We actually know what is happening because we are much more aware.

Once again the wind turned the fire before it got to Timboon, where we live. It was only a few kilometres away, but it did turn. I milked, and that night I went into Timboon to help with the fire relief. The RSL had set up a kitchen. Just like now, there were volunteers there, including fire brigade people, and stuff was starting to come in. I decided to go for a drive towards Nullawarre, where the fire had impacted badly. As I drove along I came across a burnt body lying on the side of the road. I did not know who it was, and I kept going. I thought, 'I wish I wasn't even here; I didn't know all these things were happening'. I drove around the corner in an attempt to see the guy who lived on this property. I will not mention names. He was not there, but his brother was. I said, 'What's happened down the road?'. He said, 'That was my brother's wife who was burnt to death there'. He said that he did not even recognise the family. These people had tried to escape but were caught on the road because there were trees across the road, and his sister-in-law was burnt to death. He said there was a little kid there and his brother did not know who he was, until he said, 'Dad, it's me'. He did not even recognise his own son, who later died in hospital.

We never forget these things. Today is near the anniversary of Ash Wednesday. I wonder what these families are thinking. It is 26 years later and exactly the same things have happened — people have died, and memories come flooding back.

I just want to say that we do recover. If you go to the Western District now, to around Timboon and Nullawarre, you would not know that a fire had been through the place. The people have got back, they have recovered — but you do not forget. With all this happening again, another thing I want to say is let us get it right. I congratulate the government on setting up

a royal commission; it is very important. We need to make sure that there is a balance between protecting the environment and where people live et cetera, but roads should be there for people to be able to drive out to safety, without the fear that maybe there are branches and trees across the road and they cannot get out. We need to sort this out. We know that 210 people have died and there could be more.

At this stage all I want to do is once again offer my condolences and congratulate all the people who have been out there doing all the hard work, as they do, and say let us make sure we do it right this time.

**Mr ELASMAR** (Northern Metropolitan) — I also rise to contribute to the debate on the condolence motion moved by the Leader of the Government. After listening to the previous speaker, I do not think it is going to be easy for me to tell some more stories. What I heard from Mr Vogels touched my heart.

I wish to place on record my heartfelt condolences to the people of Victoria following the horrific bushfires of 7 February 2009. Just a few days after this terrible disaster I visited the ravaged bushfire areas, and in particular Whittlesea. I saw for myself the devastation that had befallen those immensely brave and stoic people. So much has been lost that it was very hard for me not to cry publicly in the face of so much pain and misery. Children have lost their parents; parents have lost their children. Bush animals and family pets were not spared the inferno.

My deepest sympathies go to all the bushfire victims, and my profound respect goes to all the marvellous volunteers who have pitched in and given a helping hand to our fellow Victorians in their time of dire need.

As did many others, I attended the national day of mourning ceremony at the Rod Laver Arena on Sunday, 22 February. Like many attendees, I was touched by this moving event which was organised to honour the victims and the survivors of the Black Saturday bushfires. The ceremony included praise for the courage and heroism of our country firefighters — ordinary men and women who are often called upon to perform superhuman feats of courage and who have knowingly sacrificed their own properties while trying to protect the properties of their neighbours.

I salute also the brave firefighters who have crossed the world to help us to try to save lives and properties within our community. It is comforting to know that we are not alone in the international community.

I was deeply impressed also by the Victorian community spirit that was evident in the aftermath of

this tragedy. Men and women from all walks of life rallied around the survivors. Food, clothing and bedding was donated in such large quantities that within two days of the dreadful event the relief agencies had to stop accepting further donations.

I know that many with small businesses in the area rallied so strongly to support the devastated community that they risked bankruptcy, and in some instances their very lives, to continue to provide goods and services. Their bravery and generosity of spirit should not go unrecognised or, indeed, unrewarded.

Then there were the telethon, the Salvation Army and the banks that raised millions of dollars to aid the victims. This also was a wonderful effort, and I congratulate everyone who either organised or worked or helped to raise money for the bushfire appeal.

La Trobe University is now undertaking independent research into fire behaviour and how people react in times of great danger in bushfires. The team will also look at building and infrastructure issues. I applaud the initiatives because there is a lot to learn about human behaviour in a time of crisis. The research will provide management agencies with an independent analysis of the factors surrounding the fires. The more we learn about bushfires the more we are able to put in place contingency plans to limit the loss of life and property.

I wish to put on the record my enormous admiration for the people in my electorate who have shown remarkable courage in the face of such adversity and tragedy following the Victorian bushfires of Saturday, 7 February 2009. It is a day that will never be forgotten. However now, today, we must begin the rebuilding process and plan for the future. We must, as our Premier, John Brumby, and the Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, have said, rebuild brick by brick. For those homes that have been lost money has been raised, but it is not enough. We must continue as a community to fundraise. We also have the obligation to ensure that emergency plans are established by the government to save lives as the no. 1 priority. We, as a Labor government, are committed to ensuring that a timely rebuilding program is under way as quickly as humanly possible.

I would also like to congratulate Danielle Green and Ben Hardman, the members for Yan Yean and Seymour in the other place, for their outstanding service to their constituents during their time of desperate need. I would like to thank all members who spoke before me and those who will speak after me for their touching words and the feelings they have expressed and will express about unity amongst the

people of Victoria. It is most important that the people of Victoria know that their representatives are there for them when they need them.

I would also like to personally commend our Labor Premier, John Brumby, for his wonderful compassion and down-to-earth practical assistance to the survivors. I would be remiss if I did not thank our heroic Country Fire Authority firefighters. God bless you all and thank you for a job very well done.

**Mrs KRONBERG** (Eastern Metropolitan) — As I rise to support the condolence motion, I do so with a very heavy heart and a mind that is laden with the vivid images of horror and suffering of my fellow Victorians across so much of our state. The events of 7 February, Black Saturday, are now etched in the psyche of all Victorians. Victorians now bow our heads in collective sorrow for the tragic loss of human life on a scale we have not experienced before and in sympathy with the suffering of those who were injured in the bushfires. To the grieving families who have lost loved ones and their dear friends in the conflagration, the awesome firestorm, I offer my condolences and feelings of deepest sympathy for your loss.

Eltham College, which is one of the schools in the Eastern Metropolitan Region that serves its region, including places like Strathewen, St Andrews and Kinglake, has suffered three deaths amongst its former student body.

