

**PARLIAMENT OF VICTORIA**

**PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES  
(HANSARD)**

**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**

**FIFTY-SIXTH PARLIAMENT**

**FIRST SESSION**

**Tuesday, 24 February 2009**

**(Extract from book 2)**

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The Hon. R. J. HULLS (from 30 July 2007)

The Hon. J. W. THWAITES (to 30 July 2007)

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Mr P. J. RYAN

**Deputy Leader of The Nationals:**

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Lim, Mr Muy Hong	Clayton	ALP			

<sup>1</sup> Resigned 6 August 2007

<sup>2</sup> Elected 15 September 2007

<sup>3</sup> Resigned 2 June 2008

<sup>4</sup> Elected 28 June 2008

<sup>5</sup> Elected 15 September 2007

<sup>6</sup> Resigned 6 August 2007



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## Tuesday, 24 February 2009

**The SPEAKER (Hon. Jenny Lindell) took the chair at 2.05 p.m. and read the prayer.**

### DISTINGUISHED VISITORS

**The SPEAKER** — Order! I acknowledge the presence of the Speaker and the Clerk of the Legislative Assembly of New South Wales.

### BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

#### Standing orders

**Mr BATCHELOR** (Minister for Community Development) — By leave, I move:

That so much of standing orders be suspended to allow:

- (1) on Tuesday and Wednesday, 24 and 25 February 2009:
  - (a) no business other than the consideration of a motion relating to the Victorian bushfires; and
  - (b) the suspension of the 10.00 p.m. interruption under standing order 32;
- (2) on Thursday, 26 February 2009:
  - (a) the suspension of question time; and
  - (b) a motion setting a government business program to be moved;
- (3) on Wednesday, 11 March 2009, the opposition to propose the matter of public importance.

**Motion agreed to.**

### CONDOLENCES

#### Bushfires: Victoria

**Mr BRUMBY** (Premier) — I move:

That the house:

- (1) extends its condolences and deepest sympathy to the families and loved ones of those killed in the recent bushfires;
- (2) grieves for those who suffered injury and who lost their homes, property and personal possessions;
- (3) praises the work of firefighters and emergency services personnel from Victoria, other parts of Australia and overseas for their courage and sacrifice in fighting the fires and protecting our community;

- (4) expresses its deep gratitude to the many volunteers and community members who have supported friends, neighbours and communities at this time of great need;
- (5) sincerely thanks the people of Australia for their incredible generosity and support to the affected communities, particularly through the bushfire appeal fund; and
- (6) pledges to work with communities and all levels of government to rebuild fire-affected communities at the earliest opportunity.

As I rise to offer my condolences to all those affected by the horrific bushfires of Black Saturday, firefighters are continuing to rise to new challenges across our state, devastated communities are literally rising from the ashes and the support of Victorians and Australians is rising to new heights. Today I offer my deepest sympathies, as does the whole Parliament, to the family and friends of those who have lost their lives in these terrible bushfires. Our hearts, of course, go out to all of those who were injured, many of them seriously, and we hope for those people that their recovery is quick and that they can soon begin the process of reclaiming their lives.

To all of those Victorians and Victorian families who lost their homes and, in many cases, everything they own, and to all of those people who lost their businesses and their livelihoods in the bushfires, again, our thoughts are with you at this painful time. We share in your shock and your grief, and we share in the anguish of the many communities which have been affected by this tragedy. Today I pledge that our government will continue to do everything within its power to support you in rebuilding your lives and your communities, because we will rebuild these communities.

Our state is in mourning, and our resolve as Victorians is being severely tested. Over these past two weeks, as I have said on many occasions, we have seen the very worst of times. There have been moments in the last two weeks when you could not imagine times that would be more bleak, more dark, more desolate or more despairing, but over these last two weeks we have also seen the very best of human nature. The Black Saturday bushfires are without parallel in our history. Never have so many people lost their lives to the forces of nature in this country and never have so many people been left homeless and dispossessed because of bushfires. At least 209 people have perished and tragically, as we know, that toll may yet rise further; more than 2000 homes and farmhouses have been destroyed and countless businesses have been wiped out; over 350 000 hectares of land have been burnt out and over 1500 farming structures, including dairies and

wool, hay and machinery sheds, have been destroyed; and of course entire communities have been lost.

But amidst all this great tragedy and loss I believe we all, as members of Parliament, have seen and heard things that will inspire Victorians and Australians for years and decades to come. We have seen unbelievable self-sacrifice — firefighters who remained steadfast while their own homes burnt. Again I know we have all met Country Fire Authority firefighters who have done this across the state. We have seen unbelievable courage — ordinary Victorians who, when the time called, did extraordinary things in the most testing of circumstances. We have seen mateship — thousands of volunteers, in fact tens of thousands of volunteers, supporting their communities and doing whatever they can to help. And we have seen incredible resilience and determination — communities coming together and seeking to rebuild in the face of overwhelming grief and loss.

In the last two weeks we have also seen complete bipartisanship across this Parliament. I have been on many visits with the Leader of the Opposition and/or the Leader of The Nationals. We had many members of Parliament here signing the message book, and on Sunday we had an event, the national day of mourning, where again all our political leaders were united. All these qualities — self-sacrifice, courage, mateship and determination — are great qualities to have come to the fore, and they are qualities that give us all hope for the future.

As we know, Victoria is no stranger to bushfires. The devastation of Black Friday in 1939 and Ash Wednesday in 1983 is etched into our memory. I certainly recall the events of 1983; my father recalls the events of 1939. But even those terrible events, horrific as they were, and the climatic events that caused them, were eclipsed by the scale, the speed and the severity of Black Saturday. I think it is true to say that on 7 February this year Victoria was quite literally baking. Temperatures hit the 48 degrees Celsius mark in regional Victoria — I think that is around 120 degrees on the old scale. Melbourne set a new record — not just for Melbourne; we now have the record for the hottest day experienced by any Australian capital city — of 46.4 degrees Celsius. In many of the suburbs the temperature hit 48 degrees — I know the temperature hit 48 degrees at Essendon and Avalon.

That kind of heat was unprecedented, but it was the arrival of the strong northerly winds and then the cool change that turned a potentially dangerous situation into a disaster. In certain parts of Victoria those winds were ferocious, they were monstrous, they were up to

125 kilometres per hour and they were highly unpredictable. When you add to that lethal mix a decade-long drought that has left our bushland and forests bone dry — the driest start to a year on record, with only 2 millimetres of rain in Melbourne since the beginning of the year and much of the north of the state having had no rain at all — and the record-breaking heatwave the week before that sapped any remaining moisture and left our vegetation parched and tinder-dry, I think everybody knew the odds were against us when we saw the latest forecast on that Friday.

I remember I spent the first 5 to 10 minutes at my Friday press conference talking about the next day. I said that the weather predictions were a recipe for disaster and that it was likely to be the worst day ever in the history of the state in terms of temperatures and winds, and so it was. And I remember encouraging all Victorians to be prepared, to check on elderly relatives, friends and neighbours, and to exercise common sense. I also remember saying, 'If you don't need to go out, if you don't need to travel on that day, don't go out'.

Many similar warnings were issued on that day. People were told to clear their properties and put fire plans in place. And all Victorians were told to prepare for the worst and to be on high alert. All of the emergency services were mobilised and travel was actively discouraged. But it became clear by early to mid-afternoon on Saturday that hundreds of blazes had ignited across Victoria, and in those horrific conditions they were taking hold. Quite simply, in many parts of our state by late Saturday — as many of the firefighters explained it to me — it was like hell on earth.

As I said before, I saw the destructive force of the fires in 1983, but what I have seen in the past two weeks has been beyond belief and was far worse than what occurred then. We have seen the lives of individuals and families lost, we have seen that homes and possessions have gone and we have seen that entire towns no longer exist. Many places such as Marysville, Kinglake, Kinglake West, Narbethong, Flowerdale and Strathewen are unrecognisable. And around 78 Victorian townships have been directly impacted by the fires — Bendigo, St Andrews, Steels Creek, Narre Warren, Smiths Gully, Yarra Glen, Dixons Creek, Wandong, Heathcote Junction, Taggerty, Buxton, Toolangi, Mudgegonga, Longwarry, Drouin West, Horsham, Humevale, Mittons Bridge, Reedy Creek, Strath Creek, Upper Plenty, Whittlesea, Callignee, Churchill, Koornalla and Coleraine.

The other point I would make about these fires is that every Victorian has been affected by them in some way. As honourable members would be aware, my

parents still live at Coleraine. I think it was mid-Saturday afternoon when we first heard on the radio of the fire at Coleraine. I remember the address coming over radio station 774: the corner of Coleraine-Balmoral Road and Douglas Road. That is where my parents live. You do as everybody does in those circumstances — you get on the phone and you try to ring your loved ones to make sure that they are okay. Often the first thing you learn in these fires is that the power is gone and the phone does not work; it goes straight through to record. Then you try the mobile. I tried for some hours to contact my parents.

It was only through the extraordinary work of the Country Fire Authority that this fire was brought under control. The fire had broken through onto my parents' property in four places and stopped just a few hundred metres from Mum and Dad's house, where they both were. My parents and I will always be very grateful to the CFA for the extraordinary work its members did in protecting that property. By the way, the member for Lowan was kind enough to drop in to see my parents on the Sunday night to make sure they were all right. I appreciate his care and concern too, and I wanted to put my thanks to the CFA firefighters on the record.

When I visited Marysville for the first time around 48 hours after the fires swept through the town it was one of the most harrowing experiences of my life — in fact, it was the most harrowing experience of my life. As I am sure do many members here, I remember going to Marysville as a child. I remember going there in my Victorian certificate of education year — or higher school certificate, as it was then. My mother thought that I had not been studying hard enough, and she asked whether, if she took me there for a few days, I would sit down and work all day and just go for a walk at night, and I did that. I can remember being there; my mother went there a lot as a child. Something like 3 million Australians have done the walk to Steavenson Falls, but when I arrived at Marysville there was just nothing left of the town. It shows total devastation.

When I arrived at Marysville the first of the police forensic crews was there. There was a policeman on loan — I forget his name; he spoke with an Irish accent. He said he had been to many disaster zones in the world but that this was the worst he had ever seen. He said there were no sounds — no birds, no pets, no animals, no people and no activity. He said there was just an eerie silence — and that is what there was.

A friend of my daughter's, someone with whom she went to school, lost family in that area, and she only had the death of her father confirmed last week. It goes to show that all Victorians are affected by these fires.

I spoke to Dean Connell, one of the survivors at Alexandra, where many residents were sheltering. Dean was unharmed himself, but he told me about a 12-year-old boy he had been playing golf with just days before. All he could say to me at Alexandra was, 'He's gone, he's gone.' At Callignee I had morning tea at the house of the Country Fire Authority captain, Ian Ewart. Ian took me on a tour of the town, and I saw the remains of the community hall and CFA station. They were completely destroyed by the fires. A temporary plaque has been erected at that burnt-out site to commemorate those extraordinarily brave Victorians who had perished in the fires. Of course, as a government we have committed to rebuild the hall and the station.

One of the things about these fires is that they were monstrous fires — they turned day into night — but they were also indiscriminate fires. They took too many, they took too much — they took children, they took parents, they took grandchildren.

Jason Lawrence, the CFA incident controller at Kangaroo Ground, summed up the helplessness that his people felt in the face of the Kinglake fire. He said, 'It moved through with such ferocity that there was nothing the local fire brigades could do'. David McGahy is a local farmer and captain of the Arthurs Creek CFA brigade. I know many people have spoken to David. I was out there last week. Many people will have seen him pictured in the media fighting back tears when he recalled the monstrous fireball bearing down on Strathewen. He said, 'Even if I had 20 strike teams, all that would have happened is that we would have had 50 dead firefighters as well.' I was speaking to David last week, and he told me he finished firefighting at about 3 o'clock on the Sunday morning. He was up again at 6 o'clock and, like many other CFA captains, his first job on Sunday morning was to identify the bodies of many people he had known and grown up with and worked with in those areas.

Today I want to place on the record my heartfelt gratitude to the countless Victorians who swung into action during and in the immediate aftermath of these devastating bushfires. I begin with the firefighters and emergency services staff. I cannot praise enough, and I know the Parliament cannot praise enough, these extraordinary individuals, these thousands of men and women who came together across a range of emergency services organisations, from government departments and agencies, including the Country Fire Authority, the Department of Sustainability and Environment, the State Emergency Service, Parks Victoria, the Metropolitan Fire Brigades Board, Victoria Police, Ambulance Victoria, the Australian

army and all the other state and federal government agencies.

I know and the Parliament knows that many of these firefighters will be hurting deeply from the loss of so many, but it is important that they know that all of Australia, all in this Parliament and all Victorians support them and see them as the heroes they are. It is important that they get that message, because after the fires of 1983 we lost many of our best CFA volunteers because they were all worried that they had not done enough. Had they done everything right? Had they given their 100 per cent? Had they done enough to save lives in the community? Of course, the fact is they did and they have. So they did on Black Saturday as well, and over the last fortnight. Those firefighters need to know that all of us, all members of this Parliament and all people across the state, support them 100 per cent for what they did. We want them to stay in the service; we want them to stay supporting the state, because their work is so crucial to us.

Fire agencies estimate that more than 4000 fire agency personnel have been working directly on the fires over the past 17 days. It now seems like an eternity ago, but we should not forget the week before Black Saturday and the fires at Boolarra — I was down there that weekend. Thousands of them have been out there. It is something like 70 000 person days that our firefighters have put in. It has been a massive firefighting effort. We saw last night at Upwey an extraordinary effort in saving property. Well over 1200 fire trucks and appliances, 71 bulldozers and 45 aircraft have been in use. Even as we speak, whether the fires are at Yarram, Daylesford or many other parts of our state, we have large teams out there throwing everything they can at these fires before the hot weather returns on Friday.

To give the Parliament an idea of just how massive this firefighting task is, if you measured around the edge of the fires that are running today, you would find there are more than 1000 kilometres of fire edge. We could drive to Mildura and back, and that would be about the length of fire edge out there. That is why everything is being thrown at these fires. But in the absence of rain — and rain is what we desperately need — it is still going to be an extraordinarily difficult effort containing all of these fires.

I mentioned the magnificent effort last night at Upwey. There are many more firefighters working to protect their local communities, responding to dozens of daily incidents on the home front. I am, and I know we all are, immensely proud of our firefighters because they are doing everything they can to protect our

communities in terrible times. Their courage will never be forgotten.

I place on the record too my appreciation of the huge support we have received from interstate. Virtually every state Premier and territory leader was at the national day of mourning event on Sunday. Their communities, their governments and their fire authorities have provided fantastic support. We have had support from Tasmania, South Australia, Western Australia, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory. These jurisdictions have provided close to 1000 personnel and around 220 firefighting appliances. Victoria has also received support, with more than 120 personnel coming from the USA, New Zealand and Canada. Their support is much needed and greatly appreciated by all Victorians. In that context it was therefore a great tragedy to learn last week that Canberra firefighter David Balfour was killed by a falling tree near Marysville. David was in Victoria because he wanted to give something back in return for the support that his community received after the Canberra firestorm in 2003. Today on behalf of all Victorians I want to express our deep sympathy and condolences to David Balfour's family, friends and colleagues.

Australia's firefighters were not alone in their selflessness and heroism on that Saturday. At Pheasant Creek, for example, something like 50 people owe their lives to local policeman Senior Constable Roger Wood. Senior Constable Wood found those people huddled in terror in the local supermarket as the fire literally bore down on the town. Without fuss he quickly evacuated them to the Kinglake West CFA building, and not long after that the supermarket became one of the many properties destroyed by fire.

The day after this tragedy struck our state, tens of thousands of Victorians stepped in to do whatever they could to help families and communities. If heroism is about courage, compassion and self-sacrifice, then these people too are heroes in the truest sense.

I visited many of the fire-affected communities, and I felt an unbelievable sense of pride in seeing the overwhelming number of volunteers who have been assisting paid staff in running the relief centres. We know that there have been more than 1000 Red Cross volunteers and more than 2000 St Vincent de Paul volunteers contributing to the relief effort since the start of the bushfire crisis. Everywhere that I have been I have seen ordinary Victorians pitching in and doing what they can.

Last week I visited Narbethong. I know many ministers and members have been there. The Black Spur Inn in Narbethong has been converted into a massive open house and base for relief efforts. The two publicans, Jim and Di Kennedy, opened up their business and their home to help. On the night of the fires people congregated at the pub for safety. Jim always said he would accommodate strike teams if he needed to, and he has. And he has done a lot more.

For those of you who have been there and seen it, the pub is now a temporary home to firefighters, emergency personnel and relief workers. Jim and Di are providing breakfast, lunch and dinner to everyone, from the visiting forensic teams to locals who have lost their homes and have nowhere else to go. They got on the phone straightaway and rang one of the Bass Strait oil crews, which donated all its chefs. The chefs have been doing all the cooking for free.

The army has set up a camp out the back. One of those buildings is now a relief store. There is a structure known as Jim's shed, which is now holding bay for generators and fodder. One of the people I spoke to was Liz Evans, who is helping out with the effort. She showed me around and introduced me to a whole team of volunteers, mainly women and mainly friends who had come up from Melbourne. They had got on the internet to ask how they could help. The day I was there they were all unloading a huge semitrailer of tools that had been donated by Dahlsen hardware. Community meetings are now held there. Half the community is helping in some way, and the pub's housekeeping supervisor, Jo Cash, is now in charge of the whole operation. That really exemplifies and highlights what has been happening in so many parts of the state.

I was in Longwarry last week with the Deputy Prime Minister and ministers, the Leader of the Opposition and the Leader of The Nationals. We would all recall meeting the CFA member John Shannon who had lost his house, his possessions and some of his Clydesdale horses. John was there with his wife when we spoke. He and his family were remarkably positive. They had continued to fight the fires, they had continued to protect other people's homes and properties and lives while losing much of their own, but they count themselves among the lucky ones.

Last week I visited the St Vincent de Paul relief centre at Rowville with federal minister Jenny Macklin. I was shown around by the St Vincent de Paul state president, Jim Grealish. I went there because a huge warehouse had been offered to house all of the goods that have come from around Australia. The centre had 500 volunteers who had been there the weekend before

last. People from all walks of life had come in to help sort goods, to help and do whatever they could. It is an extraordinary relief operation. I am told that donations for Victorian bushfire survivors to the St Vincent de Paul Society could fill the Melbourne Cricket Ground; that is how much has been contributed. Again, the donations came from all round Australia.

On that point, I should say I was at the MCG earlier this morning with the music industry, announcing that on 14 March we will have a huge concert to raise money for bushfire victims. Some of our greatest artists will be at the Melbourne Cricket Ground and the Sydney Cricket Ground. I mention it because Kasey Chambers was there. She was asked by the media why she was doing this. She said she has felt so deeply for all of the fire victims, but she is not a counsellor, so she cannot go out there and help people that way and she wants to help them in the way she knows best. She is not a builder, so she cannot help them rebuild their houses, but she can sing and she can entertain people and she can raise money and she can lift morale. Her answer put extraordinarily eloquently how all Australians, all Victorians, have wanted to do their bit to help the bushfire victims.

Last week I was at Strathewen, which is certainly one of the worst affected areas of the state. There were so many volunteers there and so many people helping. There were a number of volunteers there from St John's Anglican Church at Diamond Creek. They had been there for the week doing what they could do to support people and to help those who had lost family or friends.

