

Mr. BOLTE (Hampden). - I had no desire to make my maiden effort this side of Christmas, but on travelling in the country I find the fire danger is so great this year that those of us who represent country electorates must stress the importance of fire control and prevention. I have had practical experience of fire-brigade work. I am president of the Meredith brigade, and was also a lieutenant, so I know the problems confronting fire brigades. The main one is that the brigades have insufficient power. I maintain that if rural brigades were given more power they would be effective fire-fighting units. The main trouble in the past has been that until this year they were permitted to burn off only after 4 o'clock in the afternoon. As honorable members know, after 4 o'clock grass will not burn sufficiently well to provide effective breaks. This year the time limit has been altered to 2 o'clock. That is an improvement, I admit, but it is still unsatisfactory.

The chief reason why I am stressing this point is that in the past all the financial help for the Meredith brigade came from local graziers and land owners, and it was really an effective fire-fighting unit. The people were interested in it, and they knew that the money they subscribed was wisely spent. They were supporting it on their own behalf and were allowed to exercise their own judgment. To-day they are not allowed to do so, and they experience frustration at every point of the compass. They first have to obtain a permit from the regional officer. I admit that regional officers have done a good job in the past, but why not allow the local land owners and others who want to burn firebreaks to do the work in their own way? It is said that there is risk in burning breaks before a certain hour of the day, but would not a land owner make sure of burning both safely and efficiently? I am sure honorable members will agree that there is very little risk when those who have a stake in the country are doing the work.

I appeal to all honorable members to try to bring about greater freedom for the brigades. I understand that the Chief Secretary has received deputations urging him to give the rural brigades more power. I am entirely in support of the idea, and I think every member who represents a rural area must also support it. To show how farcical the position is I would point out that there are brigades with effective equipment and plenty of man power, but without proper authority, while on the other hand there are the railway people, who burn any day and all day, and incidentally have a two-foot break and a man with a knapsack pump to stop a fire if it gets away. Furthermore, the railways have burned off on a proclaimed day. They are a law unto themselves. The land owner and the fire brigades in the country are not permitted to do such things.

Another matter needing attention is the providing of sufficient petrol supplies at strategic points throughout country areas. I represent the electorate of Hampden, a large proportion of which in 1944 was burned out. Unless honorable members have experienced what it means to be burned out by a fierce bush fire, I am certain they cannot understand the troubles and trials of the people who are the victims. This year is a record for growth of grass, and I maintain that it can be a record for fires unless something is done quickly. Inside three weeks the whole country will be in a condition to burn, and when I say "burn" I mean it. The fire would start in the Grampians and end at the coast. I ask the Chief Secretary to give the rural fire brigades as soon as possible the authority they so badly need.

I am making this earnest appeal not merely to members of this House, but to every individual in Victoria. As well as the loss involved to land owners by extensive fires, there is also the possible loss of life. Further, production in Victoria suffers, as well as in Australia, and the effect goes even farther than that, because the starving people of the world are dependent on Australian production this year. If the State is not to be burnt out from one end to the other the Government

must act quickly and effectively. I am glad that I have got these views off my chest, because I believe that if they are acted on good may be accomplished.