I have an awful list in front of me. It is the list that shows the number of deaths across this state. I think it is worth including the list at this point, just to remind us how many people have been lost and where they were lost. In Marysville there were 45 deaths; in Strathewen, 43; in Kinglake, 38; in St Andrews, 22; in Steels Creek, 10; in Flowerdale, 8; in Humevale, 7; in Kinglake West, 7; in Koornalla, 4; in Narbethong, 4; in Callignee, 4; in Churchill, 2; in Mudgegonga, 2; in Strath Creek, 2; in Toolangi, 2; in Whittlesea, 2; in Yarra Glen, 1; in Upper Plenty, 1; in Jeeralang Junction, 1; in Cambarville, 1; in Bendigo, 1; in Heathcote Junction, 1; in Mittons Bridge, 1; and in Reedy Creek, 1.

It is during such times as these that we are going through that Australians are at their very best. Where would any of us be without the courage and skills of our volunteer forces? Volunteers across the state have saved lives and given hope. I salute the brave, selfless heroes of the Country Fire Authority (CFA) and the State Emergency Service and the officers of the DSE (Department of Sustainability and Environment), Parks Victoria and our noble Victoria Police. These brave

souls have been supported by the Red Cross, the Salvation Army and many other agencies working on the front line.

We also need to salute those toiling behind the scenes. Those volunteers, seemingly along with everyone in Victoria who could do something, have applied their love for their neighbours, their love for their fellow man and their skills in a very caring and thoughtful way from the beginning, and many are still making selfless contributions.

When I think of selfless contributions and putting your life on the line, my thoughts turn to my cousin John Canny, who fought many, many fires in Victoria as an incident controller with the Dixons Creek brigade. When the conflagrations were very bad in the Blue Mountains he went there, and he was hospitalised as a result of fighting fires there. After returning to Victoria, as a resident of Dixons Creek he maintained safety all along the Melba Highway. It is ironic that he moved to Yea; it seems the fires followed him there. We are very sad about the loss of his property in Lorimers Lane, Dixons Creek, which abuts the De Bortoli winery.

Our family is very concerned about John. We can hardly communicate with him because he is so absolutely dedicated to the task. Everything in his life is on hold. I point to that because that is what we know in terms of our day-to-day communications within our family. I am sure his selflessness is replicated in the hearts and minds and in the hours served by everyone in the Country Fire Authority and in all the other volunteer bodies that rushed to the aid of people in the face of the bushfires.

The Kinglake Ranges dominate the northern outlook from my home. The haunting beauty of the mountains and their foothills often calls me to their midst. Now this magnificent vista will provide a constant reminder, and for me a lasting testament, of the terror and loss of Black Saturday, the very worst of the worst. These wonderful, lush and regal forests provided havens for so many. On the hottest day ever recorded in the Melbourne metropolitan area these forests also wreaked death and destruction. My outlook takes in the town of Kinglake, where 38 people perished. I am familiar with moving around such places as Arthurs Creek, and in particular the hamlet of Strathewen, where 43 died, and St Andrews, which suffered the loss of 22 people.

I think it is important to include here reference to a note that came through to me late on Friday afternoon from the captain of the St Andrews CFA brigade, Helen Kenney. Her concerns centred on the difficulty she was having in getting a response to the management of

polluted dams. She needed an immediate quantity of liquid lime to assist the settling of ash in dams across the southern face of the Kinglake Ranges to allow livestock to be watered from those dams, which amazingly still had some water in them. Livestock and native animals are being cared for by people who are capable of doing so. The animals are being kept alive from those people's own dwindling supply of drinking water. Those areas are very difficult to get through to deliver water because of the state of access roads and general conditions. I hope the Department of Primary Industries has responded accordingly.

There will be many lessons to be learnt from the firestorm of 7 February. I am encouraged by the establishment of a royal commission, and I wish the three commissioners well as they begin their onerous task and look for answers.

I am also concerned for our courageous emergency services personnel, and my concern deepened after conversations with many of them at an event on Sunday night. These people often remain outwardly stoic even when approaching the point of mental and physical exhaustion. What we need is a robust commitment to their ongoing support and care as and when they need it, not just while there is a big focus on the response. I imagine we are looking at something akin to the armed forces in terms of post-traumatic stress manifesting itself in all sorts of ways in the weeks, months and years to come.

Like my colleagues here today I am very proud to be a Victorian, part of a community whose members rose up in vast numbers to help their neighbours. Our collective suffering and our collective outpouring of grief have reverberated around this country and drawn support from our friends overseas. My concerns now focus on those who are preparing to begin anew and those who still have a long way to go before they are healed both physically and emotionally. The response of Victorians has broken records for the number of people involved in service delivery and emergency relief and also in a material sense. The money raised is staggeringly wonderful, and the mountains of donated goods are silent testimony to how much this event has touched us all.

It would be remiss of me not to congratulate an army of really noble people spearheaded by the members of the Eltham Rotary Club and supported by rotary clubs from Diamond Creek, Greensborough, Heidelberg and Bundoora to put on a major fundraising concert that took place on Sunday night in Eltham and where a very large sum of money was raised. It takes the contribution to the bushfire relief fund made by the Eltham Rotary

Club to \$100 000. The energy and focus of so many people in that area was a wonderful sight to behold as the community responded to the event. Everybody involved is to be congratulated. It gave me the opportunity to speak with a number of people two weeks after the fire event, and all I can say — and I need to underscore this — is that the suffering is very deep. Many people need a lot of patience, a lot of tender loving care and an opportunity to tell their story.

I am generally concerned by the fact that such suffering as has been inflicted on individuals, their families, their extended families, their network of friends and the community in general has had to be endured in such a public way when each one of the sufferings — if we look at any one family that has lost not only all their property, all their family treasures and multiple members of their families — in its own right would have been a front-page story. I am very anxious to see their needs triaged, if you like, in a very professional way so that each case is handled by a dedicated case manager and that there is an appropriate degree of sensitivity, so that all this suffering is not lost in our collective response. We must focus on the needs of each and every individual affected by these fires.

News of the most recent death from the fires comes to us from the Alfred hospital, where a victim of the firestorm in Strathewen has succumbed to their burns. My prayers are offered for those still fighting for their lives. My thanks, and I am sure those of all members, go to the magnificent medical staff across the state, especially those in the burns unit of the Alfred hospital, who have been working around the clock to alleviate suffering and save lives.

Councillors at the Shire of Nillumbik have had to deal with a lot of criticism. I want to put on record that a group of new councillors were elected in November last year. They will be doing their very best to review policies that are causing a lot of concern and are the focus of a lot of criticism in terms of land management practices and policies and the strategic direction of the shire in the past. I know that the councillors and their staff are working assiduously over extended hours; I have been to a number of community meetings with them, and I have seen them at work.