At Traralgon — many people in that area and in Gippsland more generally lost their homes, and I have been to Traralgon a number of times — I heard a lovely story about a woman who had lost her home. She went to the local jewellery shop in Traralgon because she had also lost her watch and wanted to replace it. While she was talking to the shopkeeper, what was occurring became apparent to two women standing behind her. Having heard the story the two women, who were friends on holiday from Queensland, came forward and bought the watch for her. There are many stories like that from right across the state.

I went to Wandong on the first Sunday after the fires and was met there by the fire captain, Frank Amoroso, who is first lieutenant at the Wandong fire brigade. Ben Hardman, the local member, was there as well. I will never forget that visit to Wandong because Frank had been out all night fighting fires and his first job on Sunday morning was to go around to the homes that had been burnt to find the bodies of people that he had grown up and shared his life with in that community. I

think the burdens many of our CFA officers and members of the community have had to bear have been truly unimaginable. The national effort has been truly extraordinary. Those people and many more from across Victoria and Australia — everybody — rallied when they were most needed, despite many losing everything themselves.

In that context I also acknowledge the medical teams across the state, including the burns unit and staff at the Alfred hospital. It was not until late on that first Sunday that we had an accurate picture of just how many people had been seriously burnt and were in the hospital's burns unit. The medical teams have done a wonderful job. The disaster victim identification teams, including teams from interstate and from Indonesia, have had the horrific task of identifying the remains of deceased persons in homes. Many of these teams include Victoria Police officers who have been undertaking tasks they have never been trained for but who have again acted beyond the call of duty. Of course many other people have also been involved in the painstaking task of identifying the victims of this tragedy.

It goes without saying that the tragic loss of life on 7 February will leave an indelible imprint on the minds of all Victorians and all Australians, but I think the mayor of Murrindindi Shire Council, Lyn Gunter, a Flowerdale resident, spoke for us all when she spoke of her own community's quiet determination and hope for the future. She said:

It's going to take a lot of time to get over, but the town will rebuild.

I know our government shares her determination, as I am sure does this Parliament. We all want to help get these communities back on their feet. We all want to replace the schools, the police stations, the parks and the community buildings. We all want to see our businesses and shops reopen, and we want to see families back in these areas enjoying themselves again. If passion and determination are anything to go by, and if people like Marysville Patisserie owner, Ashraf Doos, is an example of that, we will succeed. Ashraf lost his business, his home and many of his friends in the Marysville fires. I met him at Healesville literally minutes after he had learnt that his property had been destroyed, and despite his extraordinary pain he told me in no uncertain terms how he and his wife planned to rebuild his patisserie and help rebuild his beloved community. I told him that we would support him, and we will.

On the Saturday night of the fires, 7 February, I was in Bendigo with my wife, Rosemary. It would have been

around 10.00 p.m. when I went to the local incident control centre for the Bendigo-Fortuna group. I met the staff and was later shown around the fire site by the two CFA incident controllers, Peter Rogash and Peter Downes. I went to the staging post and thanked firefighters who had literally come from all parts of the state. I spoke to the Prime Minister at about midnight or just after as it became clear how profound this tragedy was.

On the Sunday we put in place immediate help and support. The commonwealth disaster plan was activated and Australian Defence Force members were deployed. The Prime Minister and I also announced an initial \$10 million towards a community recovery fund and we launched the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund 2009 in partnership with the Australian Red Cross.

This fund is overseen by a panel led by John Landy. I thank the members of that panel: John Landy, the vice-chancellor of the University of Melbourne; Pat McNamara, a former leader of The Nationals; Lyn Gunter, the mayor of Murrindindi shire, is also a panel member; and Robert Tickner from the Red Cross. Christine Nixon will join the panel when she takes up her new position on 2 March.

That fund has exceeded all expectations and at last count had raised in excess of \$190 million from more than 490 000 individual donations. It is an extraordinary contribution. Corporate Australia has also been magnificent. It has pledged more than \$35 million, including contributions from some overseas businesses. Sixteen individual companies have pledged donations of \$1 million or more, and companies like Coles, Woolworths, National Australia Bank, Commonwealth Bank and Bunnings are raising even more through their stores and branches.

On top of this there are literally thousands of other fundraising efforts around Australia and overseas. Last Saturday I did some phone interviews for a big fundraiser in Bunbury, Western Australia, where they were hoping to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars. There have been fundraisers in Boston, in London and in many other places all around the world. It shows more than we could ever say about the generosity and compassion of the Australian community.

By the Tuesday following the fires we had established personal hardship and emergency grants that were available to the families who needed them. We also announced that a bushfire reconstruction and recovery authority would be established. As members know, that will be led by the outgoing Chief Commissioner of Police, Christine Nixon, who will take up her new

position on 2 March 2009. In the meantime Major General John Cantwell is filling that position, and he is doing a fantastic job.

In the immediate aftermath we put in place many other initiatives to help people through the crisis, including counselling support, and land tax and stamp duty relief, as well as a major package to support Victorian businesses that were damaged or destroyed by the bushfires.

We have also begun to distribute money from the bushfire fund, including compassionate and bereavement payments and funding to cover medical expenses and immediate essentials. I am advised that as of this morning more than 7000 emergency grants have been paid, with over 600 grants being made from the bushfire appeal fund, mainly for home dislocation.

As a government we will continue to do everything in our power to help Victoria rebuild after these fires. We will do everything in our power to prevent a disaster like this from ever happening again. That is why we announced the establishment of a royal commission, which has been supported by the opposition parties. Victorians rightly want and deserve to know all the details about how the bushfires occurred. We learnt the lessons from Black Friday in 1939. We learnt some more lessons after Ash Wednesday in 1983. If there are lessons to be learnt from 2009, we need to learn those lessons also. But today the pain of Victorians, and Australians generally, is still raw, and our thoughts are with the victims of Black Saturday. The memorial service on Sunday reminded all Australians of the sheer magnitude of this disaster. As we were on Sunday, we are all united in grief and in our determination to recover and rebuild.

Finally, I did not have time on Sunday to read all of the poem written by Peter Auty from Flowerdale; I was only able to read four verses. But one of the things we have seen as we have moved around is that you cannot ever beat the human spirit; you cannot ever beat the inspiration that comes from the endeavour, the inventiveness, the drive and the sense of community and camaraderie of our fellow human beings.

Many people have written poems about what they saw and what they heard. I was given a poem entitled *No More* by Peter Auty of Flowerdale:

You know me as Johnny-been-before;  
I've seen the flames and I've heard the roar;  
I thought I had some fair idea  
Of the heights of success and the depths of fear.

I've studied and trained and been to courses,  
And thought that I could pick winning horses;  
I thought I could see what the fire would do,  
And I thought that I could direct the crew.

I'd studied foam and the waters' flow,  
I'd studied how the fire would go;  
Topography and the fuel load,  
How to make a firebreak out of a road.

I've trained with my mates in our brigade,  
Fought fires with them that the times have made,  
Talked it out: what went wrong? What went right?  
Studied and learned how the fires to fight.

But all that I knew, and all that I planned,  
Flew out the door, and I'm quite unmanned,  
Because Saturday broke all of the rules,  
Made me and my studies look like fools.

Bigger and faster than I could think;  
My knowledge and studies pushed past the brink;  
My mind and my heart both numbed and cold;  
The fire came down like the wolf on the fold.

Four days have gone past, and I'm writing this down;  
I don't understand why the fire didn't crown;  
I don't understand. Why this and not that?  
Why burn on the ridges and not on the flat?

The little pink cottage surrounded by black,  
The mud-brick houses reduced to wrack,  
The ruin, the wreck, the human cost,  
The homes that are gone, and the lives that are lost.

Now I'm Johnny who never has been here before,  
Johnny who don't want to go there no more,  
Johnny who's seen the grief and the pain,  
Johnny who don't want to go there again.

We are united in our grief, we are united in our determination to recover and rebuild. And we will rebuild. And we will always remember all the Victorians who lost their lives on 7 February. I know that I speak for all members when I say that our thoughts and prayers are with all those Victorians whose lives have been scarred by this tragic event.

**Mr BAILLIEU** (Leader of the Opposition) — It is with great sadness that we find cause to sponsor this motion before the house. We do so together to mark the tragic events of the last three weeks, and we do so to honour all those who have suffered and pay tribute to all those who have assisted.

I met Connor exactly two weeks ago. It was at the collection point in the old IGA store at Yarra Glen. Donated goods and clothing were, and still are, being assembled there by volunteers as a part of the local relief centre. Connor, perhaps three to four years old,

was clutching his grandmother's hand. He looked up at me with big innocent eyes, threw his hands in the air and shouted out, 'Our house went boom!'. Indeed, on 7 February Victoria went boom. In shocking conditions, bushfires once again tore through our state, tearing the very fabric of our being, placing Black Saturday onto our home-grown calendar of historic disasters.

Amidst high temperatures, strong winds and dry country, separate fires flashed through farmland, roared through forests, tore through towns and destroyed lives, families, businesses and dreams. The fires followed the appalling fires at Boolarra late in January, about which much was said at our last gathering here, and in part grew from fires that commenced in Bunyip on 4 February.

As the Premier said, the fires burn still, and in just the last 24 hours new fires have sparked further anxieties and resulted in more losses. As we meet today the fires have already consumed more than 350 000 hectares, directly impacted 78 towns, displaced more than 7000 people, demolished completely more than 2000 homes, rendered a further 2000 homes effectively uninhabitable, destroyed farms and other businesses, and most miserably of all, taken at least 210 lives — women, men, young, old, families, couples, groups and the quiet residents of the beautiful hills and valleys of Victoria. Other people remain in hospital. Many more have been injured. Our thoughts are with them all.

It is difficult to imagine the horror of the situation in which so many people found themselves on that day. It was unbearably hot and followed weeks of scorching weather. The wind from the north-west was hot, dry and exceptionally strong. The conditions were known — they were predicted and they were aired. In the way to which Victorians have been made accustomed, fire plans were activated, and people did as they were encouraged to do. Victorians were apprehensive but confident. Chinese New Year celebrations were coming to a close across the state.

It seems though that the threat and the warnings were simply at odds. People perished in homes they were unable to defend, in cars seeking to escape too late, and in streets and public places seeking refuge. Those who did survive tell stories of miraculous escapes. They tell of a fire they barely saw, a fire they never knew was coming. They tell of a fire that leapt and soared, throwing itself forward kilometres ahead of the front in embers as big as bricks. They tell of a violent wind change that spared some and condemned others. They tell of thick, acrid smoke. They tell of a dark that blocked the day and of the noise and the roar it became.

They tell of no chance being given and of no chance being had. They tell of neighbours, friends and communities lost. And they tell it all with tears enough to dream the fires might be stopped by tears alone. Those who survived count their blessings. A resident of Kinglake told me of turning left to leave, while his neighbour beside him turned right and perished. Connor's family made it, but their house went boom.

In the west the fires took pastures, crops, stock, buildings and community facilities in Coleraine and Horsham. At Bendigo and Redesdale the fires took over 50 homes and they took animals, and at Eaglehawk they took a life. In the north the fires threatened towns in the Beechworth region, Mudgegonga and the alpine country around Dargo. In Gippsland the fires burn still at Wilsons Promontory, many homes and lives have been lost in the fires at Churchill, and there is so much damage from the Bunyip fire. In the hills and valleys north of Melbourne scores of lives have been lost in the complex of fires that have savaged so many towns, with absolute devastation occurring in Humevale, Flowerdale, Kinglake, Kinglake West, Pheasant Creek, Steels Creek, St Andrews, Strathewen, Castella, Narbethong, Marysville and too many other places.

Bushfires have long been a problem in this state. Some have been bigger and of greater duration, but none have been so deadly. Some claim these fires are unprecedented, but the official accounts of the 1939 fires and of Ash Wednesday are chillingly similar. Others will attest that more recent fires have burnt just as badly, just as hot and just as ferociously but burnt largely only in unpopulated forests and parks. An analysis of that must and no doubt will follow. But these fires burnt in more heavily populated areas, and at least 210 lives have been lost. That is what makes these fires so tragic and so different.

The response has been extraordinary. At 11.00 a.m. on Sunday, 8 February, I joined the Prime Minister, the Premier, the Chief Commissioner of Police and other agency heads for a briefing at Kangaroo Ground. On our side we are pleased to have joined the government in every possible way to deal with this crisis. I know that members from both sides of the house have dropped everything to assist. I thank the Premier for that support and goodwill.

I want to pay particular tribute to the emergency services on the ground. As I mentioned on Sunday at the mourning service, whether in yellow, green, orange, blue or white, the emergency services did their absolute best. They came from far and wide; some are still hard at it. They have our deep thanks and admiration. I have had the opportunity to speak to many people who owe

their lives to the courage and determination of those at the front. The provision of counselling and support for those who have been fighting the fires is one of the essential responses we must make.

The response to the fires has come from emergency services workers, including those from the Country Fire Authority. Some — and I have spoken to them — on their very first outing on the trucks have had to deal with shocking circumstances. The response has also come from the Department of Sustainability and Environment, the State Emergency Service, Victoria Police, police from other jurisdictions, the Australian Defence Force and firefighters from interstate and overseas. I join with the Premier and the rest of this house in paying tribute to David Balfour and the Australian Capital Territory firefighters — David Balfour having tragically lost his life in Marysville last week.

We pay also tribute to the council officers at the municipal emergency control centres (MECCs) — the relief centres — for the extraordinary work they did. We pay tribute to the commonwealth disaster teams, to the medical teams — the doctors and nurses, as the Premier said — and to the burns unit at the Alfred hospital. We pay tribute to all those volunteers from the Red Cross, St John Ambulance, St Vinnies, the Brotherhood and the Salvation Army. On the Monday after the fires the Salvation Army was writing cheques at relief centres to aid those affected. It did an extraordinary job. We pay tribute to all the service clubs, which are still hard at it, and to the scout groups.

We pay tribute to the Country Women's Association, which was assisting wherever it could, and to the many housing agencies that were assisting, including Anchor, whose representatives I talked with at length. We pay tribute to the support groups, to the counsellors, to the churches and to the chaplains manning the relief centres. Could there be a harder task than dealing with and talking and listening to those people who have come from such tragic circumstances?

We also pay tribute to the supermarket chains which have opened their doors and provided their goods, and to the many other businesses that have provided assistance. Indeed we pay tribute to the Sugarloaf Pipeline Alliance, which has lent its equipment to assist in many areas. We pay tribute to the wider Victorian community, including all those individuals who have given their time and money, and to the sporting clubs.

I want to mention the media. Many more people would have died on Saturday, 7 February, without ABC radio and 3AW doing what they did and without local radio

making the commitment it made. The broader media has not only supported communities but done its best, in my view, to do it sensitively.

The relief effort in turn has been amazing. These fires have turned a string of towns into living relief centres for those escaping the fires and those who lost their homes. These towns have served as staging points for emergency services and as community meeting points. Whittlesea, Wallan, Kilmore, Broadford, Beechworth, Seymour, Yea, Alexandra, Taggerty, Healesville, Yarra Glen, Traralgon, Longwarry, Gembrook and many others assumed roles as sanctuaries and centres of life and hope. Those who have manned these centres day and night for up to three weeks have already done a remarkable job, and we thank them all.

I particularly want to thank the local governments involved. Many had their MECCs up and running within hours. The calmness, confidence and training in those centres was evident to anyone who was apt to visit. A sense of order is essential in times like this, and the mere presence of a full team in clearly distinguished tabards was certainly a part of that confidence.

The community response has been quite extraordinary. The Premier mentioned the provision of goods. I, like many other members, have attended relief centres and seen extraordinary amounts of food and clothing supplied. It is, as the Premier said, a tribute to the goodwill of this community. The Red Cross Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund has had an extraordinary response not only from this state but from right across Australia and the world. The donation by individuals and groups of homes, vehicles, goods, clothing and support, and indeed the response from the international community, has been quite outstanding.

We commend the warmth of Her Royal Highness Princess Anne, who was here at the weekend, for the effort she made to not only be here for the mourning service but to actually visit the fire zones and talk to those affected. We commend the response from other governments — governments that we would sometimes be providing with aid. The Indonesian government made an extraordinary contribution, and indeed I understand the Papua New Guinea government also provided assistance. It is a tribute to those governments.

The recovery effort in turn has also been exceptional. We support the notion of the recovery authority, and we wish Christine Nixon and that authority well in the efforts they will no doubt be undertaking.

Many people have lost everything. Of course nothing can replace family members, and as a community we

can only reach out and provide whatever assistance and support we possibly can. Our thoughts are with all those who have lost family members and friends. In the days ahead, as memorial services and funerals take place, the pain and the grief will be evident for all to see. That process has already commenced.

For those who have lost homes and livelihoods, it is a question of starting again from scratch. Our governments at both the state and federal level have already made announcements about a range of support packages. We support them all; indeed many we were pleased to advance. It is essential to provide assistance to individuals and families, and it is important to provide assistance to businesses. No doubt more can be done, including providing support for local government to offer rate relief and providing assistance to businesses that have lost everything to deal with insurance, banking, credit provision, industrial matters, planning and investment matters.

But it will also become increasingly important to deal with those individuals, families and businesses that have been indirectly affected. Such assistance could include the provision of short-term employment preservation packages that will allow businesses to avoid laying off staff who would not otherwise have access to any of the benefits from Centrelink; the suspension of payroll tax, perhaps, for a short period to allow some of those businesses to get through their short-term difficulties; and the provision of government statements to clarify some of the more difficult insurance provisions which are currently a problem.

The physical damage in these regions is obvious. The heartache is also obvious to all. As the smoke clears, the damage to local economies will also appear. Business has been interrupted, jobs have been lost and services that were once a staple are no longer required. Each wave of consequences will have an impact on different people. By way of example I look at the tourism businesses in the Yarra Valley. The tourists have gone and the revenues have evaporated, and times are already tough enough. Relief purchased from local businesses provides twice the relief. Future commitments are also business essentials in these communities. To those who want to help I say by all means make a donation, but also make a booking. Make a date with these communities for the future, because they are the essentials upon which these businesses rely.

Not everything was right in advance of these fires. Not everything went right in response. It never does. There is still much to assess, and there will be a royal commission. That is as it should be; the loss of life

alone demands it. We support the establishment of the commission. I am pleased we were able, through the Premier, to advance our thoughts on the style of the commission and the terms of reference. The inclusion of terms which will allow the commissioners to examine any matters in regard to the fires they deem appropriate picks up the Premier's advice that everything will be on the table. We support the commission, the commissioners and their terms of reference.

The critical mission of that commission will be to establish why so many people died in these fires. No doubt the commission will allow all Victorians to make a contribution. Many issues have already been aired in the media but it is clear that the issues of preparation, land management, communications, risk assessment, warnings and defensive strategies will need to be addressed. There is much that can be done in advance of any findings of the commission to provide greater protection before the next fire season begins, and of that I have spoken many times elsewhere. Now is not the time to provide details, but I simply urge the government to use the time well. We must do whatever is possible to reduce the risk of this ever happening again.

The task ahead is huge. It will require our collective attention for years to come. Thousands of people will be changed for ever. They will live with the images in their hearts, on their walls, and in their memories. Some will live with the scars, and the grief will no doubt come every year. I join the Premier in making the observation that barely a Victorian has not been touched in some way. People I set out in politics with have lost their lives. People I have shared politics with have lost their lives. We have all been touched. Many places will be changed forever; Marysville, Kinglake, Strathewen, Flowerdale, Steels Creek have been all but eliminated. In Marysville there is barely a building left standing, but some oaks and elms still shade the main street in an extraordinary display of defiance. Much of the signage remains intact in a symbolic pointer to the future. Homes will be rebuilt. Communities will be re-established. Towns will rise again. It will be a shared effort.