This crisis continues, with uncontained fires blazing in many districts, and so I wish strength and courage to those who have already fought fires and those who prepare to fight any fires in coming days.

**Mr FINN** (Western Metropolitan) — I rise to support the motion before the house to offer our condolences to those who have suffered such enormous

loss as a result of the tragedy of the Black Saturday fires 2009. Whilst those dreadful fires fortunately did not physically touch Western Metropolitan Region, I would be very surprised if there was one single person living in that region who has not been touched in some way by what they have seen and what they have heard since 7 February. The people of Melbourne's west have a tremendous capacity for empathy, but the overwhelming tragedy we have witnessed has stretched even those powers.

There is a certain irony in the fact that we are finalising the debate on this motion on Ash Wednesday. I remember another Ash Wednesday, 26 years ago; and what a dreadful and horrific day that was. I recall, 24 hours later, visiting the Riddells Creek fire station and travelling through the Macedon Ranges, and I recall one moment which I am sure will stick in my mind forever. I was in a car being driven down the road. I looked out the windows and saw trees still alight on both sides of the road. I thought to myself at that time, 'What the hell am I doing here?'. How could anybody put themselves in this situation when just 24 hours before — or even less than 24 hours before in some instances — people had been put in that situation when they certainly would have done just about anything to get out?

I remember my father, who was a CFA (Country Fire Authority) volunteer when his health would allow him, fighting the grassfires at Cressy many years ago — back in the late 1960s, if I remember correctly. I can remember my mother baking scones and delivering them to the firefighters. That is one of my earliest memories of involvement in the CFA and of those brave men and women who put themselves on the line to protect life and property in those circumstances.

For my own part I have attempted to empathise, to feel the pain as much as possible, of those who have suffered as a result of these fires. I have tried to put myself in the shoes of those who have lost their homes and who have lost every material possession; those who the next day were left with only the clothes they were wearing as their sole possessions. I must say that I have some difficulty fully coming to grips with what they went through, but when I think about those who lost loved ones, those who lost husbands, those who lost wives, those who lost mothers, those who lost fathers, those who lost children, I really cannot grasp at all the deep pain they must be feeling.

It is a human tragedy that is extraordinarily overwhelming, and there were two occasions on which I must admit I lost control. I was watching what was

occurring with a deep sense of distress, but there were two instances which really got to me.

One was when I was listening to the radio on, I think, the Monday morning after the fires, when Neil Mitchell reported that he had just seen a man collapse as a result of being told that his entire family was missing, presumed dead, in the fires. I must say on hearing that I had no defence against the emotions that overcame me.

The other one was just a few days later — I am sure most members will remember this — when I saw the front page of the *Herald Sun* which was devoted to the children who had died in the fires. I think it was something in the vicinity of 2.5 seconds after I picked up that newspaper that I was in tears. It brings home to us all the very real human tragedy that we have seen. We have lost 210 people in these fires, and that should not be — should never be — just a statistic for the books. These were 210 people who were contributing maybe to the community, and certainly to their own families, but irrespective of the contribution they made, by virtue of their humanity they were important. They were unique human beings; they were human beings that we will never see again, and that is a tragedy that we cannot get away from, irrespective of how hard we might try.

For those who have lost their lives, those of us who pray offer our prayers. We recognise the importance of those who have left us, and we hope and pray that they have found peace in a better place. We offer condolences and support for those who have lost their loved ones. As I said, the strength that will be needed for them to continue is something that, I must say, I find a little difficult to understand entirely, but we certainly give them our support and we wish them all the very best. For many years to come my thoughts will be with people who find themselves in that position.

As I said, it is a human tragedy that we have experienced in these fires, but we have also seen another side of humanity. We have seen human beings who have been at their best. It is very easy in this politics caper sometimes to lose faith in our fellow humans, but when we see people out there — for example, from the CFA, the DSE (Department of Sustainability and Environment), the SES (State Emergency Service), the police, the ambulance service, the Red Cross, the Salvation Army and St Vincent de Paul Society, so many different agencies and so many different people of varying abilities and contributions — really putting in for their fellow human beings, then we can say that it does restore our faith in humanity.

If ever there were true Aussie heroes, it would be the volunteers of the CFA. These are people who set aside one night a week or one night a fortnight to go to their local CFA station and prepare themselves for a day such as 7 February this year. They do it very regularly. This is not something that just pops up every couple of years. This is something they work and prepare for, and of course they were prepared for what happened on Black Saturday. We are very grateful indeed that no CFA volunteers lost their lives, but we certainly offer our condolences and our gratitude to the family of the Canberra firefighter who died fighting the fires and who was buried with due honours in Canberra yesterday.

As has been mentioned by a number of people, most worryingly, this fire event might not be over. This coming Friday we will again have very high temperatures, and we may see again the fires that are still burning taking matters into their own hands, as fires almost seem to have an ability to think for themselves. That is a great fear that I have for this Friday. I wish those who are out on the lines fighting the fires all the very best for this Friday, and our prayers are with them for their success and for their safety.

The community response has been quite astonishing. We have seen many millions of dollars — I think the last figure I heard was in excess of \$150 million — put into the fund for bushfire victims. We have seen the agencies such as I mentioned before — the Red Cross, the Salvos, Vinnies and so on — absolutely flooded with various forms of aid and support for those who need them. I think our community can take a bow for the support that it has shown and I have no doubt will continue to show those who have suffered during the fires.

There are issues that will have to be debated, and of course the royal commission will bring those out. There will be anger, there will be fingers pointed, there will be blame and there will be a good deal of acrimony as to what went wrong, what we could have done and what we should have done. That is something that must happen. It must happen, and it is important that it does happen, but I do not believe now is the time, certainly in this debate, for it to happen.

I finish off by saying to those who mourn, those who are in pain, those who feel loss and those who look to the future with fear and uncertainty that the power of the human spirit will always overcome pain, grief and loss. It might seem impossible at the moment, but it will happen. In this situation human spirit will again triumph, and to ensure that it does we as a community

will stand shoulder to shoulder with those who are suffering as a result of the Black Saturday fires.

**Mr BARBER** (Northern Metropolitan) — It has been two weeks since this tragedy. For all Victorians it has been two weeks of unfolding horror and sadness. We should, though, recall that for many people those two weeks have been taken up with responding to the fires. In that frenetic and unrelenting activity, it is possible that there are many people who have not yet even had a chance to start to come to terms with the scale, breadth and nature of the tragedy. Some of us perhaps have had a bit more opportunity to do so.