I have had cause in the past, in dealing with these terrible situations, to refer in this house to an effect described to me as the casserole effect — the effect that young mums describe after having a baby, when all the assistance that they get immediately afterwards dries up. The day the casseroles stop coming is the day of the casserole effect and we have to make sure, whatever we do, that the casseroles keep coming. It is up to all of us to keep that support going.

Bushfires are indeed part of our heritage in this state. Recovery from those fires is part of our history, and it is a history that has to be told. The stories simply must be told: the dreadful stories, the tragic stories, the sad stories, the inspirational stories, the happy and even the funny stories. They are the stories of people, their triumphs, their tragedies and their relationships. Those of us who had the honour and privilege to listen to and talk quietly with survivors, volunteers and supporters have heard thousands of such stories. The Premier has shared just some of his. I do not wish to dwell on them but will reflect on just a few that have impacted on me.

On the Sunday morning, after sharing the time with the Premier and Prime Minister at St Andrews, I went to Whittlesea, as did the Prime Minister. I went to the staging ground at the Whittlesea showgrounds and the buses were arriving from Kinglake with those who had been affected. Out of the buses poured individuals and families, clutching whatever possessions they still had. Many of the children were clutching a soft toy, but some had absolutely nothing. One man approached me in a t-shirt and shorts and barely any shoes. He told me his story and how his children and his wife were still up in the hills, hopefully safe. He simply said to me, 'I don't understand. Every Sunday morning for as long as I can remember at 11.00 a.m. the siren went off. But yesterday, no siren.' All he said was, 'I don't understand'. Yet there were stories of hope as well.

In a couple of visits I have made to Taggerty, Alexandra and Marysville I have had the extraordinary situation of talking to the Country Fire Authority unit from Taggerty. It was the last unit to leave Marysville. I am quite confident the members of the CFA unit there do not want any publicity. They have seen it all. I am sure the Premier has met with them as well. But they tell the tale of leaving Marysville, and the difficulty and the heartache of doing that. They tell the tale of having to leave Buxton as well and their retreat from Buxton on the way — past friends, past family and past properties they owned. Then I talked to a Victoria Police officer from Marysville who likewise, I am sure, does not want to be singled out — indeed the Leader of The Nationals and I talked to him at length on Friday. He told an extraordinary story of how he and some colleagues went through Marysville in an effort to encourage people to leave, and they did. They succeeded. I say this to them: they could not have done anything more than they did to assist.

To round it out, on my previous visit I talked to Anastasia. Anastasia is a resident of Marysville and she had one of the top 100 gardens in Australia there. She is small, elderly — I do not think she would mind me saying that — and of Greek origin. She told me the tale

of how the CFA and officers of the Victoria Police had saved her life. She believed she was in the second-last car to leave Marysville. There was a certain symmetry in having talked to all of those people who had come together at Marysville to save lives.

At a community meeting at Gembrook a young woman told me of her elderly relative who with bucket and hose had defended his home from the Bunyip fire. The house was saved, but he was burnt. Somehow when he regained consciousness he staggered out, found his way to hospital and survived. That story is remarkable in its own right, but it was even more telling to learn that 70 years ago this year when he was in his 20s he had lost his home in the terrible bushfires of that darkening time.

There are equally positive, cheerful stories as well. On the Tuesday after the fire started I was driving along the Chum Creek Road, which had just been reopened. As a meagre architect a long time ago I had done some work up the Chum Creek Road and I knew a bit about the area. There was absolute devastation up the Chum Creek Road. The silhouettes are plain to see. The crumpled wrecks are plain to see. There is not a lot left. As we were driving slowly up the road we went past a small cottage not far from the road — a weary, beaten cottage that had nevertheless survived. Out the front was an equally weary, weathered man standing on the side of the road, looking like he was exhausted, and quite rightly so given the devastation around him. As we drove by he had cause to lift the lid on his letterbox to see whether the mail had arrived! He was looking to move on. He was looking for the basic connections. Those of us in the car turned to each other, smiled and thought there is hope.

Later that afternoon we were driving through the Yarra Valley and had cause to draw attention to a small fire that looked like it might be about to jump the road. We sought the assistance of some locals down the road, off the main drag to some extent, and we found half a dozen people seeking to extinguish fires in some burning logs where not much else remained. They were black and soiled and tired and anything but fresh, and their concern was with the fire in front of them, which they had under control. We stopped and chatted to them. One told me that he had lost everything in his vineyard, except the house. In my perhaps limp attempt to cheer them up I told the story of the fellow up the Chum Creek Road, whom I had just observed. With that the daughter put her arm around the dad who had lost the vineyard and said, 'That's nothing. Here we are on Tuesday, Dad lost everything yesterday and he still put the garbage out on Monday morning'. There is the

human instinct not only to survive but also to keep going.

I want to repeat the commitment we have given on every possible occasion. It is a commitment to each and every one of those affected. It is a commitment particularly to the children of Victoria. It is a commitment to Connor. It is a commitment to those who have lost families and friends, to those who have lost homes and livelihoods, and to those who have answered the call to provide emergency relief, support and recovery. And, as I said on Sunday, it is a commitment to those who have seen the flames, those who have been blinded by the darkness of the day, those who have smelt the smoke, heard the roar and then in turn been deafened by the silence. Our simple message is: we are as one. Victoria is as one. You have our hearts. You have our hands. We will do whatever is possible to support you and ensure that our state recovers, that your towns flourish once more and a tragedy such as this never happens again.

**Mr HULLS** (Attorney-General) — On Thursday, 5 February, in this place I was asked by the honourable member for Yan Yean about the fire risk for that coming Saturday. I advised that the Bureau of Meteorology was forecasting extreme heat with winds of up to 100 kilometres per hour and almost zero humidity. I advised that experienced fire chiefs were describing predicted conditions as the worst in Victoria's history.

All Victorians will remember Saturday, 7 February, unfolding as brutal and unforgiving. Despite the conditions, however, I do not think anyone could have imagined the magnitude of the devastation that was to follow. The tragedy of that day, with the toll to date of 210 dead and more than 2000 homes lost or uninhabitable, has resonated with every Australian and indeed right around the world. Many of us have had the sobering experience, as I have, of witnessing some of the decimation caused by these horrific fires. As a father, a husband and a human being it is impossible not to be moved beyond words. Amidst the grief, however, I and I know all members of this place have witnessed inspiring strength and resilience. I have met exhausted but unflagging Country Fire Authority (CFA) members, incident control teams and Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) and Victoria Police officers, and I have never failed to be impressed.

On 9 February, for example, with the member for Gembrook and a member for Eastern Victoria Province in the Council I visited the Pakenham emergency services complex. Given the blazes already alight

before 7 February, face-to-face briefings by the CFA and DSE ensured that the communities in those areas had few surprises. I had a small surprise though when one CFA officer, Michael Owen, turned out to be a distant cousin of mine. Our reunion, I might say, was a rare moment of levity in an otherwise very sombre visit.

They are the personal stories that stay with us, whether it is the principal whom I met returning from sick leave who had spent the night fighting spot fires at his school, or the very tough former defence forces member who stayed to save his house while all around him was burning. When I asked him about his experience his lips trembled and he said, 'I have never been so scared in my entire life.'. At Trawool I witnessed a calm and well-conducted meeting at which the CFA answered countless questions from very anxious residents, who had not slept for some three days. At Wallan, Wandong and Kilmore I saw people providing very practical assistance to the distressed and displaced members of the community. At the incident control centre on Nicholson Street in Alexandra I saw firsthand the sheer scale of the operation. From staging areas accommodating hundreds of CFA, DSE and police choppers and vehicles to tents for hundreds of personnel to caterers providing thousands upon thousands of meals a day, agencies were working relentlessly and without pause and, I might say, seamlessly as well.

One of the many experiences that will certainly stay with me for the rest of my life though was the visit to Kinglake, Arthurs Creek and Strathewen. There I met people like Jenny Beales and Anne Leadbeater and her entire family. They, like so many others, are working without rest or hesitation to keep their communities informed and bound together.

Later, as the Premier has already mentioned, local Country Fire Authority captain David McGahy led me and the members for Yan Yean and Bundoora around Strathewen. I have to say that it was like nothing I have ever seen before — an entire hamlet obliterated. Nothing was left standing, and there were multiple sites at which bodies had been found. Amidst all this Captain McGahy pointed to a dam where at 2.00 a.m. on Sunday, 8 February, he and his crew were surveying the damage under torchlight, as I recall, when they heard cries of, 'Hello, is anyone there?'. There in the dam was a man and a woman clutching nothing more than a bucket and what seemed to be an old tea towel. They had been there, believe it or not, for 8 hours, petrified but they were alive. Nine days later the bucket and the tea towel were actually still there. These are just some examples of the stories I have been absolutely

privileged to hear and the work I have been privileged to witness.

There are few in this house who would not know someone personally touched by these fires; sadly, some know those who have lost their lives. My own mother has been devastated by such a loss. As reports emerged of the dangers in Kinglake, she phoned two very close friends, Brian and Moiree Naylor. Getting no answer she left a message that she hoped they were okay and safe. She tried again later that night, and there was still no answer. The next day she rang me in a flood of tears to tell me that they had died trying to save the home they loved.

Meanwhile my office was trying to reach a staff member, Elena Campbell, who lives near Alexandra with her husband, Jamie Walker, and their three young daughters. Jamie is a CFA member. He was at the front of the Murrindindi fire when the crews heard that the blaze was headed for Narbethong. He pleaded to be sent because in that wind any front could very quickly sweep towards their home in Acheron. Racing into Marysville they arrived as the inferno we have all heard about actually hit. With no choice but to get his crew to safety, and with everything around him alight, Jamie called home. Elena recalls Jamie on the phone saying, 'Marysville is gone, it is just gone. It is moving too fast, get the kids out'. It was only when driving through thick smoke to join friends in Alexandra that Elena allowed herself to wonder whether he was actually ringing to say goodbye.

That night, however, they were very lucky. The crews eventually made it out, a bulldozer clearing the smouldering trees ahead. The fire was slowed a few kilometres from their house. Those they knew from Marysville, however, were not so lucky. Some lost lives and almost all of them, as we know, lost their homes. Residents of Alexandra, like elsewhere, have put their lives on hold to volunteer at the recovery centre. Some have done nothing but cook and ferry food, while church halls to cherry packing sheds have been turned over to the recovery effort.

Like in other affected towns, the CFA, DSE and police vehicles churn up the smoke-enveloped streets; like in other affected towns, the children, in many cases, are back at school, but they play evacuating in safety lunchtime games. Others compare notes such as, 'Have you got a house?' 'Yes, but I lost my bike. Have you?' 'No, no house, but at least I have my bike'.

There are countless more stories, and a great many of them, as we know and have heard, are utterly devastating. What I want to emphasise, however, as it

does fall within my portfolio as Attorney-General, is the harrowing and often thankless work of those piecing the evidence together. I have visited the coroner and the mortuary and spoken to the staff, including many who have come from right around the nation to help identify the bodies of those who have tragically been killed. Teams of experts, from dentists to police to forensics pathologists, are working in a careful, compassionate and utterly professional manner right around the clock, and yet the process is painstaking and the damage unprecedented. With international standards requiring at least two forms of scientific identification, such as DNA testing, radiology or dental recognition, the task is rendered heartbreakingly difficult. Nevertheless, these teams are determined to give families all the certainty and clarity that they can.

I can only begin to imagine the pain of families whose loved ones have died. Some have lost multiple members and entire immediate families have been wiped out in the most horrific way. It is perhaps beyond our collective ability to understand what enduring such a nightmare entails, to allow the reality to creep in from the corners of our minds, to accept that the smallest of children suffered incomprehensibly in this way.

I can only assure the house that nobody could be working harder than the staff of the Coroners Court and at the temporary mortuary. They are all engaged in absolutely crucial and essential work: from state coroner, Jennifer Coate; deputy state coroner, Iain West; chief executive officer, Judy Leitch; and the staff of the state coroner's office; to Professor Stephen Cordner, Mari-Ann Scott and the staff at the Victorian Institute of Forensic Medicine.

It is with respect and humility that I ask the families of those who have perished to continue to display the extraordinary patience they have shown as they wait for finality. These families deserve nothing but dignity and compassion. I also ask that members of the media, almost all of whom have been highly professional, to show those people grieving the respect and privacy that they deserve.

There are so many people who deserve our collective compassion and shared admiration, from those who fight and are still fighting the fires to those helping with the relief and recovery efforts, to lawyers providing free advice, to vets working constantly to relieve the agony of family pets and wildlife, to medical staff at the Alfred and hospitals right around the state treating victims with burns and other horrendous injuries. The effects of this tragedy will resonate with a generation. It is my hope, however, that from this catastrophe will come a better understanding not just of the effects of

fire or the severity of our landscape. It is my hope that from 7 February we will emerge with a keener appreciation of each other and our collective resilience, with a greater emphasis placed on what is important and a celebration of what we share because we are Victorians.

**Mr RYAN** (Leader of The Nationals) — A month has gone by in a smoking blur. On Australia Day I was in Mirboo North. I was there, as were many other members in their respective electorates, sharing the wonder of the nation in which we live. It was a gathering of 150 to 200 people in the local hall and a joyous occasion. On Wednesday, 28 January, only two days later, the first of the fires, which are still burning in Gippsland, broke out — we think deliberately lit — at Darlimurla just north of Mirboo North, and then over the succeeding couple of days it spread to Boolarra. Gippsland still burns.

By Saturday, 31 January, I was back in Mirboo North attending town briefings being hosted by the DSE (Department of Sustainability and Environment). Later that day I went across to Churchill for another town briefing. As we now know, 29 houses and 72 outbuildings were lost in that area. Over the course of that week we were all holding our breath at the prospect of what the next Saturday would bring.

Saturday, 7 February, is now known as Black Saturday. On that day I was driving to Melbourne with my wife, Trish, on a trip that had to be made for various reasons and to fulfil an obligation to which I had committed. We got to Rosedale where I found out that the Princes Highway had been cut because of the Bunyip fires. I explained patiently to my wife how I could circumvent the problem by going up the Strzelecki Highway and rejoining the Princes Highway at Trafalgar. Trish told me to turn the car around and go home — and I did.

At home for the rest of that day, like so many others, I was glued to the ABC. As the day progressed phone calls started coming in and I made phone calls. One of the calls I received was from the Minister for Police and Emergency Services. The horror was gradually revealed as the day progressed, and by that evening the awful reality struck of deaths having occurred in Victoria — some in Gippsland and some in other parts of the state — but none of us knew that night the extent of the horror which would eventually be revealed.

As is the case for so many of the members of this place, the subsequent days have also been a blur of relief centres, staging points, fire grounds, innumerable town briefings, listening to exhausted firefighters and other volunteers, listening to the stories of those who have

been directly impacted upon by this horror — crouching, standing, kneeling, sitting and listening. We ply a trade in here which involves much yapping. This has been a task of listening, and it is one of the great contributions that we have been able to make to these terrible events: listening to people who have been shocked and who are distraught about what has happened to them, people who have the thousand-yard stare; listening to the remarkable experiences of so many of them and listening to some of the extraordinarily close encounters. At the relief centre in Traralgon a young lady showed me a mobile phone photo of the back rim of the family four-wheel drive. The rim was all that was left because the tyre had melted off as they had made it down the driveway to get out.

At Boolarra one of the firefighters described the awful moment of attempting to protect a house which was about to burn. Having apparently lost the battle, he heard the whirr of rotor blades above him and looked up to see Elvis flying at an impossible angle, laying a curtain of water across the building and over some of the firefighters. Then the fire was out, Elvis was gone and the house was saved — absolutely remarkable. The people who fly those aircraft are aeronautical magicians. They are nothing less than astounding.

I visited Mudgegonga with the member for Benalla just last Monday and spoke with a lady who, like other members of the community, had suffered the loss of two of their number at a house just down the way. She had started that day by shooting 34 of her stock. There are these stories and so many others, of 1001 narrow escapes and heroics that in many instances will never ever be told. Then there are moments of remarkable humanity and levity — that immortal photograph of Dave Tree from Mirboo North giving his water bottle to a koala which had been injured in the fires. ‘Tree saves koala’ was surely a headline missed. The ultimate tragedy was the death of so many Victorians and of Dave Balfour, the firefighter from Canberra.

I remember going through Marysville last Friday in the company of the Leader of the Opposition and three others who were travelling with us. Being driven around the town by a police officer, with another police officer giving us a quiet commentary as to the tragedy of events that had unfolded, and I might say conducting ourselves in a way entirely respectful of the local residents who even until now have not been able to return, we saw how that beautiful town was laid waste by these awful events, including all those famous landmarks, some of which the Premier has referred to. I remember the many occasions that I had stayed with my family in that beautiful location. At Callignee,

Traralgon South, Hazelwood, Kinglake and Strathewen are similar scenes of devastation.

We went through Bendigo with a member for Northern Victoria Region in the Council, Damian Drum, talking to people who had lost their houses. This was a singularly alarming event if only for the fact that one of the great regional cities of Victoria came perilously close to being burnt even more severely than was already the case.

Seventy-eight towns across Victoria have been impacted upon by these fires, many of them by death, and yet across those different communities there is a gradual awakening from this awful nightmare. It is gradual, but it is certain nevertheless. At Kinglake, where we were last Monday, there was a sense of bustling intensity around the town. Children are out and about and people are moving; they are looking forward.

At his invitation we went to the house of a gentleman whose house had miraculously survived. He was not even home to defend it. We went down the side street to see that the other side of the street had been laid waste. It was an awful sight: burnt out cars with police tape on them, carrying the implied message, and yet on his side of the street, although every other house was gone, there still sits his little green weatherboard almost covered in vegetation. His garage burnt down, but the house still stands with its verdant green backyard. We sat out in that backyard for an hour or more talking about the future of Kinglake and what he and his friends see the future holding — the colours of life on a very black canvas. But people are gradually emerging from this.

Therein lies our essential challenge. The concept has been spoken of here today, as it was on Sunday during that wonderful event, and that hope is the cornerstone for the future of these people. The 88 of us are the collective voice of Victorians. Our first obligation I believe is to give these people hope. The investigations of what happened are important, of course, and they will occur in their various forms. It is vital to accommodate the urgent needs of our citizens who have suffered such appalling losses. Recovery and planning are crucial, and the way in which they eventuate are absolutely imperative, but the first obligation we have as a Parliament is to give these people hope. As a commitment made by all of us, I am sure those who have suffered from these appalling tragedies can count on it. We give them hope for the future.

We gather today in the context of the motion that has been moved by the Premier. I thank the volunteers. God

bless the Country Fire Authority. Where would we be without the CFA? Its members have stood the line, displayed courage under fire yet again and demonstrated the utmost professionalism. To them and to their colleagues who have come here from interstate and overseas to fight this monster, we are so very grateful.

They stand of course with the other volunteers: the State Emergency Service, the Red Cross, St John's Ambulance, the Country Women's Association, the faith affiliates — be it Vinnies or the Salvos — and so many others, including the service clubs, the neighbours and the individuals who have done such heroic things in the names of their friends and families. There are stories that we will never hear about. There are also the agencies that have stood with them. The Department of Sustainability and Environment has also done a magnificent job, as have those who wear the blue, our police officers. I was there with the Leader of the Opposition to hear an officer describe the appalling, terrible circumstances that occurred in Marysville just before the town was burnt so recently. Interestingly, at the end of that conversation, which I am sure both the Leader of the Opposition and I will always remember, his final words to us were, 'I am sorry I did not save more', when of course, as we said to him, he and his colleagues saved literally hundreds of lives.