My electorate takes in areas such as Arthurs Creek, St Andrews and Strathewen. They are small, tightly knit communities which, in terms of proportion of their population, have suffered some of the worst devastation. The boundary of my electorate also takes in the foothills of Kinglake but not the town of Kinglake itself, which, due to the level of devastation and other concerns, has been pretty much inaccessible over much of the last two weeks. But electoral geography is particularly unimportant when we face a tragedy that has hurt and involved all of Victoria, Australia and people around the world. So I join with the members of this place in offering thanks and commemoration: thanks to those who worked so hard to make this tragedy not as bad as it could have been; and commemoration of those who lost their lives or lost those things that to them represented their life.

My electorate actually starts right at the Melbourne central business district and takes in all the suburbs that spread towards the mountains. It includes bushland and national park area that suffered the fires. I observed that just a few kilometres from the fire front, in the suburbs that form the outer edge of this metropolis, life was going on as normal. Just one or two postcodes away from people whose lives had been devastated were people who were not immediately touched. That is a stark dividing line between the communities of the city and suburbs, and members of those communities who choose a different life, living in and around forests and nature.

Yesterday Mr Pakula made the observation that nature cannot be commanded. That is probably a big part of the philosophy that got me into politics. It is true that in these circumstances nature cannot be commanded, and we have to live within nature when we choose to be part of it.

As anybody who has been to the relief centres knows, the humanitarian relief effort was absolutely amazing; it was incredibly timely and almost completely the best

we could ask for. Within 48 hours of the fires I felt able to go to those places where relief was being offered immediately. I saw something I never expected to see in my own country, which was people being handed a cardboard box with food, clothing and something to cook with, such as a gas bottle. People were being handed the most basic essentials of life. They in fact had become refugees right there, in our country. That is something we see on TV every night happening in other countries; I just never expected to see it in my own country in that way.

Those people did not need to travel far to find sanctuary. They just came a couple of kilometres down from the mountains to the next intact community and received the necessary relief. They did not need, as other refugees have, to travel a long way to an unknown future in order to receive relief, but nevertheless they have had that same experience: the experience of perhaps losing almost everything except their own lives — and that is not to say they did not lose family members.

Within one or two days after the fires, community information sessions were being held. I was able to attend them in Arthurs Creek, St Andrews and Panton Hill. The whole town seem to turn up to each session. A CFA shed or a community hall would hold 100 or 200 people, with another 100 or 200 people standing outside.

Although I had no role to play in the practical and immediate relief effort, I wanted to go to them because I wanted to understand what those communities were experiencing at that exact moment. I wanted to hear the information they were being given in the way they were hearing it and to understand their immediate reactions, but I also experienced something else they were experiencing. As Mr Finn said, it is very hard to put yourself in the shoes of those individuals, but in one small way I did experience what they were experiencing — that is, the relief of seeing friends, recognisable faces, which I did at each of the three meetings. There was a sudden feeling of relief to know that that person was alive. Immediately that feeling was tinged with sadness when I found out that other friends had not survived or that my friends had lost many friends.

It was that feeling of relief that caused me to move towards a particular friend of mine, someone who has always been ahead of me in my group. He is someone I have always looked up to socially and intellectually and also, as it happens, with regard to stature. He is quite a lot bigger than me, so I always have to look up to him. I went to him; he grabbed hold of me and hugged me like

a child would, looking for comfort from me. When it was someone I had always looked up to, it was a startling experience.

The information being given to the community at these meetings came from the CFA (Country Fire Authority), the police, the local council, DHS (Department of Human Services) and in some cases from utility providers — electricity, telephone and so forth. All the people who stood up at those meetings to speak to their communities had an aura of calm, confidence and compassion, and you could easily see the effects that had on those communities.

The word ‘heroism’ has been used a lot in the past couple of weeks. Having known some people who were not people of great physical bravery but nevertheless were very brave, I think the essence of heroism is simply to take responsibility in a situation. Whether the taking of that responsibility required or forced you to take an act of physical bravery or whether it was in some other form, that is the essence of the heroism that has been on display. The question for us as members of Parliament may be: where are we willing to take on responsibility for what happens next in relation to this tragedy?

There have been some in the community who have wanted to jump to conclusions about this fire, and we have read that via the media. The media reporting has been quite responsible, given the obvious great need for information. At a time like this we have to understand that everybody will have a great hunger for information, because they also are trying to understand. We might quibble with individual bits of reporting, but overall, given the difficulty journalists would have had in delivering information in a timely fashion and given the necessity of that reporting, I think we did okay.

I did something else to develop my understanding of what had happened — that is, I took the opportunity to fly in a helicopter across this fire area which, until very recently, was inaccessible and where, correctly, public access is still not being encouraged or allowed. I started at the source of the fire, and I followed it in the same manner that the fire itself developed.

Along with all the other information that has been provided to us via the media and through other forms, I was able to get a treetop view of the scale of the tragedy, the variability in how it played out and the particular effects it has had on communities. What I saw was something that I again never thought I would see in my own country. I saw something very similar to what I saw when I flew into East Timor about nine months after the independence vote and the resulting

destruction there — that is, endless homes and towns and communities consisting of blackness and twisted metal. It is necessary to have a visual understanding to refer to during the future debate which will be comprised largely of statistics, time lines and descriptions of a whole range of biophysical phenomena.

I have been told that the fire danger index for this particular day was anything from 200 to 300 or 400 in official announcements, so there is some difficulty in understanding exactly what that might have been at any particular place in the fire. A fire danger index of 50 is considered to be extreme fire weather — almost so extreme that it is no longer practicable to fight the fire. I have been told that the fire danger index was 140 during Ash Wednesday, so clearly we are now trying to understand something that we have never faced before.

People have expressed their determination to rebuild, and rebuilding brick by brick is one way to do it. At the national day of mourning commemoration in Melbourne one speaker used a different analogy — that is, regeneration or how native bush regenerates from fire. When you go to the part of the fire area where I believe, from observation, the fire was at its absolute peak — that is, the day was hottest, the wind was strongest and the fire had had time to build up, just before the weather changed and turned it into another direction, at Steels Creek — you will see a complete incineration. There is nothing left. That is not the case in every part of the fire area, but in that particular area there is nothing left but black — black trees, black ground — with, as I understand it, one home standing and little white trails of bare earth, the roads and driveways of people's properties.