As I have said to many of the senior ranks of the police and to the other agencies, it is going to be so important that these people who have done such wondrous things are able to talk to those who can help them and that those who had that capacity to take the stories from these people are equally able to make that contribution. The debriefing exercise will be enormous.

I thank all the other emergency services and the contributions they have made, as well as the ABC. In Gippsland the ABC became our only means of contact. We had no television except for Channel 10 — and I refuse to watch *The Simpsons*. All other means of communication in terms of television were lost to us when the towers went down at Mount Tassie. The ABC has been absolutely magnificent throughout. Gerard Callinan particularly and the team who work with him have done a wonderful job in keeping us informed. The same applies across the state. I believe the ABC has done an absolutely remarkable job for all of us.

The fires have shown the generosity of Australians. We have heard that something of the order of \$190 million has been donated. That of course flows over to other nations and communities who have also made their contribution. They are heroes all.

We are here today to mourn the dead. I offer my condolences to the families of those who are lost. I offer my sympathy for the injured, particularly for the burns victims in the Alfred hospital, for whom it will be perhaps a long and difficult future but who, thank God, are still with us. We have seen some of the consequences of this tragedy. We will never see a lot of them, but they will be generational in form and they will be lifelong for many. It is our role as a Parliament to support all the people who have suffered as a consequence of this disaster.

Standing across all of this like a colossus is the strength of human spirit. We have seen it again and again. The stories have been told in part today and they will be told more in the balance of today and, more particularly, beyond the walls of this place. We have seen the darkest, but we have also seen the finest. Victorians can be assured that we as a Parliament will do what we conceivably can to rebuild these great communities which are so much of the tapestry of the wonderful state of which we are part.

**Ms GREEN** (Yan Yean) — I rise in sorrow in support of this condolence motion. Many times in this Parliament I have spoken with pride of the beautiful bushland areas of the Yan Yean electorate. Just over two weeks ago this beautiful bush paradise turned into an inferno before turning black, deadly and ugly. Black Saturday, 7 February 2009, was a day like no other. It was 46 degrees with a fire danger index of 300, compared to Ash Wednesday's 170. At 5.00 a.m. at my home in Doreen, which faces the Sherwin Ranges of Kinglake, a baking north wind, hotter than I have ever felt in darkness, awoke me. At first I thought our heating had been switched on, or worse, that there was a fire in our garden, but I was wrong. It was simply the weather precursor to the day from hell, when Armageddon came to my community.

At 11.55 a.m. a fire was reported at Kilmore West. Tankers from my own local Diamond Creek Country Fire Authority (CFA) brigade were quickly sent as part of strike teams in response. By 2.00 p.m. we were receiving calls from locals who had seen a column of smoke to the north of us. I worried about the crowd of country music fans at Whittlesea showgrounds. What I did not know then was that this fire would brutally hit Humevale, Strathewen, Kinglake West, Kinglake, St Andrews, Christmas Hills and even, in a lesser way, the Plenty Gorge precinct at South Morang and Doreen.

The next 12 hours were a blur of frenetic activity, anguish and adrenaline. I heard not one but four mayday calls from our CFA radio, all from members of fire crews whose voices I instantly knew. Miraculously

all of these crews survived the mortal peril that they were in. What I heard and saw live in real time were stories of the most profound and selfless heroism — for example, there was the story of the CFA crew from Wonga Park who saved the lives of the North Warrandyte crew who were trapped in a crashed tanker behind fallen trees at Kinglake while the fire raged. These brave fireys physically lifted trees on to the bumper bar of the Wonga Park tanker and used it as a bulldozer to pluck the trapped crew to safety with seconds to spare.

After the raging firestorm went through Humevale and Kinglake West, Whittlesea captain Ken Williamson and lieutenant Tim Dawkins cut their way through fallen and burning trees to rescue injured people from dams and partially destroyed homes. These brave men then chainsawed their way up the ravaged Whittlesea–Yea road to Kinglake, opening ambulance access for hundreds of people trapped on the mountain, with many being critically injured with horrific burns. Back at Whittlesea fire station, group officer Rod Holland and operations officer Phil Peacock established triage for the injured in preparation for transfer to hospital.

Before ambulances were able to reach the injured at Kinglake the brave and skilled volunteers of the Kinglake community emergency response team (CERT) stabilised their shocked and in some cases mortally wounded patients, many of whom were known personally to them. At Kinglake West police officers Cameron Caine and Roger Wood, along with CFA captain, John Grover, herded people into the fire station, where more than 200 lives were saved through their efforts. Captain Grover had no fire trucks left at the fire station, but he calmly used the water and class A foam at his disposal to wet down the station building and its surrounds, providing a safe haven for the terrified people inside.

I pay tribute to the selflessness of the many people who sheltered neighbours and strangers alike to save them from the firestorm. Jenny and Peter Beales sheltered 30 people at their Kinglake home, and Barry Tulley and his wife did the same for 19 people at Strathewen as the unforgiving firestorm passed over and around them. At Strathewen, as the fire bore down on them, Mernda CFA captain, Brandon Delaney, positioned tankers in front of and behind five cars which held terrified locals trying to flee. His training kicked in, and the emergency sprays on the tankers saved the tankers and their crews along with all those in the cars. Ten firefighters from the Arthurs Creek and Strathewen rural fire brigade lost their homes while saving the lives of others. This outstanding brigade led by the captain, David McGahy, and the lieutenant, Michael Chapman, scooped up

many people from dams, roadsides and paddocks but suffered the unspeakable tragedy of knowing more than 40 out of Strathewen's 200 residents died. These brave, selfless firefighters overcame their horror at finding the remains of their neighbours and remained able to provide much needed comfort to their loved ones.

In the fortnight since this tragic day, the Arthurs Creek and Strathewen rural fire brigade has barely stopped, continuing to carve a much-needed firebreak to continue to protect the community and to locate housing, cars and clothing for neighbours who have lost everything. The magnificent ladies auxiliary has served much more than tea, scones, meals and fresh fruit, delivering selfless comfort to husbands, wives and children who have lost partners, parents and siblings. Two days ago a brigade member, Joe Shepherd, sadly succumbed to his injuries and lost his battle for life. Similarly the St Andrews fire brigade, led by its magnificent captain, Helen Kenney, who cannot be with us today because she is attending a memorial service for one of the many who lost their lives, has continued to fight fires while caring for its very saddened local community after the senseless deaths of more than 20 locals, including members of its own brigade. Four brigade members and many other local residents have lost their homes, but members of this beautiful community remain strong and supportive of one another.

The Diamond Creek lieutenant, David Murphy, described the day after Black Saturday as the most difficult firefighting day ever, with firefighters having to extinguish many spot fires and smouldering embers and search for the deceased by going from house to house and car to car hoping against hope that survivors would be found instead.

My memory of entering Strathewen and going along Bald Spur Road from St Andrews to Kinglake is that the area looked like a nuclear wasteland. The only comfort I can give to those who lost family and friends there is that the extent of the devastation and the blackness means that their passing must have been swift. The fact that no CFA firefighters were lost in the fire on Black Saturday is absolute testimony to the CFA's training, particularly the minimum skills modules that have been a compulsory requirement following the Linton fires. I pay tribute to the CFA chief officer, to the board, to the training branch and to each and every brigade training officer who drove those then unpopular training reforms. I have no doubt your efforts saved my local fireys on that day. I also pay tribute to Lex de Man, the current region 13 CFA area manager, who when mayor of Nillumbik earlier this decade insisted on removing the classification of

schools in the shire as fire refuges despite strident opposition. This measure alone saved lives in Strathewen, as the school was destroyed along with the beautiful hall.

It takes enormous courage to protect a community, and decisions will not always be popular. This same courage will again need to be shown in rebuilding our stricken communities. Like each and every firefighter who fought against the insurmountable force of Black Saturday, I have thought over and over about how we could have done more. What I say to comfort myself and what I say to every Country Fire Authority, Department of Sustainability and Environment and Metropolitan Fire Brigade firefighter and other emergency service workers is that the community knows you did your best and that you are simply the best.

My condolences to the family of the Australian Capital Territory firefighter, David Balfour, who came to our community's assistance. I also extend best wishes to firefighters such as Rohan Thornton, who is recovering from injury. I salute the Ambulance Victoria officers who set up triage centres across the fire stricken areas at very short notice and took ambulances into some perilous situations, as well as the health professionals who worked with them along the way and at the hospitals.

I want to pay tribute to the Murrindindi, Nillumbik and Whittlesea local governments for their response in setting up relief centres and working with the Red Cross, Department of Human Services, Centrelink, local churches, Vinnies, the Salvos, the army and that army of locals who have opened their arms and hearts to the stricken survivors. I say to Anne Leadbetter at Kinglake that you are outstanding. I also thank the many traders and businesspeople from Whittlesea, Diamond Creek, Hurstbridge, Smiths Gully, Doreen, Mernda, Eden Park, Epping and South Morang who have put their businesses on hold for days on end or have actually given away their goods and services or provided staff to the relief effort.

Victoria Police has been outstanding both on the day and in the days since and has displayed the utmost sensitivity both to survivors and families seeking news of loved ones. In particular I want to thank Inspector Ian Lanyon, Senior Sergeant Wayne Spence and Sergeant John Elks and say that your coolness under pressure and your profound respect for the departed and those who mourn them has been truly honourable.

I want to thank the Premier, the Prime Minister and ministers and parliamentary colleagues on all sides of

the house — you know who you are — who have responded so quickly to the needs of my community. I commend the Premier on his announcement of such a far-reaching royal commission. I commend both him and the Prime Minister on their commitment to rebuilding and I commend the Premier on the speedy establishment of the bushfire relief fund and the bushfire reconstruction authority. I also extend my heartfelt thanks to these same people for the many personal gestures of support to me and my family for our own loss of friends and for our friends who have lost family, including children they will never hold again. Others still suffer an agonising wait for the missing to be found or their remains to be identified.

I have never been sadder or prouder to represent the wonderful people of Yan Yean. The region I have the privilege of representing has spawned and nurtured the most amazing, creative and productive talent, such as Brian Naylor, who will never again ‘tell us’; the thespian genius of Reg Evans, who will no longer terrorise Jon Faine as Reg of St Andrews, or Reg of Hurstbridge when he tried to hide his true identity; the beautiful art works of Angela Brunton, who I have known since I was 14; the green wedge passion of Jenny Bundy; and so many others I will never forget. Kinglake singer-songwriter Ross Buchanan could never have known his beautiful song *Salty Tears*, which was written for a friend who had lost a child, would also be a song for his and Bec’s own children, Macca and Neeve.

Our memories will live on in our hearts and minds and through the works of legendary artist Clifton Pugh, whose work miraculously survived the firestorm of Strathewen and will inspire us to keep the natural beauty of our area while committing to create a better and kinder community.

I say to the royal commissioner, Justice Teague, that my community stands ready to work in partnership with you to leave no stone unturned to discover the causes of this unspeakable tragedy and to find solutions. My community lost so many beautiful, creative and passionate people on this dreadful day. I mourn each and every one of you, and I commit that I am dedicated to seeing the beautiful place that we all love for its environment and its people restored in your name. The pond of our grief spreads ever wider and deeper for those we have lost, but we will never forget.

**Mrs FYFFE** (Evelyn) — It is with sadness that I rise to speak on this condolence motion. For 35 years the Yarra Valley has been my home. Its mountains have greeted me whichever way I have entered the valley. Whether you come down from Christmas Hills,

through Yea on the Melba Highway, over the Black Spur or from Gembrook, Mount Evelyn or through Lilydale, the valley floor spreads out in front of you and the mountains reach out to greet you like a mother’s arms saying, ‘Welcome home’. But on 7 February a firestorm was unleashed from those beautiful mountains and the valley floor. Yarra Glen, Christmas Hills, Steels Creek, Kinglake, Healesville, Dixons Creek, Coldstream, Gruyere, and our neighbours at Marysville, Glenburn and Narbethong, were all attacked by the fires.

There were 210 lives lost in Victoria, including 11 in the Yarra Ranges. Homes have been destroyed and farm sheds wiped out, as were wineries, pastures, vines, animals, trees and some of the most beautiful gardens in the world. So much has been left scarred and blackened. It has been two weeks since we have been able to see our mountains. Our tears and the never-ending smoke have blinded our eyes. Our valley has blackened pastures, solitary chimneys — that symbol of the Australian bushfire that always remains — twisted roof iron, dead and injured stock.

Our world is very dark, our heads are bowed with sorrow and grief, but we know when all our tears are spent, when all our ‘what ifs’ are said, when the feeling of weariness has past and the anger subsided, when our minds stop constantly revisiting and reliving, we will again lift our heads. We will see again those beautiful, welcoming and encircling hills. The Yarra Valley and the mountain towns will once again regain their iconic status as Victoria’s tourism centres.

Yesterday once more we saw fires close to our townships at Upwey and in the Upper Yarra Valley coming close to the townships in the Warburton area. Once again our exhausted response teams sprang back into action, fighting the fires, supplying food, shelter and support. I watched with awe yesterday as tired — very tired — police and members of the Country Fire Authority (CFA), the Country Women’s Association and the Red Cross opened up centres in Lilydale, Kilsyth and, I hear, in Knox. Once again they provided the services for those who needed it.

The DSE (Department of Sustainability and Environment) staff have been there day after day. Controlling the fires around Warburton is not easy. Those of us who know a little bit about bushfires know that they create their own weather — their own wind and lightning. It is very difficult for man to control them when they are burning with such intensity.

The tragedy unleashed on 7 February will stay with us forever; the extreme heat and the heat haze on the hills;

a land so dry that stalks of grass snapped with every step so that it felt like walking on cornflakes. Birds were sitting on my front lawn, gasping from the heat. I carried a young magpie into the shade and gave it a drink of water. Despite having shade and continuous fresh water, several of our chooks died. They were my husband's precious possessions, as he is a breeder of light Sussex chooks.

We knew it was coming, but no one knew from where, no one knew how, and none of us could imagine how terrible it would be. We were there watching. We had memories of Ash Wednesday, the Dandenong Ranges fires and all the other fires filling our thoughts. It took some time throughout that night and the following day before the news began to filter through. There was so much to comprehend; it seemed unreal. The radio and television reports were like a horror show. There was the urge to know, wanting to rush and help, but knowing we would only be in the way; the calls and anxious questions about who, where, were they, did they? — our voices trailing off as we dreaded the answer.

We knew all the emergency services had immediately swung into action. We knew the shire had enacted its Displan. The people from the Shire of Yarra Ranges have been tremendous during this period, as has Lex de Man, CFA area manager, who was mentioned by the member for Yan Yean. They have kept us informed, but still we wanted to help — and help Australians did. There was an avalanche of donated goods, of everything imaginable, including money and food. Victorians led the way, and as the relief centres opened we were overwhelmed by the love and warmth pouring in.

There were urgent needs, and I thank my colleagues who helped and responded when I made phone calls. I thank the member for Ferntree Gully who somehow found me 40 pairs of men's underpants; the member for Warrandyte, who supplied the shaving lotion and razors we needed urgently and deodorant the relief centres were waiting for; the member for Kilsyth, who supplied suntan lotion for those who needed to go back to their properties; and the member for Bayswater, who drove some very tired policemen home when they finished their shifts because there was no other transport available.

I also thank the member for Caulfield. When I was at the Yarra Glen centre I realised that traumatised little children were standing next to their parents, hearing everything being said and reliving it again. It is absolutely traumatic for a small child to hear its mother say, 'We have no food, we have nothing'. A lady from

the Salvation Army said that toys were needed. I called the member for Caulfield, who arrived with a car full of toys and also a massive amount of personal toiletries that were received by the centre.

I also called Andrea Coote, a member for Southern Metropolitan Region in the other place, and made the same request. Not only did she arrive with toys, but she set up a play corner and spent three days sitting on the floor, playing with the children, blowing bubbles and playing with playdough, which I think was one of the best things that could have happened to help the parents and children.

However, even with all these responses, as we worked we were waiting for the answers to our questions: are they? did they? There was also the overwhelming joy of seeing a face you knew and had thought was lost. I do not know how the Leader of the Opposition will feel about this, but I actually embraced and kissed a longstanding Labor supporter who I thought had gone. It was such a joy to see him.

There was an unbearable sadness when the news we did not want to hear came through. As the activity at the Yarra Glen and Healesville relief centres proceeded, where 3044 people were registered, 10 700 breakfasts, lunches and dinners were served. As this was all happening, the brave men and women of the police force, the SES (State Emergency Service), councils, the DSE (Department of Sustainability and Environment) and the power companies carried on the relentless and horrible task of moving into fire-ravaged areas, making them safe, clearing fallen trees and opening roads when fires were still burning. They were switching off and removing live powerlines lying across the roads at entrances to properties. As they painstakingly made their way from road to road and house to house, we began to hear the count of lives lost. The numbers rose, and at each announcement our hearts sank. Today it is 210. I pray that that is the end and that number will not increase.

Through all this tragedy and gloom, the dry, laconic Australian humour occasionally shone through. Kath Gannaway of *Mountain Views Mail* reports the story from Steels Creek where a gentleman of mature years was coming off the tennis court, resplendent in totally new tennis gear, including shoes. He, like so many others in Steels Creek, had lost everything. Kath was talking to him and asked him where he lived. His answer was, 'The second chimney on Old Kinglake Road'. Then there is the lady at Christmas Hills who lost her house and went back with family and friends to see if anything was left. A box was discovered — undamaged. When it was opened she said, 'Oh, no, I

hate that dinner set. I've been trying to get rid of the bloody thing for 20 years!'.

There have been individual stories of bravery and unselfishness — of Drew Adamson, a volunteer with the Yarra Glen CFA, who was fighting a fire, saving a house, and turned around and saw his own house burning on the hill; of the policemen who saved so many in Marysville; of the farmers who used their own equipment and put themselves at risk as they helped to stop a rapidly moving fire in the valley floor which was heading for the Gruyere hills. If that had reached the Gruyere hills it would have gone through urban areas and up to Silvan — and who knows? There are so many more stories, and I know other members will relate them.

I would like to praise the Red Cross workers, who tirelessly continue to prepare meals and respond to the call, for the numbers of meals they have prepared. At the Yarra Glen staging station I was talking to a group of young policemen and I asked them, 'Are you getting everything you need?'. One of them turned to me and smiled and said, 'Yes, we are very well looked after', and I said, 'In what way?', thinking he would talk about vehicles, about emotional support, about rest time and so forth. He said, 'I've been living on my own for two years. I haven't eaten this well since I left home. The food is fantastic and they're giving us breakfast, lunch and dinner every day!'.

The policemen who have been working in the Yarra Valley — and I can only talk about them — I hold in the highest esteem. They have carried out the task, a very difficult task, with dignity. They have enforced roadblocks which have been very necessary because of the dangers of people going in. My heart went out to them when there was the media campaign to open the roads to Kinglake. In fact, I got very angry about the urge to let that number of people back into Kinglake, when there were no support services for them, when what they would see would be nothing like a photograph in a newspaper or a shot on television, which do not express the smell and the silence that happens in the bush after a bushfire. When I heard of the urging to let people go back in before those support services were there I got quite angry and was going to call, but the Leader of the Opposition advised me that it was best not to do that.

With these fires we have an ongoing situation of an economic downturn in the Yarra Valley. We have had a firestorm, and if we do not act and respond quickly we will have a financial tsunami. So many visitors are staying away. I took the responsibility of calling Helmut Konecsny at Rochford Winery on the morning

of Sunday, 8 February, and asking him to cancel his concert for which 7000 tickets had been sold. I also asked the Yarra Valley Wine Growers Association to cancel the Grape Grazing Festival weekend, which would have brought in 36 000 visitors. That will be held in the future, probably at the end of April, and other things will be happening.