The bush has evolved over millennia to recover from fires, and so for trees and so forth the recovery process is built in, but with a human community living in that nature, the path is not so certain. So, yes, we need to rebuild bricks, mortar and infrastructure, and those are just the most basic things we would expect — and they will be very important. But there is also for us a question of how lives and communities are to be rebuilt.

People have been able to talk about the way humans have risen to the occasion, and they have been able to point as some small comfort to the human spirit and the best of humanity that has been on display in a tragedy that has come to be about our shared humanity. There are great differences between us in the community, but at the basis is our shared humanity. It is good that we can find some small comfort out of what we saw of our humanity, but for me it is still not enough. It is a

comfort, but it is not enough for me to know what to do or say in the face of a tragedy like this. There must be more — more reason for why this is so.

In my thinking I was reminded of something one of my political leaders said at a time which to her was one of enormous privation and in fact captivity: she said we need a vision that exceeds our pain. We need a vision for what life, humanity and community is all about. Because our pain at this time is so great, that vision also needs to be great — and much greater. We owe it to the communities most affected to listen to them and understand what their vision is so that we can help them to achieve it, and if we can do that then I think and hope that things will be okay.

**Ms PULFORD** (Western Victoria) — On this rather cool and drizzly February Melbourne day, with a heavy heart I express my deepest sympathies to those who have lost so much during this savage bushfire season. While we grapple to find words that can convey the depths of our feelings of sadness and sympathy — and also to find those words of thanks and admiration — fires still burn in parts of the state. There are six fires still to be contained, and the weather forecasters tell us that on Friday we will again experience high temperatures and strong winds.

Much of our focus has rightly been on the horrendous fires that swept through many Victorian communities on 7 February, but there have also been great losses experienced before that terrible day and since. To those who lost family members, friends and loved ones; to all who lost homes, businesses, farms, possessions or beloved pets, I am truly sorry for your loss. As a member of this Parliament, like 39 other members in this chamber and no doubt 88 in the other place, I will work tirelessly to restore, where possible, what you have lost.

History will record 7 February as one of the darkest days Victoria has experienced. There are 210 confirmed deaths, a reported 30 people still missing, many thousands made homeless and many livelihoods destroyed. For many years to come we will all recall where we were on that day and remember the smell of smoke, the darkening skies and that chill you get in your bones on a hot day when those deadly northerly winds start to blow.

In my electorate of Western Victoria Region there were fires. Some of these fires defied the usual description of bushfire by roaring through open spaces in Horsham and close to quarter-acre blocks. As in Narre Warren and Bendigo, the fire in Horsham came right into town, into the suburbs. These are not the sorts of areas where

families have typically had the need for a fire plan. In Horsham homes were destroyed — a devastating loss by any measure. The iconic and much-loved golf club was destroyed. It was a sentimental place for many as it was a favourite venue to celebrate a wedding.

Mandy Kirsopp saw the fire burn right up to the back of her house. The trees in her backyard were on fire, as was her shed. As the fire approached and was only metres from her home a grader came through and laid a firebreak between her burning shed and her house. This act saved her home and the homes of her neighbours. Then the grader and its mystery driver were gone, moving on to save other homes and other property. Mandy has searched for that driver to say thank you but her search has been unsuccessful. In her search people in her community have refused any recognition for their acts of selflessness and have rather hoped that the community response and the banding together of the community will be what is remembered. Whoever you are, Mandy says, ‘Thank you’.

Victoria has many anonymous heroes. At Camperdown a blaze blackened almost 1300 hectares of land east of the town, burning through pasture and destroying hundreds of kilometres of fencing. In Coleraine more than 230 firefighters were involved in controlling a blaze that required over 35 CFA (Country Fire Authority) tankers, two aircraft and assistance from the Department of Sustainability and Environment and forest industry brigades. As my colleagues from Western Victoria Region have said, John Smeets was seriously injured. He is in the Alfred hospital with significant burns to his body, sustained when trying to assist a neighbour in the blaze. I wish him and others injured a very speedy return to health.

A wind change saved Coleraine from a fate similar to that of other Victorian towns destroyed by fire. The thing that is hardest to understand about all this devastation is the randomness of the way a fire takes its victims. A wind change that saves one community can imperil another. Where one home is spared, another is destroyed.

This bushfire season still threatens. At around 3 o’clock on Monday afternoon a fire started near Daylesford, on the side of the Ballan-Daylesford Road. It started as a small grassfire but spread rapidly. More than 40 brigades and over 195 firefighters were called to battle that blaze. Some of those firefighters were injured. This fire is almost under control. Firefighters have this week been battling a blaze started by a lightning strike 4 kilometres from Aireys Inlet in the Angahook-Lorne State Park. CFA crews have been

working tirelessly to establish control lines around this blaze.

In the last few weeks Victorian hearts have broken. People have been dislocated from their homes and communities. Those who suffered terribly in previous bushfires have relived their experiences 2, 3, 10 or, in the case of Ash Wednesday, 26 years later. The scars people have from those fires, both physical and emotional, have been laid bare in recent weeks. But perhaps these people can show the residents of those communities so devastated by the fires of 7 February from Coleraine and Horsham to communities including Kinglake and Marysville and those in Gippsland that there is hope, that there will be days better than today and that time will heal much of their pain. Perhaps they can find cause for hope in the response of our community to this devastation.

**Sitting suspended 1.00 p.m. until 2.03 p.m.**

**Ms PULFORD** — Perhaps the victims of these devastating bushfires can find cause for hope in the community’s response to this devastation: the many tales of heroism and ordinary people doing extraordinary things; the generous response of our community from those who are employed in our emergency services; the local councils with which we work so very closely and their staff; the bureaucrats who have been redeployed across the state to the area of greatest need; to those staffing the relief centres; and to those working at the Department of Sustainability and Environment call centre in Ballarat that I visited with Minister Holding on 12 February. This call centre runs the bushfire hotline year-round, with a phone bank of some 28 phones with support from back-up call centres in Victoria and Western Australia.

This call centre took some 20 000 calls in a 24-hour period. On 12 February, when we visited, many of the fires were under control and the weather was providing some relief. The calls we heard were offers of assistance by people wanting to know where to take their goods and where to make donations. There was generous response from our volunteers — those working through organisations such as the Salvation Army and the Red Cross and those fundraising at their schools, in their workplaces and in their backyards. The volunteer effort has been remarkable.

A friend of mine volunteered at the Red Cross call centre. She said people were queuing downstairs, waiting for the other volunteers’ voices to tire so they could go and do their bit.

I was humbled to see the truckloads of donated goods leaving my home town bound for fire-affected areas. Mr Barber's comments about the need for us to meet the most basic requirements of people who have been affected by these fires reminded me of listening to ABC radio, as we all were, and hearing the call for not only shoes and clothes or emergency housing but the most basic things like toiletries, such as toothbrushes and hairbrushes. It struck me at that moment just how complete the loss of possessions had been for these displaced people.

Like others I have been touched by the many stories of very gracious acts of kindness. My hope for those who have been displaced by the fires, who have lost people very dear to them and who have lost possessions is that they can take some comfort from the generosity of our community.

I would like to make special mention of the firefighters from my electorate who are assisting with blazes across the state — firefighters, personnel and appliances from CFA region 4 at Casterton; region 5 at Hamilton; region 6 at Colac; region 7 at Geelong; region 14 at Melton; region 15 at Ballarat; region 16 at Ararat; and region 17 at Horsham.

Words cannot convey what it is that our emergency services and volunteer firefighters do in times of crisis like this. Amid this devastation there has been a great awakening of the best of our people.

For those who have lost a parent, a child, a brother, a sister, a friend, a neighbour or workmate, for those who are experiencing an excruciating wait for news about a missing loved one, for those who have been injured and those who have lost possessions, for those who, like my family in Toolangi, have slept in shifts over many, many days, waiting with frayed nerves for the fire front to approach from not one but two directions, and for those who have suffered modest losses but enormous stress, there are many, many thousands of others.

To those people I say: we will be with you through every step of your recovery, and we will learn from this so that Victoria never again experiences such a profound loss.

**Mrs COOTE** (Southern Metropolitan) — All of us in this building, in this chamber and in the other place have been profoundly touched by the bushfires that ravaged our state on Saturday, 7 February. The poignancy of the collective speeches in this place, with the heart-wrenching stories of your constituents and from your electorates, makes me proud to be at one

with you and of you. So many of us gave donations and assisted where we could, but we felt totally inadequate.

As has been demonstrated over the past two days of condolence speeches, all of us have a story, all of us have had an experience. Christine Fyffe, the member for Evelyn in another place, and Fran Bailey, the federal member for McEwen, became the human political leaders in the Yarra Valley. Their pragmatic assistance, human contact and genuine compassion made them the heroes of our profession.

I was asked by Christine Fyffe to help at the Yarra Glen fire relief centre, where I established a children's corner. I entertained the children while their parents were being processed for accommodation, for identification, for clothes, for food and for life's other essentials. The children did not need to hear or see their parents so visibly upset, and the parents needed to be able to concentrate on taking the first steps towards rebuilding their lives. They were really grateful for the assistance that I was able to give them.

The children's corner, with its brightly coloured paper, plasticine and bubbles, became a hub at the centre. Everyone was able to focus around the children — workers, parents and volunteers alike. It was an honour to be present at such a facility. People from the Red Cross, Salvation Army, local shire council, Centrelink, Anchor, police, the CFA (Country Fire Authority), Westpac and Optus, along with counsellors and a multitude of other volunteers and specialists, showed the essence of what it is to be Australian.

But my story is about Emma. I have here the drawing that Emma did for me on the Tuesday after the fires. Emma is seven years old. She is one of four children, one of whom has special needs. She told me that her house had burnt down, her school had burnt down and five of her friends were burnt to death. She told me about how the family had fled their burning home and travelled through a tunnel of fire, how their car had been engulfed by flames and that she was worried about her pet guinea pig.

Her parents — young, gentle, stunned and kind — explained that the father had given up work late last year to assist with the new twins and to complete the additions to their home, the house that burnt to the ground. Their concerns were for others worse off than themselves.

Emma and her parents encapsulate for me the intangible that is the Australian spirit. Emma's story is etched in my heart. I was humbled by Emma and her family. I hope they rebuild their lives and that we as a

community enable them and all the other survivors to do just that in their own dignified way.

We in this place are the custodians of Emma's future. Her wellbeing and that of her family and thousands of other families both now and in the future are in our hands. This tragedy must never be repeated, and we must never fail them.

**Mr SOMYUREK** (South Eastern Metropolitan) — I rise to offer my condolences to those who have been affected by the tragedy that was the Black Saturday bushfires. These fires are unquestionably the worst natural disaster in Australia's history, with at least 209 people tragically losing their lives, 350 000 hectares of land having been burnt out and 2000 homes being destroyed — and consequently hundreds of people being left homeless.

In fact hearing these homeless people being described as displaced people and/or refugees really brings home the level of this disaster, as these terms are not normally associated with Australia. They are terms usually used to describe the plight of people in other, less fortunate places in the world, certainly not in Australia. Before Black Saturday I would never have thought Australians living in Australia would ever have been described as displaced people or refugees. I guess in a way we lost our innocence on Black Saturday.

At times like this it is difficult to find words which accurately capture the scale and scope of the destruction and devastation caused to individuals and entire communities by this tragedy. A great human tragedy is probably the closest I can come to describing it.

I would like to extend my condolences and deepest sympathy to the families and loved ones of those killed in the Black Saturday bushfires and to those who suffered injury and lost property and possessions as a result of these fires.

I would also like to offer praise to our courageous firefighters and emergency services personnel who, at great risk to themselves, fought these fires to protect fellow Victorians. Mind you, not all the firefighters were Victorians; there were a lot of firefighters from interstate and overseas. I acknowledge their courage and sacrifice. I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the family of the Canberra firefighter who tragically lost his life fighting these fires in Victoria.

I commend the many volunteers who rallied around the victims of the bushfires during this time of great need, and the generosity of the people of Australia for donating large sums of money through the bushfire appeal fund.

Finally, these bushfires were a great human tragedy. For those affected by this tragedy the pain will continue for many years. The challenge for those of us not directly affected by the bushfires is to maintain the resolve and the generosity needed to rebuild these communities long after they are out of the national spotlight. I commend the motion to the house.

**Ms HARTLAND** (Western Metropolitan) — I want to thank everybody who has already contributed to the debate on this condolence motion. The raw emotion that has been expressed and demonstrated in this chamber over the past two days has indicated that sense of helplessness that we all have felt about this issue.

I want also to express my admiration for and gratitude to the men and women who have been fighting the bushfires during this extreme and horrific fire season. I want to extend my thanks particularly to the thousands of volunteers who have sacrificed so much to assist in the protection of lives, homes and possessions. Many of those volunteer firefighters lost their homes; their dedication is simply astonishing.