Apart from the lack of visitors, our farmers are also in strife. They have lost many crops through the preceding heat and the drought, and the final heat of the fire. One of our apple growers said to me, 'Chris, do you want to have baked apples for tea?'. I thought, 'That sounds pretty good'. He said, 'Just go and pick a few; you've only got to add the custard'. The heat had actually cooked the apples on the tree.

We are in difficult times. There are people who rely on their casual wages to pay their mortgages, and there are no jobs. The owners of De Bortoli Wines are fielding calls from hundreds of people. They are able to keep their staff on, but many of the small businesses cannot.

So many of the people affected by the fires in the valley, and those we have lost, I knew — some by name only, some by sight and some through my children's sporting activities. I well remember taking Scott to play cricket at Kinglake. There is a photograph in the clubrooms at Yarra Junction of me fast asleep in a chair supposedly watching that game of cricket. I think that day I had some official role to play in scoring or something.

I knew Marysville extremely well. We always took our international visitors to Marysville. We drove along the Acheron Way through Warburton. The Acheron Way was burnt this week as a result of back-burning to try to control the fires. I would drive through those wonderful rainforest gullies with my visitors. They would be amazed, because if you went early enough or late enough you would see lyrebirds. We would go into Marysville and have strawberries and cream and visit the lolly shop.

We would also visit Bruno's Art and Sculpture Garden. In fact, in the mid-1990s I bought a piece of art from Bruno's gallery. It is a sculpture of a very old man sitting surrounded by books and holding out his hands. Bruno told me that the story of this sculpture was that you get knowledge from books but it is from living life and the knowledge you acquire that you get wisdom. This morning I looked in the dictionary to get the definition of wisdom.

The definition of wisdom in the *Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary* is 'being wise' and the possession of

‘experience and knowledge, together with the power of applying them critically or practically’. We have the knowledge. I have read many reports about the bushfires. There is the 1939 report and many other reports. We have heard the experts. There have been many books written about bushfires. I would like to share the sculpture with the house. The sculpture I am showing the house is the piece of art that I got from Bruno. We have the knowledge. We have the wisdom — the acquiring of that knowledge and wisdom.

I ask everybody in this house to use this time, and to use it wisely. The royal commission report will tell us many things, but lots of the things we already know. The federal member for McEwen, Fran Bailey, has made a call for safety in schools. If we had had the fire during the week when children were at school, I do not think any of us would be able to sit here without a tear. I ask all members to just think about the piece of art that Bruno did in the mid-1990s. The knowledge is there. Our collective wisdom is there. It is our responsibility to apply it and to do the things necessary for the future.

**Mr HARDMAN** (Seymour) — It is with sadness but also hope and a strengthened faith in human nature that I rise to contribute to the condolence motion on behalf of the people of the Seymour electorate. I offer my deepest sympathies to the many people who have lost those close to them — your grief will be profound.

Saturday, 7 February 2009, now known as Black Saturday, is a day etched in my mind forever. All of us will have our own memories and perspectives of the day on which nature took control and wreaked devastation on individuals and communities that were in the path of raging bushfires, unprecedented heat and strong and erratic winds.

When I was writing my speech for today and thinking about it beforehand I chose not to relay the stories of individuals, many of whom I have known for a very long time, who either lost their lives or whose stories displayed the qualities of survival, of sorrow and courage, demonstrate misfortune and good fortune, inner strength, destruction and tragedy. Their stories are all compelling, and I do not have time to do justice to all of them.

Today I wish to begin by passing on my deepest sympathies and by saying, ‘Thank you and well done’ to all of those who have partaken in the firefighting efforts and the recovery efforts to date, and to appeal to the Parliament, the government and the wider community to always keep the survivors in mind, as

their grieving, recovery and reconstruction process continues.

To those who have lost family members, to the many people suffering burns and injuries from the fires and to the many who have lost their homes, their mementos, their identity, their livelihood, their friends, I say, ‘You are the survivors. Your strength and resilience, along with the support of others, will help you back on your feet again. I hope the condolences expressed from around the world and here in the Victorian Parliament today offer some comfort to you’.

Many communities across Victoria and most communities across the Seymour electorate have been touched in some way by the devastation inflicted by the fires of Black Saturday. Like the wonderful and generous spirit of the broader community, the spirit of the communities physically destroyed by the fires is also very strong, and the people of those communities have chosen to help each other — to protect, to clothe, to feed, to shelter and to comfort one another. In some cases wonderful people have done this for several days before adequate support could be provided to them as they were cut off by still-burning fires and blocked roads. The spirit which drives these communities to focus on recovering, rebuilding and improving has seen marvellous people prepared to take the burden on their shoulders. People who have had many burdens of their own to face have taken on the burden for others as well, and one can only be inspired by their courage and their selfless actions. There are many volunteers and staff across many organisations that deserve our thanks and congratulations on a job well done to date. Our firefighters in particular have still a great deal to do for the remainder of the fire season.

Our emergency services, including the Country Fire Authority, Department of Sustainability and Environment, Metropolitan Fire Brigade, Parks Victoria, police, ambulance, community first responders and the State Emergency Service, have been there from the beginning working many hours and days to protect our communities. I thank them. Our losses would have been far greater without them.

I also thank the local community leaders who have taken on the task of calming, comforting and providing for survivors who stayed and also those who came back. I thank the local pubs, the shops, the vets, contractors, tradies, schools, hospitals and many more groups that were there immediately, helping make plans and providing practical help to get people back on their feet as quickly as possible. I thank the Red Cross, the Salvation Army, community service organisations, like the Lions, Rotary and Apex clubs, the scouts, the

Country Women's Association and church organisations — there are far too many to mention all of them — which have brought with them their skills, their love and understanding. I would like to thank local shires and councils which assisted people, and the state and federal government departments and their agencies, which all acted quickly and respectfully to provide practical assistance to take on the burden for these communities. The army and the Department of Human Services emergency management team, to mention only two, have given confidence and provided so much support.

I thank the providers of essential services, like power, water and telecommunications, which have acted quickly to get their services back up and running. I thank the many other individuals and organisations I have not mentioned. There are too many, but they know who they are. Their support has been massive and greatly appreciated by survivors.

I would like to offer a personal thank you to the Premier, to the ministers and their staff, to my office staff, my colleagues across the Parliament and their staff and to my friends and family. Their support for the people of the Seymour electorate communities and for me has been outstanding.

My appeal to all is to remember that there is a long road to recovery and reconstruction. I ask that the same sensitivity and wisdom continue. Some of the Seymour electorate towns and communities directly burnt or evacuated include Reedy Creek, Clonbinane, Broadford, Kilmore East, Wandong, Heathcote Junction, Upper Plenty, Kinglake West, Hazeldene, Flowerdale, Strath Creek, Pheasant Creek, Middle Kinglake, Kinglake, Strathewen, St Andrews, Mittons Bridge, Smiths Gully, Castella, Glenburn, Murrindindi, Toolangi, Steels Creek, Dixons Creek, Chum Creek, Tarrawarra, Healesville, Badger Creek, Narbethong, Granton, Marysville, Buxton, Taggerty, Rubicon and Crystal Creek. I am sure there are others I have not named. They will all need us on the long road to recovery.

There are many communities not directly burnt by the fires which have been mighty in their support. Surrounding sporting and community groups and businesses have dropped everything to help. People from towns like Yea, Yarra Glen, Wallan, Kilmore, Healesville, Broadford, Alexandra and Seymour have seen a real downturn in trade. Many of the jobs that have existed in the area rely on expenditure by visitors and tourists, which has led to local businesses being very concerned about their future survival. I ask that these communities be remembered too and that help be

provided. Surrounding communities and businesses were the first to help but they are suffering economically. Major industries in and around the fires, including timber, wine, trout and tourism, have taken a massive hit, and many people's livelihoods will be in the balance for a long time as they rebuild. They need our help.

As we rebuild we need to keep in mind that each community is unique; one size will not fit all in the reconstruction and recovery. We need to listen respectfully and facilitate their vision in the process of rebuilding and reconstruction. The challenge will be to constantly evaluate whether we are treating survivors and communities as we would want to be treated if it happened to us. We need to rebuild sustainable communities.

Where will employment be? What services can we offer to those communities? How can we support the jobs and industries that are left, when people want to stay and rebuild? What is the best way to assist survivors and communities? As the grieving process continues, what do we have in place for people? Is it flexible and ongoing? Will we retain the whole-of-government approach that has worked so effectively?

In 6 weeks, 6 months, 12 months, 2 years and further into the future, fire-ravaged communities will still need our collective focus — emotionally, socially, environmentally and physically. People were affected in many different ways, and it is important that we remember everybody — from the farmers who have lost their fences and have had to sell or put down their stock, to the children who have lost their parents and the parents who have lost their children; from the people who have lost their homes and whose landscapes have been destroyed, to those who have lost their friends or family; from the business people and employers who have lost their trade, to the employees who have lost their jobs. We must remember them, and do what we can to help.

To conclude, I ask that as the recovery and reconstruction process continues we trust in the collective wisdom of the survivors of the bushfires and allow them to shape their communities' future according to their vision. As one of the representatives of the many communities impacted upon across the state, I understand the privilege and the responsibility I have to work with people to ensure that their voices are heard. I also understand the responsibility I have to ensure that the government and our authorities undertake the massive task of rebuilding with compassion, empathy, tolerance and understanding. I

commit to doing my part and look forward to the continued support of everyone into the future as we recover and reconstruct our communities.

**Mr NORTHE** (Morwell) — I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the condolence motion before us today on behalf of the electorate of Morwell. Firstly, I acknowledge my colleagues for their unwavering support during this difficult time and pass on my best wishes to other members of Parliament who are also dealing with the various challenges associated with these devastating bushfires. I offer my deepest sympathy and pay my respects to those impacted upon by the events of 7 February. I say to those who have lost family, friends or neighbours, to those who have lost homes or possessions, to all those who have been directly or indirectly affected by the bushfires, please know the thoughts of the Victorian community are with you. Those thoughts extend to those still fighting fires as we speak and those recovering from injuries sustained during the past weeks.

The Latrobe Valley region has been subject to the scourge of bushfires since 28 January, with the townships of Boolarra and Yinnar directly threatened by the Delburn fires. Thirty homes in the Boolarra region were destroyed at this time, along with numerous sheds, stock, fencing and fodder. Little did we realise that this was just a prelude to a much greater disaster.

Whilst I have the opportunity I want to acknowledge all those persons who helped fight the Delburn fire and who assisted and are assisting the Boolarra and Yinnar communities in their respective recoveries. In particular I acknowledge Boolarra Country Fire Authority's captain, Todd Birkbeck, its first lieutenant, Roger Pither, and their team. Without the efforts of CFA crews such as Boolarra, Yinnar, Yinnar South and Driffield many more homes would have been destroyed and lives possibly lost.

The date of 7 February will be etched in the minds of Gippslanders for many years to come, with widespread devastation across many Latrobe Valley communities including Churchill, Jeeralang, Hazelwood North, Hazelwood South, Traralgon South, Callignee and Koornalla. Personally, my heart sank the moment I first witnessed smoke billowing from the Churchill-Jeeralang fire in the pristine hills to the south-east of Churchill. Given the weather conditions on this day, I knew this torrent of flames would be impossible to halt. Despite it being only mid-afternoon, day quickly turned to night and with the darkness came fear — fear for residents in the various communities who would be in the direct path of this monster fire.

We now know the destruction this fire caused, with the toll on life and property almost unbearable. Up to 10 residents of the Morwell electorate have lost their lives, up to 180 homes were destroyed and in excess of 35 000 hectares of land were burnt. Countless sheds, stock, wildlife, pets and areas of bushland are gone. It is difficult to fathom the loss of such beautiful people, homes, animals and nature. I did not witness the fury of this fire firsthand, but the stories that have been relayed to me have left an indelible mark upon me. It is therefore difficult for any words to describe the courage and strength of the CFA volunteers who faced this menace at its fiercest.

I do not want to single out particular CFA volunteers but recognise the contribution of CFA crews such as Churchill, Callignee, Traralgon South, Hazelwood North and others for their efforts as the fires raged within their own communities. As always their first thoughts were to protect the community, and this was clearly demonstrated by CFA crews throughout the state — for example, 11 members of the Callignee CFA and 1 member of the Traralgon South CFA lost their homes whilst protecting the lives and properties of others. I know this story has been replicated across other fire-ravaged areas of Victoria; you just have to dip your hat to the men and women of the CFA.

We should also recognise the contributions of visiting firefighters from other regions of Victoria, interstate and even overseas who gave so much of their efforts in our time of need — well done to them all. One should not forget the extraordinary efforts of Department of Sustainability and Environment personnel and, from a local perspective, Hancock Victoria Plantation fire crews for their determination in tackling this awful blaze. Our police have again excelled in the face of adversity — what a wonderful job they do! I commend one and all who were associated with the Gippsland bushfires.

The Leader of The Nationals referred to the ABC. Gerard Callinan and his team in Sale were fantastic; they did all they could to assist in providing accurate information to local residents.

The police have made an arrest in relation to the Churchill-Jeeralang fire, which is an enormous relief to many residents in the Latrobe Valley. Let it be known that arsonists, along with their sidekicks, the looters, schemers and scammers, are the lowest of the low and do not deserve to live amongst the good people in our communities. That said, disasters such as these bushfires bring out the worst in a very small minority of people but the absolute best in the vast majority.

The initial feelings of many people impacted by the Churchill-Jeeralang fires were simply surreal. Having spent time at fire recovery centres I, along with others, witnessed emotion on a scale that I have not seen before — despair, shock, disbelief, anger and grief. There are so many stories of heartbreak and so many stories of lucky escapes. What do you say to someone who is missing a loved one or whose home and possessions have been destroyed beyond recognition?

This is when many other heroes came to the fore to provide necessary support to bushfire victims. Organisations such as the Latrobe City Council, the Red Cross, the State Emergency Service, the Salvation Army, St Vinnies, St John Ambulance, service clubs, the Country Women's Association, Lifeline, the Department of Human Services, Centrelink, the Department of Primary Industries and VicRoads and all their staff deserve the highest of accolades for their unbelievable efforts over this extremely difficult period. Ditto for the hundreds of volunteers and private industry representatives who have given so much over the past three or four weeks in our region. Many also contributed to the recovery efforts during the Delburn fires.

What about the generosity of local businesses and the community in general? I, like others, have been absolutely staggered by the goodwill of so many people. The word 'humanity' has been utilised in recent days, and I concur that this word is entirely appropriate with respect to the Gippsland community's response to this disaster. Children emptying their piggy banks and donating to the cause, the local senior citizens club contributing funds from a raffle and people offering their homes to those displaced are just three examples of simply hundreds of offers to assist those in times of need. How proud it makes you feel to be an Australian citizen.

Without understating the devastation of other fire-ravaged areas of Victoria, there is a sense amongst the Gippsland community that it has been somewhat neglected during these tragic events, particularly from a media perspective. Whilst that might be debatable, the same cannot be said with respect to the local community, which has provided unconditional love and support to the victims of these bushfires. That is more important than being on page 1 of any newspaper.

We should not forget the involvement and importance of community associations. The Boolarra Community Development Group and Yinnar and District Community Association, for example, have been vital in their towns' respective recoveries from the Delburn blaze. We now see the Traralgon South and District

Association playing an integral role in its community's recovery. Two active leaders from that association, Ange Gordon and Chris Madsen, are leading the way among a team of many.

I want to relay a couple of stories that came out of the Churchill-Jeeralang fires. It is amazing how humour can help in a time of grief. The first relates to friends of mine, Shayne and Megan Cheney, who unfortunately lost their dream home in Koornalla. Megan was relaying the story to me that she had been attempting for approximately 12 years to convince her husband, Shayne, to sell the boat the family rarely used. Finally, Shayne recently relented and, due to the extreme heat of 7 February, the family decided to take the boat out to Hazelwood Pondage for a final run before selling. Noting the smoke on the horizon in the early afternoon, they decided to return home, but on the way they decided to leave the boat at a friend's house elsewhere. With their home unfortunately lost in the fires, all Megan could say was, 'You wouldn't believe it. The only asset we have left is that bloody boat!'. A further point to this story was that Shayne lamented publicly the loss of his favourite thongs in the fire. Two days later, 500 pairs of thongs were delivered to Shayne!

I also refer to an associate of mine and his family who lost their home in Callignee. Tony and his family have done it tough over the years, and he was absolutely distraught over the loss of his home, but the fact that he had been planning something special for his daughter took his emotions to another level — and mine as well. Over the previous three or four years Tony had been secretly placing money away in a container inside a pot-belly stove in his shed — which does not appear to be a good idea, but that is what he did — with the money intended to be used to purchase his daughter a car when she turned 18. The thought that his money was gone was something Tony could not comprehend. When Tony was finally able to return to where his home had been standing the only item remaining was the pot-belly stove. You guessed it! He opened the door, and inside was the money intact.

I had the opportunity at the national day of mourning service last Sunday in Churchill to meet Maureen Reid and her mum, Lexie. Maureen's son, Nathan, lost his life in the Churchill-Jeeralang blaze, and I was astounded by the strength of both Maureen and Lexie. During our conversation both ladies remarked on the family and community spirit afforded to them. This had helped their family deal with the loss of Nathan. I am just so proud to represent the quality of people who reside in the Morwell electorate, and I know this experience will make our community even stronger.

Our landscape has been scarred by these fires. However, it will come to life in time and, like the landscape, our community, which has been scarred by this experience, will also grow and bloom into the future.

**The SPEAKER** — Order! It is an appropriate time to have a short break.

**Sitting suspended 4.35 p.m. until 4.47 p.m.**

**Mr CAMERON** (Minister for Police and Emergency Services) — I join with other honourable members in expressing condolences for the loss of life in the recent bushfires and also express the hope that those who were injured recover. I wish also to remember all of those who have lost property and to pay a debt of gratitude to those from the Country Fire Authority (CFA) and other emergency services and to the great many thousands of other volunteers who came to help.

Nearly four weeks ago we had a fire at Boolarra, and if you can have a bushfire through that area, which is normally a bit damp, it says something about how flammable the rest of the state is. Of course that is in the context of record heat, record drought and the driest start to the year on record. That is why the weather bureau was alarmed a few days before Black Saturday and gave the chief fire officers the darkest of news — that the weather conditions on that Saturday would be worse than those on Ash Wednesday in every respect. It would be hotter, the humidity would be lower and the winds would be stronger. Severe warnings were given and emergency service agencies put plans in place. The Metropolitan Fire Brigade geared up to help the CFA. Councils were put on notice that municipal emergency coordination centres and relief centres might be needed. Members of many volunteer brigades sat in their stations on the Saturday ready to pounce, because they knew that any fire that started on that day would not be able to be contained and would run extremely hard.

I have spoken to many older people in the CFA who were there on Ash Wednesday, such as Doug Murley from Eaglehawk. All of those people said that it was worse than Ash Wednesday, and many made it very clear that it was a quantum leap worse. The Yea group officer, Neil Beer, said if he had had 1000 tankers that day it would not have stopped the fires. A firefighter at Alexandra said that he saw a fire over the ridge but knew from the radio that the main fire was nearly 30 kilometres away — that was how far the fire had spotted. Likewise on that day the Churchill fire spotted around 30 kilometres away at Yarram, where it caused a fire. While that fire was later contained, yesterday it

got away again, which just highlights how difficult the fire conditions are and how difficult the fire conditions remain for the state.

On that day firefighters did everything they could. I know that there are a lot of people in agencies such as the CFA who ask, ‘Could I have done more?’ and worry and ask questions and question themselves. The simple fact of the matter is they did their job, and they did it extremely well with a fire enemy of a size we have never seen before. To all of them we say thank you. They performed with valour and we are very, very proud of what they did, and as a result of what they did they make us very, very proud to be Victorians. So many lives and so many houses were saved through the efforts of firefighters, and I salute them. I salute the firefighters in my own electorate, where Sparrowhawk and Ironbark would have substantially burnt down if it had not been for the tremendous efforts of firefighters on that day. It was likewise at Redesdale in my electorate, where there was a large fire. That would have been much worse if not for the tremendous efforts of firefighters.

At no time in the lead-up to that day or since have I seen such good cooperation between agencies, including the Country Fire Authority, the Department of Sustainability and Environment, Parks Victoria, the Metropolitan Fire Brigade, the State Emergency Service (SES), Victoria Police, councils, emergency call-takers, ambos, the emergency services broadcaster, the ABC, and the Bureau of Meteorology. Can I say of the chief fire officers of the CFA and DSE respectively, Russell Rees and Ewan Waller, who led the fight on that day and who continue to lead the fight, that they are two of the most practical and common-sense people that God put on earth. They work so well with each other and so well with others — and we are grateful to them and their teams.

I sat with them on that Saturday evening when police confirmed our worst fears — the loss of life. They sat sombre, but they never lost sight of the task that still lay ahead. The fires were large, and it was to be a long fight — and it still is a long fight. While emergency services personnel fought through that Saturday night, it was not until the morning that we began to realise the full enormity of the horror that had been inflicted — towns reduced, communities decimated, families gone. So we mourn the dead. We mourn them all. I join with honourable members in offering condolences to the families and friends and to their communities for what happened on what we now know to have been our darkest day.

Relief centres and municipal emergency centres were quickly set up. Thousands of people were homeless. The stories of survival, heroism and heartache spread out on that Sunday. The personal stories on the Sunday touched my heart when I was in Gippsland with the Treasurer, the Leader of The Nationals, the Minister for Community Development and the honourable member for Morwell. Although on Saturday we saw Victoria at its worst, on Sunday we started to see what would become Victoria at its best as Victorians rose to the challenge of reaching out to help each other.

Ordinary Victorians were coming out to become part of an extraordinary community effort. Even while the fires still blazed, members of the Red Cross, the SES, neighbours, community groups, ambos and the Department of Human Services were there, and in the days that followed the towns were full of members of St John Ambulance, the Country Women's Association, Lions, Rotary, the Salvation Army, the Brotherhood of St Laurence, church groups and St Vincent de Paul. There were so many groups and so many people; all of them are great Victorians.

When the scale of it became apparent the army quickly responded and gave its assistance. All levels of government came together, and agencies and groups worked hand in hand. Nobody complained; people just got in and did what had to be done. Nobody stood around and looked at a problem for long. People worked out a way to get to a solution. Crises always bring about a whole series of problems, and people just wanted to work through and quickly get on with the job. There are so many people who have grown a foot in the last two and a half weeks in Victoria.

Volunteers give of themselves because they believe in serving others. Days after the fire I saw some people who owned nothing but their CFA or SES uniforms — people like Marysville's Peter Thwaites from the SES, whom I saw twice. He continued to work away, helping other people; he is selfless. The only thing he had was the overalls he had had on since Saturday night.

I pay tribute to the police for their local leadership and the fantastic job they all did. I pay tribute to the police who were involved in the task of identification, which I saw when I visited Marysville with the coroner. The Chief Commissioner of Police, Christine Nixon, gave great leadership, and she continues to give great leadership to her team at this vital time, with the vital role that local police play and continue to play. She has been a great chief commissioner, and she is going to do a great job as head of the reconstruction authority.

We are very grateful that we live in a great nation that pulls together. The army came, and every state and federal police force sent people. The Indonesians sent people. Fire services from across the nation came forward, helping relieve our teams so we could maintain a large force out on the ground. We thank the teams that came from the United States, Canada and New Zealand; they assist us just as we reciprocate with them.

Last Tuesday I was at Alexandra with the chief fire officers, and on the staging ground there is a massive number of tents which Steven Kaiser from DSE brought together. The caterer that night was going to do 1500 meals for those who were getting ready to go out and for those who would be coming in. There was a colourful array of uniforms, all from different agencies and places, but those wearing them all were working and eating together with a common objective of tackling and quelling fire.

One of the groups I spoke to was a group of blokes from the Australian Capital Territory who were part of a bigger group and who were going to do one more shift before they went home to their families. Unfortunately one of them, David Balfour, was killed by a falling tree. His funeral was held this morning. We mourn the loss of a good Australian who came to the aid of fellow Australians. While I have spoken to his wife, Celia, privately, I now publicly place on record our condolences to her and to her children on the loss of her husband and their dad.

We pause today to remember lives that have been lost and join with the families and friends in their grief, and to remember that people have been injured, homes have been destroyed and communities shaken. But we also resolve to remember by rebuilding. We thank all the thousands and thousands of volunteers who have helped, and we thank their employers who have released them. We thank the ABC for its magnificent role in providing information. We thank the SES, the police and our great fire services: the CFA, the DSE and the Metropolitan Fire Brigade. We thank local firefighters in local communities. The magnificent volunteers of the CFA are the backbone of the authority, making it one of the great fire services of the world.

**Mr BLACKWOOD** (Narracan) — It is with a great degree of sadness that I rise to support this condolence motion. I intend to touch on the broader statewide impact of the fires and then make some comments and observations regarding the impact of the fires in my electorate of Narracan.

The terrible loss of life — the figure now stands at 210 — is an absolute tragedy never before experienced here in Victoria. I extend my deepest sympathy to all those families and individuals who have lost loved ones and friends. As we all know, Victoria has been subjected to attacks by large bushfires on many occasions over the years. In 1939, 2003 and 2006 the area burnt was probably more than double that burnt on Black Saturday. The fires of 2009 will go down in history as fires which had a massive impact on populated areas and which resulted in a tragic loss of life and complete devastation for many communities, particularly Kinglake, Marysville and Strathewen, and Callignee in Gippsland.

Having lost a younger brother in a car accident when he was 18, I know what it is like to lose a family member. I have observed the impact a death can have on a family. I think you learn to live with the loss, but you never really get over it. That is probably what most families and friends of bushfire victims will find. Over time they will learn to live with their loss, but they will really never ever get over the tragedy.

Out of this tragedy, as has been the case with so many other tragedies in Victoria over the years, we have seen the emergence of heroes. Some have gone about their jobs doing what we expect of them, while others have taken enormous personal risks to assist others and save lives. I bet that for everyone who gets recognition in the media for what they did there are hundreds who have performed similar acts of heroism that will go unrecognised but will never be forgotten by those who received assistance. I would like to thank every one of those heroes for their selfless acts of support for their fellow community members in the face of terrifying danger.

In my area of Narracan there are two fires that have continued to pose a threat to a number of communities. They are the Bunyip Ridge fire and the Walhalla fire. Both fires are still burning. On Black Saturday it was the Bunyip Ridge fire that did the most damage. We were very fortunate. I guess you could say we were the luckiest of the unlucky on that day. I thank God that we did not suffer any loss of human life. Having heard the contributions of many of my colleagues today from both sides of the house, in particular the excellent contributions from those who have had their electorates directly impacted, I feel a bit guilty standing here and saying that, but I do thank God that we did not lose any human life. The buildings, fences, hay and pasture we can restore and replace, but it is impossible to bring a lost loved one back.

The Bunyip Ridge fire is believed to have been deliberately lit on the Wednesday before Black Saturday, and I believe the reason we did not lose anybody at the height of the blaze is the warning our communities received. The first community meeting was held at Labertouche at 1.30 p.m. on Friday, Black Saturday eve. The projections the Country Fire Authority and Department of Sustainability and Environment officers made at that meeting proved to be spot on. People knew exactly what to expect. They knew the north wind would strengthen from 11.00 a.m. on Saturday and swing around to the south-west from 3.30 p.m. onwards. The message was very clear: if you are going to stay and defend your property you have less than 24 hours to ensure you are well prepared; if you are going to leave the area, you should go now.

I firmly believe that many lives that could have been lost were saved because the Labertouche, Labertouche North, Drouin West and Jindivick West communities had this amount of notice and had it spelt out to them so plainly. This was in stark contrast to what happened to those communities north of the Great Dividing Range and in the Latrobe Valley that had no warning.

I would like to thank all of those people who worked so hard in the face of enormous danger to keep us safe on the day: the Country Fire Authority (CFA) staff and volunteers; the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) VicForests and Parks Victoria staff; our police; and in particular the ABC regional station in Gippsland. Gerard Callinan and his crew worked through the day getting the message out right up until when the Mount Tassie tower succumbed to the fire that started in Churchill. They had the FM station back up and running by about 6 o'clock on Monday evening. It was a great effort by them to get back on the air and keep getting the message out.

I also extend thanks to the timber harvesting contractors and to the chopper and plane crews, including the Elvis crew, who responded so well. The fact that they were able to fly all day on that Saturday in the prevailing conditions was amazing. No other aircraft could get into the air, but they were prepared to take the risks in flying conditions that I do not think they had flown in before, certainly in Australia. I commend them on the work they did and the risks they took on behalf of Victorians on that day. I thank the timber harvesting contractors who responded by providing the bulldozers and their very critical bush experience and knowledge for the firefighting effort.

Probably we all have a good understanding of the roles of the CFA, DSE, Parks Victoria and chopper crews but very little is said or published about the role of machine

operators in the firefighting effort. Bulldozers and other heavy machinery are used to construct containment lines, and containment lines are usually constructed some distance ahead of the fire front to try to stop the advance of the fire and often to provide a location to back-burn from in order to widen the buffer between the fire front and unburnt vegetation. As one would expect, with the volatility of the wind, it can be extremely dangerous to work in front of an advancing fire. Constructing a containment line in rugged terrain, which can be very steep or rocky, is also hazardous and requires the skill of an experienced operator. The operators usually work 12-hour shifts around the clock, and working at night presents another added challenge and set of risks.

I would like to pay tribute to all those timber harvesting and earthmoving contractors and their crews who respond to the call without a second thought and rarely get a mention. My son, Tony, is working at the Bunyip Ridge fire, operating a dozer. Like any parent, we worry about our children, even after they turn 30. Tony sent me a text message to say he was working with Geoff Stafford, Brian Cornwall and Les Christian, all three of whom have an enormous amount of bush experience. In fact Les is a veteran of the bush, one of the best bushmen in Gippsland. Les has been retired for many years, but every time there is a fire he dusts off the old D7 bulldozer and is the first one to offer its services. It put my mind at rest once I knew Tony was working with three such highly competent, experienced and knowledgeable bushmen.

As I mentioned earlier, the response of the Shire of Baw Baw has been fantastic. The relief centre in Warragul was set up at the leisure centre, and by Sunday morning over 360 people had registered with Red Cross. The donations of food and clothing flowing in were overwhelming. The number of volunteers arriving and wanting to help was so great that a special process for registering volunteers had to be set up by the shire away from the relief centre. The municipal emergency control centre set up by the shire on the day before the fires was working exceptionally well. Once again I commend the Baw Baw shire for its swift and timely reaction to the impending crisis by putting so much in place on the Friday, before the fires swept through.

We were lucky in Narracan, but the devastation to property is significant, and the impact on many people and businesses is going to be long lasting. There is the heart-rending story of Jessica Graden. Jess and her brother, Hew, lost both their parents to cancer in recent years. Jess is 23, Hew is 21, and Jess is Hew's guardian

because he has Down syndrome. They lost everything on their family property.

There are many amazing stories of people who stayed, defied the ferocity of the fire and saved their houses. However, as they saved their homes their businesses went up in smoke. The McGuffy, Betheras and Witchell families of Labertouche North are some examples of those impacted in this way. Boundary and internal fencing, water infrastructure, hay, pasture and shedding have all been wiped out.

Many businesses that were not directly impacted by the fires are being hit very hard. They have lost business because of the lack of activity caused by the fires. Tourism in particular has dropped off. People are not visiting fire-affected areas or even areas neighbouring the fire-affected communities. The towns of Jindivick, Neerim South, Noojee, Erica, Rawson and Walhalla are experiencing this crippling problem. Hospitality businesses in Rawson and Walhalla are having bookings cancelled even as far out as April, which is still months away.

I encourage our metropolitan and city-based cousins to support these communities by taking a weekend trip or making a booking for Easter. This is still a beautiful place to visit, and while you will see some small evidence of the fire, our high-quality tourism industry is still very much operating as normal and open for business. These people and many others like them are hurting, and we must support them. Our forests will grow back; nature will take care of that. We must take care of our people and ensure that their lives and livelihoods are resurrected from the ashes and returned to normal.

Finally, I would like to thank all my parliamentary colleagues on both sides of the house who visited my electorate over the past couple of weeks, and in particular the Minister for Agriculture, who made at least two or three visits to my electorate. Not only did he give great support to our farmers, but he offered great support at the relief centre and to the shire. I once again pass on my condolences to those of my colleagues whose communities have been impacted in the worst way, and I certainly hope this never happens again.

**Ms ALLAN** (Minister for Regional and Rural Development) — The fires of Saturday, 7 February 2009, ravaged our community. They tore through the suburbs of Bendigo and the landscape south of Redesdale. These communities, along with many across Victoria, have been left with terrible scars — on lives, bodies, homes, individuals and families. My

condolences go to those who have lost loved ones, and in particular I express my deepest sympathy to the family and friends of Michael Kane, who fell victim to the ferocity of the fire in Long Gully. Along with the loss of Mr Kane, the toll of the Bendigo fire includes the destruction of 64 houses and damage to another 63, along with many sheds and outbuildings. The Redesdale fire took a number of days to contain. During that time 14 homes were lost and another was damaged, along with many farm buildings, and there were significant stock losses.

To help soothe the pain and heal those scars, the condolence motion we tender before this Parliament gives us the chance to come together to remember, to grieve and importantly to demonstrate our strength as a community. That strength was displayed by the emergency services and the enormous number of volunteers who responded to those first frightening calls. I saw firsthand that strength displayed by the staff of the City of Greater Bendigo, Victorian and commonwealth government agencies, community organisations and volunteers who responded to the immediate needs of families displaced by the firestorm. That strength was displayed overwhelmingly by the people of Victoria, Australia and the world who donated money, goods and time to help us commence the recovery effort. We will need strength and a unity of purpose in the coming months as we work tirelessly to repair the damage, to learn what happened and to help those affected physically and emotionally by the worst natural disaster this country has ever seen.

Anyone familiar with Bendigo will know of the strong unity and pride of those who live in the former Borough of Eaglehawk and its surrounds. This is a community fiercely protective of its own, and on Saturday, 7 February, they stood together and fought the enemy that came within 1.5 kilometres of Bendigo's heart, the iconic Alexandra fountain.

We have heard through the media and from our constituents and colleagues many horrific stories of death and destruction, of terror and trauma that simply tear at your heart. We have also heard stories of courage, bravery and hope, and many of these stories were from Bendigo. In Bendigo the tales of neighbours battling side by side as the blaze tore through the suburbs is credited by local firefighters as being a key reason why hundreds more homes were saved than were lost.

On Sunday at our local memorial service, Paul Epworth, a father of three young boys, told me about how he had lost his own family home, but he spoke with great pride of how his community of about 30 or

so people had helped save his sons' school, the California Gully Primary School, armed only with ice-cream containers. The general store on Sparrowhawk Road lost two houses on its left, and Kay and Harold Greenwood thank the young boys who stood there with hoses to save their shop. They had already fled to safety, fearing for their livelihood, when their grandson rang to say 'Nan, the shop is still here; we are giving it a hug for you'.

It has been uplifting to witness the compassion of our community. This compassion was on display the day after the Bendigo fire when at the community meeting and later at the relief centre people told me that despite losing their home and despite not having a bed to sleep in for that night, they were lucky and better off than communities such as at Kinglake, where so much more was lost.

Fires may have threatened to obliterate our sense of optimism, but over the past two weeks I have seen that it failed. It certainly failed at Callignee, as the house has already heard this afternoon, where Ian Ewart, captain of the local Country Fire Authority brigade, already had plans drawn up to present to the Premier a week ago for a new centre to replace the CFA shed, community hall and former school that have been lost in those devastating fires at Callignee. With the Premier's ready agreement for the government to help meet the rebuilding costs, this is a community determinedly focused on the future. This is the theme that has been repeated in every town and relief centre that I have visited over the past two weeks.

The rebuilding effort across large parts of regional Victoria will dominate the activity of governments — federal, state and local together. There is an enormous task before us. It will dominate the work we do through Regional Development Victoria (RDV), which through its response to previous fires in 2003, 2006 and 2007 has a strong understanding of the importance of working with communities to help rebuild homes, businesses and community facilities.

I would like to acknowledge the work done to date by my department and particularly the staff of Regional Development Victoria. Many of the staff live in the fire-affected areas and were directly impacted by these fires. In the days after the fire their ability to directly support the work of government and simultaneously support their own communities was tremendous.

Residents of suburban Bendigo now have to think differently about their response to fire danger. The natural environment draws many people to live and work in Bendigo. One of the key attractions is the

unique box-ironbark forests. Families can live within 1 or 2 kilometres of Bendigo's heart but still be surrounded by this unique environment.

We know that the warnings for Black Saturday were serious. The weather conditions were nothing that this state had experienced since the time of European settlement. Many people who live in our country towns and rural communities swung their fire plans into action. The residents of Eaglehawk, California Gully, Long Gully, West Bendigo and Ironbark who confronted this fire and witnessed its ferocity will now think differently about high fire risk days. Residents across Bendigo have also begun reassessing their understanding of fire protection.

On Sunday afternoon, with tears barely dry from the memorial service that morning, residents of the rural area that I live in gathered to discuss our fire plans for our individual properties and our small community. The tight and tired faces of those present at this meeting betrayed the worry of living in a rural community during the worst fire season we have experienced. Our neighbours already had plans for what they would do, but Saturday, 7 February, has changed everything. The fire that day broke all conventional wisdom. For us, with the Redesdale complex fire starting only 10 kilometres away, it came far too close. As the member for Narracan has just said, we were one of the lucky ones of the unlucky ones. These fires demand that we redefine the way we think about how we protect our home, our loved ones and our community. They redefine the threat of fire in suburbs, country towns and across the rural landscape.

We finished our meeting determined to improve our efforts around our homes and, critically, to work together as a community. Our vow to each other was to be better neighbours — each to know where the other is on high fire danger days, to share contact details and to be alert for any sign of impending danger. We also resolved to talk to the CFA to ensure that we are better informed and better prepared.

The fires of Boolarra in late January and early February, the fires of Black Saturday and the fires that have continued to burn across the state have been devastating. Their lessons are many, but the fires have not broken our bond of community. That bond has been strengthened through heroic efforts, through generosity and through an affirmation that we will build safer and stronger communities and, importantly, take better care of each other.

**Dr SYKES** (Benalla) — On behalf of the people of the electorate of Benalla I speak in support of the

condolence motion. I offer my sympathy to those who have lost loved ones or have been seriously injured or lost their home, property and livestock. I also extend my gratitude to the over 4000 CFA (Country Fire Authority) volunteers, DSE (Department of Sustainability and Environment) staff and support agencies, including the SES (State Emergency Service), the police, Red Cross and community groups, businesses and the tens of thousands of ordinary people who have contributed to this effort. Scarcely a Victorian has not been touched by the fires. In the Benalla electorate, some have been burnt. Hundreds have fought the fires, and thousands have supported the firefighting effort, and thousands have grieved for those who have been hurt by the fires.