I want to also give thanks to the many business operators who have allowed their employees to be CFA (Country Fire Authority) firefighters and who have continued to pay them, sometimes at great cost to their own small businesses.

In the last few days I have run into friends who work for inner city councils who have been to the devastated council areas and assisted. Local government has been playing a major role in lending resources and personnel.

We have seen many examples of small businesses in a number of the fire areas that have been assisting residents of their community in whatever way they can. In the past two weeks I have found it interesting that whoever organised the functions I have attended ensured there were prayers and collections. After the memorial service on Sunday I went to the Sunshine mosque where they had special prayers for the five victims and took up a collection. I would like to thank all the individuals and organisations who provided urgent assistance to people, wildlife, livestock and domestic pets that suffered as a result of the bushfires. We can talk about how the tragedy has united us as a nation, but it has also united all sectors of the community. Small gestures from community groups and individuals, such as giving blood and donating money, have been made on a grand scale.

There is a great sorrow across the country at the scale of the losses suffered by many communities throughout Victoria. Having grown up in Morwell, I know many of

the towns in Gippsland that have been affected. They are places I know well, such as Churchill, Jeeralang and Bunyip. I still have family members living in Traralgon and Morwell. They have had friends who have been directly affected by the fires. While I have never gone through a bushfire myself — and I am grateful for that — I think we have all been given an insight into the fear and suffering that so many Victorians have gone through over the last few weeks. We must ensure we assist for the long term, as the recovery will be slow and it will be a painful process for many people and many communities.

The Brumby government's quick response to the needs of the community is to be applauded. I think we have all been completely overwhelmed by the scale and ferocity of these fires and the sheer heartbreak they have caused. We can talk about the fact that we are now a community in mourning. We are not all directly affected, but we are in mourning together. We are in mourning over the more than 200 lives that have been lost and the destruction of thousands of homes. We are also mourning the loss of our feeling of safety in our own homes and the loss of being connected with a belief that natural disasters of this scale do not happen to us. We are also mourning and recognising the loss of a stable climate and the beginning of dangerous climate change.

When I was writing my contribution I found it very difficult to know what to say. I thought about the seven stages of grief. Having lost family members in different circumstances, I understand what that grief means. We have that initial stage of shock or disbelief, and we are not quite sure. Many of us have already gone through this. It is that feeling of helplessness. The second stage is denial. We feel that this cannot be happening to us and it cannot be real. No, not this person — not my friend. Surely this person who is still missing will turn up somewhere. This has been a difficult stage for the people waiting for the confirmation of the death of family and friends. My heart goes out to them.

The third stage is anger. Anger is a natural response, but we need to be aware of it in ourselves and stop ourselves from lashing out at others. Anger obviously can destroy relationships. It is also an incredibly difficult time for the victims of the fire to deal with the anger of others. In those first days I think we probably all had conversations with friends about this issue. I heard a lot of people say, 'Why didn't they have insurance? Why did they try to rescue their horses? Did they really think they could save their house? What were they doing in a car? They know better than that — they are experienced in fire. Why didn't they have a bunker? Why didn't they get out early? What were they

thinking of living in the bush? What were they ever thinking of, full stop?'. We have to recognise that people made choices in the heat of the moment, in circumstances that were so horrible that we simply cannot put ourselves in their shoes and so unimaginable that I wonder how anybody could prepare themselves. Some of them are not dealing with their loss, but somehow there is blame — and I think that has to stop. These people are not to blame for what has happened.

I must admit I felt anger myself; I think it comes out of a feeling of helplessness. What could I have done? What could I have done to help people? In many circumstances, there was nothing we could have done. Over the last two years one of the things I have raised in this Parliament is the need for an emergency alerting system. I am so pleased that just yesterday the Rudd federal government announced that it will bring in such an emergency alerting system. That is a part of the hope.

The fourth stage is about bargaining. We bargain. This stage is more about people directly affected by the loss of their loved ones or by the injury of a loved one. People make deals with their god. They promise to be a better person if only the situation will go away.

The fifth stage of mourning is guilt. You can recognise this in yourself if you have thought, 'If only I had insisted that they left and if only I had spent more time with them when I had the chance'. There also can be a more general feeling of, 'I feel terrible about the sort of climate my friend's children will live in'. It is a very difficult stage to go through, and it can often lead to the sixth stage of mourning, which is depression.

I am worried about what will happen when so many in our community get to this stage in their mourning, which can involve long periods of sadness and reflection and may also include instances of real clinical depression. I am particularly concerned about communities that have been deeply impacted by the fires — the families living in caravans and the families returning to streets that have been wiped out. We have to be ready to deal with depression in our community which is linked to or caused by this disaster. The good news is that there is now more awareness about depression. It is not hidden; it is not something that is shameful. I wholeheartedly support the government's promise of a case manager for each family, because it will help families going through the difficult stages in the mourning process. I am aware from a number of networks that I belong to that the ads have already gone out to a number of different community organisations, to make sure those case managers are employed as quickly as possible.

A great deal of sensitivity will be needed with people who may be in a fragile state when others who have moved faster through the grieving process want them to buck up and move on with their lives. People are already saying, 'I am sick of the bushfires. I do not want to deal with it anymore', and unfortunately the fires are not yet over. People suffering from depression will find it difficult to deal with things like insurance claims, going back to their jobs, looking after their kids, finding somewhere to live and even contributing to the royal commission; but if their depression is no more than a stage of the grieving process, their normal functionality will return gradually. We just have to look after them in the meantime. We have to be understanding and patient.

The final stage of mourning is acceptance and hope. We may never be the same, but we will get to the stage where we can see a way forward, both individually and as a community. This stage comes on gradually and not necessarily in a linear way. People may lapse back into depression from time to time.

My hope is that this disaster brings us together and that we move on with constructive changes that will give us reason to hope for a different outcome should we ever find ourselves facing another 47-degree day with a northerly wind. My hope is based on the incredible community spirit I have seen, and which I think everybody in this house has expressed, and the selfless and generous actions that ordinary people have taken to help others in need.

There have been too many instances to mention, but I felt it for the first time the Monday morning after the fires at my regular blood donation, when the place was suddenly swamped with donors. When I left the blood bank 100 people were queued up because it was the one practical, tangible thing people could do. I am sure a community filled with such people as these has reason to return to hope.