In the south of the electorate the Rubicon Valley has been burnt and is still at risk. We also still have risks to Enoch Point, Woods Point, Gaffneys Creek and Jamieson. Eildon, Thornton, Yarck, Strathbogie and Ruffy communities had some very nervous times. In the north, Mudgegonga, Rosewhite, Kancoona and the neighbouring areas of Bruarong, Stanley and Running Creek were burnt. Two hundred and forty farms were burnt, approximately 16 houses and, very tragically, John and Sue Wilson lost their lives. Many other lives and properties were saved through the preparedness and courage of individuals, by the angels — the sometimes not-so-pretty angels in the big red trucks — and by good luck and at times what must be considered an act of God.

I wish to acknowledge some of those who have contributed to this magnificent effort by the community to battle the fires from hell. In doing so I apologise to the many whose names I do not have time to mention, but be assured my gratitude extends to all who fought the fires and all who supported the effort.

All the 81 CFA brigades in the Benalla electorate contributed by sending trucks and crews to the main fire front or by remaining home on high alert to protect their own and neighbouring communities. And thank God some did stay at home, as we needed them when fires broke out at Mansfield, Stewarton, Mount Beauty and Rosewhite. A couple of these fires were started under suspicious circumstances.

Local DSE, Parks Victoria and Hancock's plantation staff were in the thick of things. There were also magnificent behind-the-scenes efforts by regional fire coordinators at Benalla and incident control centres at Alexandra and Ovens. People such as DSE's Peter Farrell and Kevin Ritchie, and CFA's Alan Davies and John Boal kept cool heads at Benalla whilst coordinating much-needed resources for the front-line

troops. These men were ably supported by police, SES and support staff, including Dobbo, Sally, Lauren, Jenny, Carol and many others.

Closer to the fire front, Murrindindi shire councillors and council staff have performed an outstanding job under extremely difficult circumstances. I particularly want to acknowledge the efforts of mayor Lyn Gunter, chief executive officer Mark Henderson and councillors Kevin Bellingham and Peter Beales. Those who know their individual stories would understand why I speak of them in particular.

In Alpine shire mayor Nino Mautone, chief executive officer Ian Nicholls and Trevor Britten and many other staff along with volunteers such as Cheryl Sanderson have given a tremendous effort to help the fire victims and the relief and recovery effort.

Post fire, the efforts of Andrew Embling at Alexandra must be acknowledged. He has been out on the road with Les Hume — Andrew looking after the stock requirements and Les looking after people's requirements. It is little wonder that Andrew was honoured with a Medal of the Order of Australia last year. The ubiquitous rural outreach worker Ivan Lister is also poking around the Murrindindi shire doing what he does best — helping people in their time of need.

At Mudgegonga the efforts of Loretta Carroll and the whole Carroll clan and neighbours have been outstanding. Loretta and her sister Therese, brother Paul, and Bill, and other extended family members and neighbours have operated a fodder depot from day one and have done a magnificent job distributing hay so generously donated by fellow farmers.

Speaking of hay donations, a special mention must go to Melinda Spinks of Goorambat near Lake Mokoan. Melinda and her husband, Wayne, initiated and so far have coordinated the supply and delivery of 18 semitrailers of hay to the fire victims. The Goorambat area is part of the Broken Valley irrigation system, which has had zero water allocation this year. That is a magnificent effort by those people.

Returning to speak about the fires, I must acknowledge the outstanding efforts of the ABC team for broadcasting timely fire updates. The ABC's efforts were complemented by Tony Tynan and his team at 3NE Edge FM at Wangaratta, Mary Smith and her team at Mount Beauty community radio, and Peter Rice and his team at UGFM Alexandra. All have made magnificent contributions to the fire effort.

Mary-Ann Egan and Siobhan Carson also deserve special recognition for their role in communicating

sound advice to many nervous communities, including those at Eildon, Yarck and Strathbogie. As the member for Narracan mentioned, timber harvesters and earthmoving contractors deserve recognition for their outstanding contributions. People such as the ageing Allen Ashworth and the Stilo brothers worked extraordinarily long hours under extraordinarily tough conditions, but they did the job and never complained — well, not much in the case of Ashworth!

Power company staff and telecommunications staff also worked under extraordinarily difficult conditions, restoring power and communications. At wildlife rescue centres — in particular, Gabby Mehegan and her partner Rick — workers did their bit to save native animals hurt by the fire. DPI staff, especially the animal health staff, have again performed admirably. The animal health staff have had the gruesome task of assessing burnt livestock and arranging feed for those that can be kept alive, salvage slaughter for those that are a little bit injured and immediate destruction for those that are seriously injured.

There were many examples of leadership and courage, and many amazing escapes, in battling the fires. At Mudgegonga hall last Thursday night over 250 locals publicly expressed their immense gratitude to local CFA captain Andrew Cross. The crowd also acknowledged the selfless efforts of Lizzie Jones and Doug Connor who, in the middle of the night on Black Saturday, rang farmers in the Running Creek area to alert them to the impending dangers. Their actions enabled farmers to muster their stock and save hundreds of livestock from being burnt.

There have been many such acts of selflessness, courage and leadership by often unassuming and unintended heroes. Amongst the lucky escapes which have made it into the media was the Yarck CFA truck crew's near miss when its truck was caught in the fires, but fortunately good training and cool heads saw its members live to tell the story.

There are many more stories that have not made the national media but which will be indelibly etched in the memories of those whose lives and properties were saved, and which will become part of local folklore. Those stories will be told and retold around the campfires and in the lounge rooms in north-east Victoria for generations to come.

I close by again offering my sympathy to those hurt by the fires, including my good friends David and Jennifer Barton of Marysville. To those I have thanked, I thank you again, and to the thousands who I have not thanked or mentioned, I say many thousands of thanks.

**Ms LOBATO** (Gembrook) — I rise to support the condolence motion today and share the grief and sadness of all Victorians as we contemplate the many tragedies that have taken place during the most devastating bushfires ever witnessed in this state.

These horrific fires, experienced by so many communities spread across the entire state, have claimed the lives of more than 200 people and destroyed thousands of homes. These statistics are traumatic and overwhelming, and even somewhat hard to envisage. However, we know that behind every statistic are real human beings whose lives have been turned upside down as well as families in need of emotional and financial support.

Like many in this house, I remember all too well the Ash Wednesday bushfires of 1983 which cast a blackened pall over much of the state. Just last year I attended a memorial service in Cockatoo which marked 25 years since so many lost their lives and when the small townships of Cockatoo and Upper Beaconsfield were devastated. Community infrastructure and homes were totally destroyed, virtually wiping out townships. On that anniversary it was staggering how raw were the emotions of those who had experienced that day so many years previously.

Yet there are also people who recall the 1939 Black Friday bushfires that burnt almost 2 million hectares and claimed 71 lives. One of the townships most affected that day was Warburton, a town in my electorate that has again been under severe bushfire threat for weeks. Some of the local residents have been reliving both the 1939 and 1983 bushfires during this February. Now there is another year, 2009, that will be etched in all our memories.

Ash Wednesday made such a profound impact on everyone that I, like many, felt the scope of bushfire tragedy would never again reach those levels. As a community we all learnt lessons from Ash Wednesday — lessons that we felt would stand us in good stead for tackling future fires. The Country Fire Authority in particular has spent decades informing communities about bushfires and the need to prepare fire safety plans. CFA and other emergency services have never been so well resourced and ready.

We have diligent, trained volunteers and urge new residents in high fire risk areas to prepare for fire events. In short we felt better prepared than ever before. The ferocity of the fires on Black Saturday and the record-breaking temperatures were beyond what we could have contemplated. The scale of devastation, the number of lives lost and the properties destroyed have

outstripped what any of us have previously experienced.

In the wake of this devastation lie towns that will be forever changed and people who, like the Ash Wednesday and Black Friday survivors before them, will always carry the scars of having been part of Black Saturday 2009. There is now a generation of Victorians for whom the date 7 February will forever be a reminder of the loss and devastation they experienced on the day that changed their lives forever.

For the townships of Gembrook and Tonimbuk, this year's bushfires began prior to Black Saturday, with numerous fires breaking out in the Bunyip State Park and taking hold. The main fire front in the forest travelled south on Black Saturday and severely impacted upon the townships, including Labertouche, Jindivick, Drouin West and Longwarry.

The day after I joined many of my fellow Gembrook neighbours in staying glued to the radio, simultaneously trying to digest the tragedies at Kinglake and Marysville while also trying to stay alert to the threats at Bunyip State Park nearby.

On Monday the Deputy Premier, Matt Viney, a member for Eastern Victoria Region in the other house and I toured the affected areas, where we saw many destroyed homes and farms. At many properties we witnessed cows standing in tiny unburnt areas in an expanse of black, being unable to move unless they stood on still smouldering pastures. We visited farms and homes where owners had stayed to defend and been successful because they were thoroughly prepared. The fire had stopped at the front gate or the front door — their homes saved while hot spots were still emitting smoke in the adjoining paddocks. People spoke to us of their experience, their fears, their determination, their exhaustion, their ultimate success at saving their properties — all mingled with sadness at the devastation of others.

We also visited Labertouche Primary School where we witnessed the principal and teacher, with buckets of water in hand, tending to the smouldering areas through the school grounds while homes in view were razed to the ground. On Saturday the Beaconsfield fire brigade left a note under the school's door stating that it had saved the school. It was great to have a reason to smile at the cheekiness of the firefighters, who in the midst of such devastation had the state of mind to leave a parting note.

We silently expressed our thanks to those firefighters whose efforts meant that we still had a school to inspect

on Monday, even though paddocks around were still on fire. We arrived at Jindivick and saw to the north of us the rapidly moving Bunyip fire, which meant that within just a couple of hours Gembrook and other towns were again subject to fire threats.

For more than two weeks Gembrook has been subject to alerts, making normal day-to-day life and planning events almost impossible. In recent days there has been a constant back-burning, which has meant more reassurance for residents despite the heavy smoke which is our daily companion, yet the prospect of more hot weather, continued dryness and hot winds means there is an underlying insecurity so that no-one can really relax.

While the Bunyip Ridge fire was wreaking its havoc throughout the southern areas of my electorate, my Upper Yarra communities were under threat from Black Saturday as ember attacks from fires reached as far as Warburton, Warburton East, McMahons Creek and Reefton. The potential impact that residents had been warned about for days was realised and residents prepared their cars to leave. The sudden departure of so many residents caused difficulties along the Warburton Highway and resulted in the rare sight of an Upper Yarra traffic jam. Over the next couple of days, as the full extent of the bushfire tragedies unfolded, the process of assessing the damage and slowly taking the first steps towards recovery began.

While so many people are grieving and getting on the path to recovery, others such as the residents in my communities across the Dandenong Ranges and through the Upper Yarra are putting their grieving on hold. These residents have been on alert because of numerous threats, making them basically live from day to day, not knowing whether tomorrow will be the day to leave or what will present itself during the night. These threats will continue throughout this week as my constituents jointly assess the fires to the north and the fires to the south.

Yet this has not stopped people from displaying extraordinary generosity during these difficult weeks. As our Prime Minister said on the weekend, 'Bushfires display the worst of nature but the best of humanity'. People have come to my office bearing goods and toiletries and telephoning with messages of support or offers to help. At the same time as assisting bushfire survivors, I have been frantically occupied with preparing for more bushfires as the Bunyip Ridge fires and the fires north of Warburton and the Upper Yarra have edged ever closer and threatened to engulf my electorate.

I attended the Healesville relief centre, which was an outstanding resource for the community with every possible service offered. I went with Parks Victoria staff as we were setting up an information stall to advise people of the location of current fires. Like the Leader of the Opposition, at Healesville I had the pleasure of meeting Connor. Connor came up to me for a chat. I crouched down on the floor and asked Connor how old he was. As his baby brother sucked on my mobile phone, Connor told me he was three-and-three-quarter years old and matter of factly added that his house had burnt down. This articulate toddler refused to be overwhelmed by the tragic circumstances, and after we had an interesting discussion about fire trucks we got down to the urgent serious matters at hand as he asked me to take him to the toilet. The resilience of Connor gave me hope that, yes, we would all get through this tragedy.

There have been many community meetings held within my electorate. Staff from the CFA, Parks Victoria and the DSE (Department of Sustainability and Environment) have all worked together to ensure that the best possible information is provided to residents throughout the scattered Upper Yarra townships, not only through these community meetings but in assisting me to establish street information stalls with the latest fire maps and fire information sheets.

Residents in their thousands living in high bushfire risk areas have also been attending many Living with Fire, formerly known as Fire Ready Victoria, meetings over recent weeks. It has long been a concern of emergency service agencies to know how to connect the unconnected in the community to receive important safety messages. It has taken this tragedy for many to digest the message. I thank all community education personnel within the CFA.

I also acknowledge and thank Stuart Cooper from Parks Victoria. He has been tirelessly providing expert advice to our community at our stall in Warburton. Also of great help to residents have been the radio broadcasts through the ABC 774 programs. They have provided solace and support along with vital information to residents who live in somewhat isolated areas of the Upper Yarra region. I commend the ABC, its broadcasters and support staff who have exercised the station's role as the emergency services station with diligence and thoroughness. I also thank the emergency services commissioner, Bruce Esplin, for his assistance in ensuring that radio reception was greatly improved for our Upper Yarra residents.

I also thank my friend Brian Halit, a recipient of the Australian Fire Service Medal, and a division

commander, for all his assistance. Today Brian joins us in the gallery. Last week I took a chopper ride along with Brian and fire observer Graham Seppings to more clearly get a picture of the impact of the bushfires on my electorate. From the air the Bunyip State Forest appeared as rows of black matchsticks. It was impossible to imagine that people spent time tackling such a monstrous fire beast capable of inflicting such destruction by standing on that front line, facing such incredible danger.

Along with all my colleagues, I thank and commend all the firefighters for their tireless work over this difficult time. The efforts displayed by the CFA, Metropolitan Fire Brigade, DSE, State Emergency Service and Victoria Police, both through their paid and volunteer staff, has been absolutely outstanding. On behalf of my constituents I sincerely thank them. I am in awe of their commitment and dedication to protect our communities. I also thank all personnel working frantically and constantly in our incident control centres.

We are fortunate to have so many other dedicated volunteers working in many areas. There are the Red Cross relief and recovery centre volunteers, the many vets who have volunteered to assist animals in need and members of the general community who have been touched by this tragedy and who have volunteered to assist in some way.

We all know the fire season is not over yet. From my office yesterday I witnessed massive plumes of smoke rising from the vicinity of Belgrave Heights. Despite the tragedy that has already taken place, the potential for more tragedy still exists. Yesterday I decided to evacuate my home after two and a half weeks of feeling very insecure. With the Belgrave Heights fire under way, and the Bunyip and Warburton fires still going, I evacuated with my children and my animals.

Half an hour after I left my home I had a frantic call from my neighbour, Silvia, who was screaming into my phone saying that Gembrook Park was now under fire. Gembrook Park is a forested area just behind our homes. Yesterday afternoon some arsonists decided to light 10 fires in Gembrook Park. Fortunately the emergency services were on to it straight away so we are very thankful for that. We are also aware of the very real threat of another disastrous day occurring on Friday.

Today is a day of condolence. While not ignoring the ongoing fire threats that will continue with us for the rest of the summer, it is appropriate to recognise the suffering of many communities and to remember the

wonderful Victorian people who tragically are no longer with us. Our community is poorer for their absence, but I assure their families and friends that not one of those precious lives will be forgotten. While we do not pretend to bear the same scars as those families, we will all share in their sorrow and commit to remembering all those who died on 7 February 2009.

**Mr TILLEY** (Benambra) — It is with much sadness and a heavy heart that I rise to support this condolence motion and pay my deepest respects to those who have lost family, friends and associates who can never be replaced but will never be forgotten. I grieve for the widespread destruction of homes, businesses, pasture, livestock, infrastructure and the environment. The vegetation will regrow and infrastructure can be rebuilt, so although we will all work for the better, things will never be the same again.

It was just over a fortnight ago that I was discussing weather warnings with colleagues. Forest and grass fire index ratings were in the extreme range and were more than double those of the Ash Wednesday fires of 1983. We were hoping for no fires of significant impact but what we have witnessed and are still witnessing is a catastrophe that has rocked not only Victoria but the whole nation. Could anyone have possibly imagined such widespread loss of life or destruction of property of such devastating proportions? The answer is most probably no, but there will be much debate around that issue later. Today and for the rest of this week in this place, out of respect we will ground arms and parlay rather than engage in political debate. The full gamut of human emotions have been evident, ranging from grief and despair to helplessness, anger and outrage, but what overwhelmingly underlies all of these emotions is the desire to rebuild — and rebuild we must.

I thank all members of this house who represent the electoral districts that have been most directly affected by this catastrophic fire for their contributions: Bendigo East, Bendigo West, Benalla, Benambra — the electorate I represent, where there has been loss of life from our shared community of Mudgegonga — Evelyn, Gembrook, Lowan, Morwell, Narracan, Polwarth, Seymour and Yan Yean. I particularly mention the member for Seymour, whose heartfelt contribution really could not do justice to the number of lives that were lost in the Seymour electorate, and also the contribution of the member for Yan Yean. I thank them for their contributions. I share their grief and everyone else's grief and offer the utmost respect for all their efforts in their communities in this time of great need. However, we now realise that the work is only just beginning.

I say to our local government community leaders — the mayors and councillors of the shires of Alpine, Baw Baw, Horsham, Latrobe, Mitchell, Murrindindi, Whittlesea, Towong and Indigo — that you should say but few words but say them well for your communities in this time of grieving and reconstruction.

I thank all Country Fire Authority members, both professional and volunteer, including firefighters and those in communications and other logistical roles and functions who have given of their time and energy in an endeavour to fight and control fires and to maintain the front line at each and every fire complex. In particular I mention those in dispatch from region 24, whose primary operational role was at the Beechworth complex fire. I mention Andrew Cross, captain of Mudgegonga; Warren Larkins, strike team leader, who displayed great leadership under fire; Doug Connors of the Dederang brigade; Michael Bartel, group officer of the Kiewa group; Des Seymour, group officer, and Ron Leary, deputy group officer, of the pilot group; Graham Healy, a highly experienced and respected local, great bloke and incident controller at Kilmore; the Dederang brigade in Mudgegonga, in particular Mark Van De Ven, Corey Jones, Greg Green and Clive Hawkins. To them all I say you should just know that there was no more that you could have done.

I also acknowledge Nigel Parsons and John Bigham for the clear and concise information they gave at many of the community meetings; Paul King, the operations officer at region 24, for his strong leadership and cool head in a fire campaign where capacity had been reduced due to the widespread nature of these fires; and Aaron Wallace, the Kiewa brigade captain who pushed with all his brigade members — after missing out recently for a third successive time — under the community safety emergency support program to procure their own community funds an additional slip-on appliance, which has not seen the inside of the shed since and has paid for itself in the work it has done in saving lives and property.

I also acknowledge Keith Harms of the Beechworth brigade, a quiet achiever who goes about business without fuss and bother and is committed to his brigade and community; Colin Coyle, from Wodonga West, who is experienced and ever vigilant and who is always there to respond and provide support through his wealth of knowledge and experience; David Jewell, David Brown, Ray Gibent and Michael McLinden, all aircraft officers and air attack supervisors who are our eyes in the sky.

I extend thanks to our Department of Sustainability and Environment firefighters, who at times have been the

recipients of unnecessary criticism. You should know that your efforts and hard work deserve praise. The efforts of Leith McKenzie, Brian Pritchard, Shaun Lawler and Jeff Ross deserve special mention.