**Hon. T. C. THEOPHANOUS** (Northern Metropolitan) — These fires have brought home to me and my family just how vulnerable and how precious life is. When I added my thoughts to those of so many others on the steps of Parliament I wrote that whatever our trials and challenges were, and whatever our pain might be, it is as nought to the pain and suffering of those around us who have lost loved ones, children, parents, grandparents, family and friends. Therefore, my deepest sympathy goes to those who have lost loved ones or who are struggling to recover from their injuries — injuries incurred often because they tried to save others. The pain and suffering and the anguish they feel is shared by us all.

As my family and I reflected on the enormity of what had happened, and as I joined many others in prayer, I could not help but reflect on the vulnerability of the human condition. I believe that the greatest gift God gives us in our human existence is the gift of free will, and I agree with the great existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, that free will is not a gift we can reject. We are forced to make choices; it is part of being human. But with free will comes anguish: the anguish of making often difficult choices. Sometimes they are life and death choices. And so it was with so many people who had to make such choices in the lead-up to 7 February: to stay and defend or to leave and seek refuge elsewhere.

It is impossible to imagine the anguish these people went through in making these life and death decisions. But this anguish, this caring, this concern for others is part of the human condition; indeed it is what makes us human. But the anguish does not only occur in making our decisions, there is also the anguish that follows if we get it wrong. My heart goes out to those who must feel such enormous anguish at having lost loved ones and who perhaps ask themselves the question over and over again, 'Should I have chosen otherwise? Should I have left rather than stayed?'. We must support these people because as humans we do not always get it right.

That is why the royal commission will be so important. We must ask ourselves as a community how we can do it better and whether we made the right policy choices in the first place. As law-makers and policy-makers our anguish should not only be the anguish of seeing such suffering in the community, but for me and I think for all of us it should include the anguish of whether we got it right and whether we can do it better in the future, because with free will, choice and anguish also comes responsibility for those choices. If anguish is part of the human condition, then we should embrace it in seeking new solutions, but we should also accept responsibility for the policy choices already made and those to come. We must take responsibility for the healing and for the rebuilding of communities and of shattered lives.

My religious convictions bring me to the view that all life is precious and to be valued. My philosophical reflections tell me that what is precious about it is our free will. But, as I said, with free will comes anguish and responsibility. To quote Jean-Paul Sartre:

The existentialists say at once that man is anguish. What this means is this: the man who involved himself and who realizes that he is not only the person he chooses to be, but also a law-maker who is, at the same time, choosing all mankind as well as himself, cannot escape the feeling of his total and deep responsibility.

None of us can escape our total and deep responsibilities arising out of this tragedy.

In life we sometimes face situations so challenging that they are hard to believe. Whether these situations are man-made or a result of the power of nature and the elements, as humans we must make moral, ethical and strategic choices. In making these choices we do not just have to think about ourselves, because when we see our family or our friends or even people we do not know in the community suffering, we too suffer; that is what makes us human. However unfair our suffering might seem, however brutal nature has been, however difficult the circumstances we face, ultimately it is how we account for ourselves in times of such adversity, how we pick ourselves up and confront the adversity, that demonstrates what makes us human.

I admire deeply the courage of so many people who have had to deal with this pain — the loss of their own property, the loss of so many community facilities and the loss of so many lives. They seem to be the real heroes. They and we must make ourselves better as individuals and as a community by now dealing with the challenges put before us. To quote Sartre once more:

Man is not the sum of what he has already, but rather the sum of what he does not yet have, of what he could have —

or of what he could be.

When I reflect on what we could be as a society, I think all of those who perished and all of those who are now suffering would want us to build a better society from the tragedy. This, in effect, is the real meaning of our freedom.

When I first came into this house with great hope and with such a desire to make a difference, I quoted something that social theorist R. H. Tawney said about social justice. Tawney's view was that what made a just society was the extent to which the people within it had access to the values of the culture. If people were excluded from access to good education, health services and other community services, then they were never truly equal parts of that community.

And so as we now look at our obligations in rebuilding those shattered communities, we should reflect on our responsibilities to do so because what is great about the broader Victorian community is that we do not forget about smaller communities that are suffering or that need rebuilding as a result of tragedy.

I want to especially mention my admiration for the role played by all those who rallied to help and will help in

the future in rebuilding — the firefighters, the police and other emergency services personnel, the medical staff, the volunteers and all who will take part in the massive task of rebuilding those communities.

I especially want to make mention of the Premier, whom I deeply admire for the sensitive and thoughtful way in which he has managed the tragedy and the open way in which he accepts that we can and will learn to do it better. I also want to make mention of my friend and parliamentary colleague Danielle Green, the member for Yan Yean in the Legislative Assembly, who has shown great courage in helping her community. I mention also Ben Hardman, the member for Seymour in the Legislative Assembly, whose community was so badly affected.

We all have our own personal stories. Mine includes my wonderful wife, Rita, who, despite all the challenges in her life and needs of her family, began collecting money at the pharmacy where she works. When enough was collected it was used to purchase toiletries, pharmaceuticals and even much-wanted cosmetics, at cost. Together we took them up to the Whittlesea staging area, and she was so thrilled when the female looking after such donations said to her, 'This is just what we need. We will take these straight up the mountain'. It was a moment of happiness for her.

As humans in a community, we are all affected by such a tragedy — but tragedy also teaches us things. It has taught me how lucky I and my family are to be alive, and that no matter how difficult things seem, you can learn and grow from them. This, too, is part of our freedom. To quote Sartre one last time:

Freedom is what you do with what's been done to you.

The challenge in adversity, whatever that adversity might be, is to make a decent account of ourselves and to grow from that adversity. I admire the courage and the strength of those who, as a result of this unbelievable tragedy, are expressing this great human spirit in ways that bring out the best in us all.

Finally, I offer my condolences to all of those who have lost loved ones in this tragedy.

**The PRESIDENT** — The wording of this motion contains almost everything I would want to say about this tragedy, so I will simply supplement it with my own few humble words.

I am proud to be a Victorian and an Australian. Like all of us over the last couple of weeks I have witnessed the very best of all of us, particularly the volunteers from far and wide, nationally and internationally. Out of that

tragedy I have to say it has been uplifting to watch the efforts those people have put in under extraordinarily difficult circumstances.

I want to congratulate not just our community leaders but our political leaders as well. Each and every one of them has contributed to the sort of society we feel we have, we want to have, and we are proud of. I particularly want to say a few words about our Premier. There is a saying: 'Cometh the hour, cometh the man'. He did just that, and I am extremely proud to be associated with John Brumby.

**Motion agreed to in silence, honourable members showing unanimous agreement by standing in their places.**

**House adjourned 2.42 p.m.**