I also mention our ever-diligent members of Victoria Police, who continue to support and work closely with their communities: sergeants Geoff Still and Brian Curran for their work at the Beechworth Municipal Emergency Coordination Centre; and senior constables Rod Lay, Tom Boyle, John Kissane, Peter Stewart and Jason Frede, for whom nothing was too hard. I say to all members of Victoria Police who have protected and continue to protect the devastated communities and those who have the task of locating victims, you have my greatest respect.

I acknowledge the members of other fire services from around the country, and indeed overseas, who heeded the call for assistance and came to the relief of Victorian firefighters when exhaustion had set in and adrenalin alone was no longer enough. David Balfour's ultimate supreme sacrifice in the line of duty will always be remembered. To all those who operated private fire appliances, to contractors and to plantation operators, who rarely get mentioned, I say that your sharing of the burden has made the task in these extremely difficult times easier.

Our State Emergency Service staff members have been at any place at any time taking up the slack. No job has been too big or too small. These men and women go largely unrecognised for a lot of the work they perform in our communities. They have my gratitude for ensuring that all those tasks just got done. To the members of the Australian Defence Force who took part in its defence assistance to the civilian community tasking, Victoria extends its gratitude to you. Hopefully there are many lessons to be learnt from your deployment and the assistance you provided Victoria in its time of need. I acknowledge the Premier of Victoria in this regard for his timely request for assistance and the Australian government for its quick response. I also acknowledge the army of volunteers who have manned phones, relief centres and community centres assisting people with access to help, accommodation, food and clothing, and who have provided a shoulder when required and an ear when needed.

I thank the Victorian Farmers Federation for its quick response to the call for fodder, relief and a distribution effort, and all those property owners who made contributions and donations to support those who experienced significant stock losses and pasture destruction. It was imperative to get that fodder on the ground as quickly as possible.

I extend thanks to the many Australians — individuals, families and corporations — who have given so generously, whether in the form of goods, food items, clothing, cash or accommodation. The response has been amazing. It makes me proud to be an Australian. I particularly mention the people from the community centre in Corowa in New South Wales, whose generous donations of goods and toiletries have been distributed to a number of relief centres throughout the Beechworth complex and closer to Melbourne.

I have witnessed many acts of kindness over the last couple of weeks, from the little boy donating his pocket money to pensioners and other individuals purchasing food and goods at a time when that expenditure would have meant a sacrifice on their part. Mrs Susan Hines, an Albury businesswoman, contacted my office to advise that the company she represents, PPS Hairwear Australia, was willing to donate \$35 000 worth of hair-care products and that she wanted to set up a temporary salon in an affected area to enable survivors and others impacted by the fires to have their hair done and feel a little bit better in themselves, even if it was just for a short time. After an overwhelming response from around the Beechworth complex fires, the feedback I got was that they were pretty well catered for and there was a greater need for those services closer to Melbourne. A temporary salon was set up at the Wallan neighbourhood house, with much assistance.

I would like to acknowledge the following people: Susan Hines for her drive and determination; Donna Petrovich, a member for Northern Victoria Region in the other place for her assistance in obtaining a location; Murray King of Budget Rent a Car in Albury for the donation of an 8-tonne truck for getting donations to locations and a commuter van to ferry survivors to and from their appointments where necessary; and to committee members of the Wallan neighbourhood house, Pauline Cornish, Tania Smith, Dot and Julie, for their energetic assistance and can-do attitude on any task asked of them.

I also acknowledge Robert Seeley of PPS Hairwear Australia and in particular the hardworking hairdressers, who were there for people to tell their stories to. They listened and took away a bit of pain for those men, women and children. They are Rachel Seja and Daniel Wooley of Ruckle Hair Design, Mansfield; Judi Seeley, Andrew Sakeson, Aldo Manella, Lina Del Sureto, Melissa Hagley, Rebekah Roberts and Eloise McParland of PPS Hairwear Australia; Adriana Quattrocchi of Unique Hair and Beauty in Shepparton; Mimma Scali of Shepparton; Leanne Dungen of Heathcote; and Tina Risteski of Chez Tina for Hair in

Balwyn North. Seeing the smiles on the faces of all the men, women and children who had had their hair done to take the edge off the pain was uplifting. This goodwill will continue in Kinglake this week. The hope is to give survivors just a small moment to escape during these difficult circumstances and to feel normal during what is a surreal time for many.

For the north-east of Victoria, the wonderful part of the state that I am so proud to represent, this is the third large and complex fire in the last six years. These amazing, resilient communities who live and raise their families in the electorate of Benambra are very matter of fact. I have attended community meetings and talked with many individuals over the last two weeks. Regardless of their losses of pasture, livestock, fences, structures and the threat of impending or likely fire, predominantly all they want to know is the prevailing weather conditions, the forecasts, the active fire fronts and their locations — all in order to effectively put in place their fire action plans and have timely and accurate information, to know when it is time to activate those plans.

I have to say that no government must ever be allowed to abrogate its responsibility or apportion blame on unsubstantiated factors or to make claims that are simply misleading or promises that cannot be realistically delivered. At this time we all must ensure that we do whatever it takes. Victoria is counting on it.

Complacency must never set in. Weather forecasts for this week are not favourable and fuel is extremely dry. We are already observing new active fire fronts. This is not over yet. I urge communities to remain vigilant. They should know that our thoughts are with them. To those communities that are already devastated I say, 'We are with you and will remain with you for as long it takes'. I commend this condolence motion to the house.

**Mr MERLINO** (Minister for Sport, Recreation and Youth Affairs) — On the morning of 7 February Meagan and I took our daughter Sophie to the Croydon pool to cool down. At about 11.00 a.m. we left. We stopped at a supermarket to get some things and the wind hit us like a tonne of bricks. I distinctly remember looking back towards our home and all the communities that I represent in the foothills of the Dandenongs and feeling dread. I remember as a boy during Ash Wednesday seeing a sky of red, falling ash and my dad on the roof with the garden hose. I will always remember the furnace-like heat and the unnatural, wicked wind of Saturday, 7 February 2009.

Quick and decisive action from the Country Fire Authority (CFA) in Quarry Road, Upper Ferntree Gully saved the Dandenongs that day, and for that we are all grateful. Yet the combination of tinder-dry conditions, extraordinary heat and gale winds would not be denied. Across Victoria we suffered the worst natural disaster in our country's history — one that is not over yet. In the midst of this horrifying event the relatively small fire in Quarry Road is not well known, but the residents of the Dandenongs know how close indeed we came to an unthinkable loss of life and property.

The fire, so close to the Dandenong Ranges National Park, put in extreme danger the many communities of the hills. The fire only burnt about 5 hectares of land, yet came dangerously close to taking lives and homes. Everyone in the Dandenong Ranges owes a massive debt of gratitude to the local firefighters who stopped that particular fire on 7 February. Upper Ferntree Gully CFA brigade captain Peter Smith was quoted as saying, 'We were very, very fortunate to contain it where it was. It was a very good save. It had the potential to be another disaster'. And he was absolutely right.

Unfortunately our local brigades continue to be tested this fire season. One week later a fire broke out in Peters Street, Belgrave. The 6-hectare blaze was again quickly attended by local brigades, with 15 trucks and 2 firefighting aircraft getting it swiftly contained. A few days ago I spoke with Lex de Man, the CFA general manager for the Yarra area. Disturbingly, he told me that the fires in both Upper Ferntree Gully and Belgrave were suspected to have been deliberately lit. I hope that out of the devastation of the last fortnight, the term 'firebug' is never uttered again. Such a harmless sounding phrase completely misrepresents the destructive, devastating and deadly consequences of the action of the perpetrators.

Yesterday a 300-hectare fire broke out in Nixon Road, Upwey, burning through much of Birds Land Reserve and threatening the townships of Upwey, Tecoma, Belgrave, Belgrave Heights and Belgrave South. Over 400 fire agency personnel worked to contain the fire. Three firefighters were injured and a tanker was significantly damaged during this latest event. The fire has again flared up today, and straight after my contribution to the motion I will be heading to Upwey for a public meeting.

Again I would like to thank for their courage and skill both our local firefighters and the crews that came from well outside the area, including Mordialloc, Ballarat and many other places. I visited the local emergency relief centre in Lilydale this morning, and many in our community remain on edge, particularly ahead of this

Friday, which looms as another difficult day for Victoria.

Over the course of the last two weeks I have been to many of the fire-affected communities. In my home shire I have visited Healesville and Yarra Glen. I have also been to Horsham, Whittlesea, Arthurs Creek, Kinglake, Kinglake West and Wandong. A few days ago I went to Strathewen. I heard and saw things I do not ever want to hear or see again. I spoke to the local CFA captain and I saw a man almost broken yet defiantly not so. I will never forget the horror of what David told me, of not only the decisions he had to make on that fateful day but, in the aftermath, of families coming to him in search of their father, mother, brother, sister or friend whom they had not heard from, of the local brigade searching and finding bodies, and of telling those families and friends the tragic news. His story was heartbreaking.

Later that day we travelled to the Strathewen Cricket Club ground. The member for Mordialloc was with me as well. A bloke called Dennis asked to travel in our car. At virtually every corner we drove around he pointed out the ruined landmarks of friends and neighbours. He spoke at length about his community and informed us about the horrors of the fire. We drove past his destroyed home, the place where his wife and son died. In the frenzy of the fire Dennis had turned his car in one direction, and lived. Those in the car behind him had turned in the other direction, and had not. What can one say to someone who has lost so much?

Yet out of this horror we have witnessed the very best attributes of the Australian people — extraordinary courage and resilience. Dennis, who had lost everything, was going to get his bulldozer working so he could help clean up and rebuild the town he loves. There was the bravery of our emergency services personnel. There was generosity in epic proportions, and there was compassion and tireless commitment by volunteers in the relief centres. We will rebuild — every town, every community — and I will personally see to every sports club.

Last week the Premier announced funding to help get local clubs back on their feet. Over the last fortnight I have met with clubs including the Kinglake Football Club, Yarra Glen and District Pony Club, Wandong Junior Football Club, Strathewen Cricket Club and the Horsham Golf Club. Each club is united by one desire — the need to get their sport going as early as possible.

Local community sport is critical in providing an outlet for the kids and for the mums and dads, particularly in

the hard months ahead. As I was told by one of the members of the Kinglake Football Club, in six months time when the media and the intense focus have gone, it will be the football club, the netball club and the tennis club that will provide priceless moments of joy and relief on the weekends, as locals rebuild their lives during the week. These clubs are the cornerstone of country communities.

You see this in the Strathewen Cricket Club, which came together to play an emotional away match just one week after club members lost their houses, their clubhouse was destroyed and, devastatingly, members of their community perished on their oval. You see this in the members of the Kinglake Football Club and the Wandong Junior Football Club, who came together just 10 days after the devastation inflicted on their communities, with both clubs resoundingly voting to play on this season.

And you see this in the looks on the faces of children and adults alike after meeting their favourite cricket, Australian Football League and Olympic superstars, many of whom toured many relief centres. My thanks go to them and to all the state sporting associations. My department will be working one on one with each affected club and with local councils and state sporting associations as we quickly rebuild them.

This tragic event has touched us all like nothing else. Over the last few weeks when I have seen a picture in the newspapers of a young family that died, I see my daughter and wife. I often think about but cannot imagine that moment, which is a horror above all horrors, when parents must have realised they could not save their children and thought, 'I cannot protect my kids'. When I read about the stubborn old man who refused to flee his home, I think of my dad; I think we all make such connections. Those who died were you and me, and we are them. In their honour we are going to get through this together.

**Mr DELAHUNTY** (Lowan) — I rise on behalf of the Lowan electorate, and I am very happy to support the condolence motion moved here today by the Premier and supported by the Leader of the Opposition and others in this house. It also gives me great pleasure to follow the Minister for Sport, Recreation and Youth Affairs, and I thank him for coming to Horsham to have a look at the golf club there. I was pleased to hear his comments in relation to getting sporting groups back on track after these horrendous fires, because he is right: providing sport and recreation is one way to get people back together, supporting each other, bonding together and getting over the enormous bushfires we have had.

The January and February bushfires have resulted in a catastrophic loss of life, the loss of private property, the loss of special possessions and the loss of public property. In the Lowan electorate we had many fires on that tragic day, which is now known as Black Saturday. The two fires I want to focus on are the Coleraine fire and the one at Horsham. In these fires we lost a lot of memories, we lost machinery, we lost property and we lost houses. Thankfully we did not lose a life.

One gentleman, though, whose name is John Smeets, was doing what any true Australian would do — he was supporting his neighbour by letting that person's stock out. Unfortunately John suffered 50 per cent burns to his body and is still in the Alfred hospital. His wife, Lorraine, is here today. Lorraine showed me photos of John this morning. He has got horrendous burns, and I am sure that we as a community will stick with him and his family.

Importantly today our prayers also go out to those who have lost loved ones — family members or friends — or who are in hospital or have been injured or traumatised by these fires. I, and I am sure the people of Lowan, want to say thank you to the people who have helped people in our area. We give high praise to the emergency services people — the firefighters, particularly the volunteers of the Country Fire Authority (CFA); the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE); Parks Victoria; the State Emergency Service (SES); and the police — and importantly, as many members have spoken about, the council staff, the volunteers, the Red Cross, the Salvation Army and all the other groups that have helped during and after the two fires at Coleraine and Horsham, in my electorate.

I will give the house a bit of background to the fires in my area on 7 February. We were well aware it was going to be a very severe weather day; we were going to have worse conditions than those on Ash Wednesday. The DSE, the CFA and, importantly, the council in Horsham had set up a strategy to meet together at 7.00 a.m. on Saturday. Some 25 people got together, including the police, the SES and Ambulance Victoria. They had a management plan in place, and they were positioned with plant and operators.

The fire damage index, which is known as the FDI, is an accumulation of fuel curing, air temperature, relative humidity and wind speed data. An FDI of 50 points is normally a total fire ban day. At 4.45 on Friday night and again at 6.30 on Saturday morning we were told the fire rating index in Horsham was expected to reach 178. We were expecting a temperature of 44 degrees,

relative humidity of 7 per cent and north-westerly winds of between 50 and 75 kilometres per hour.

Although we were expecting a fire damage index of 178, the truth of the matter is that at 1.00 p.m. on that Saturday the FDI hit 312! We had a temperature of 46 degrees, 8 per cent humidity and north-westerly winds of 65 to 80 kilometres per hour, so the FDI hit 312. I think the FDI on Ash Wednesday was rated at about 165. Thankfully, by 7.00 p.m. the FDI had dropped to 49 points.

The fires in Horsham and Coleraine were both started by power poles. The towns were saved, thankfully, not only as a result of the work of the firefighters but also by wind change. Also I must thank the private firefighting units. Many of those were supplied by farmers or land-holders around the fires. Thankfully they were there not only at the front of the fires but importantly in the mop-up afterwards.

I also want to praise the media. Ace Radio in our area was on air in both Hamilton and Horsham. Also ABC radio — particularly Prue Bentley, who has not been in the area long — did a fantastic job. We had losses, though. As I said, we did not lose any lives, but in Horsham nearly 3000 hectares were burnt, we lost 11 houses and large numbers of stock. We lost sheds and had extensive loss of fencing. We lost the Ryans Freighters depot and one Dimboola fire brigade strike vehicle, but the symbol of the Horsham fires was the loss of the fantastic clubhouse and pro shop of the Horsham Golf Club. The Horsham golf course is rated 27th of the private courses in Australia, and it is a major loss to the community. Down at Coleraine 770 hectares were burnt, a house and three hay sheds were lost, and fencing and some livestock were destroyed.

I also want to compliment my staff. On the Sunday after the fires we opened the office, and an enormous number of contributions flowed in, including cash donations, bags of clothing, blankets, non-perishable foods and even a house. We even had a trucking company from Stawell donate a truck to cart hay.

The newspaper articles were numerous. I will not have time to highlight them all here today, but the *Wimmera Mail-Times* had the headline 'Fire fury', which was symbolised by a photograph of the golf club. The *Casterton News* had the headline 'Black Saturday'. The *Hamilton Spectator* had a photograph of a shed and a photograph of that great man John Smeets; it was entitled 'Hellish Saturday'. These newspaper articles highlight the enormous support by neighbours. Right across the electorate people pulled in behind their neighbours and supported them. We have also had the

enormous clean-ups that have been going on, but I will get to them at a later stage.

The recovery has been fantastic. I know the Red Cross ladies were preparing meals on fire days and have been ever since. The Salvation Army, St Vincent de Paul, the Christian Emergency Food Centre and community and neighbourhood houses right across the electorate have been putting in. But one of the great stories I want to tell is about the Bendigo Bank. There is a Bendigo Bank set up in Coleraine. Its chairman, John Kane, spoke to me about the fact that John and Lorraine Smeets may be down here in Melbourne for at least 12 months.

I say to Lorraine that hopefully it will not be that long. The bank has pulled in behind the community. It has said, 'This is a community bank which will not let these people fail. We will support them financially — all of their bills, all of their accounts — until the money starts to come back'. That is the support they are being given. Vickery Brothers in Coleraine have also pulled in behind them so there has been fantastic support. In Coleraine, on the Thursday following the fires, the council, the Apex Club, the service clubs and 80-odd people got together and cleared the whole 770 hectares. In one day they cleaned it all up — the fences, the sheds, the lot. On the Saturday after that, when I was back there again, they were already putting up the fences. There has been fantastic support from Coleraine.

There have been community meetings in Horsham and I am pleased to see that both the Horsham Rural City Council and the Southern Grampian Shire Council are represented in the gallery today. I commend both those councils for the work they have been doing. I have attended a couple of the community meetings and I want to congratulate all the people involved for the work they are doing. As the Minister for Sport, Recreation and Youth Affairs and others have said today, the Horsham Golf Club went up. After the fire that took the golf club and all the trees, an arborist from Melbourne University was brought to Horsham and pink ribbons were placed on the trees that would have to be removed. They soon worked out that that was not the way to go; they put pink ribbons around the ones that were going to be saved. At the Horsham Golf Club 85 per cent of the trees have been lost with enormous recovery work to go on there.

As another example of support, from the top of Australia the Darwin High School community got together and raised \$1500 to send down for the kids at schools in Horsham. There is a great connection between Darwin and Horsham and also with the

Darwin Defenders because a lot of people from Horsham went to Darwin at that time. The blood bank in Horsham has been overrun by people wanting to support it.

A lady by the name of Molly Cutchie lost her house but was more concerned about the welfare of her horse. He is 32 years old and is her only connection with her husband who died years ago. In the little township of Haven the horse called Haven Hero survived. It is a great story.

There was another story, about a fellow by the name of Roger Hallam. It is not the Roger Hallam we knew as a former member for Western Province in the other house, but a fellow who lives in Horsham. He sent his wife and two kids away from the fire area and stayed and protected their house. He saved the house. A week later, on 14 February — Valentine's Day, his wife placed a special notice in the newspaper congratulating her husband. It was a great story to read in the *Wimmera Mail-Times*.

There has been enormous support, but there remain some issues and I quickly want to touch on them. They are fire preparedness, fuel reduction burning, the use of private vehicles and power poles. My federal colleague has raised this in the federal Parliament, and to his credit the Prime Minister agreed that we need to give more support to power companies to replace wooden cross arms and those types of things and to try to speed up that work. There is also the issue of those who are insured and those who are not, and obviously the issue of road blocks. A fantastic job was done in my area, but these are some of the issues to be resolved.

People from western Victoria supported firefighting across the state. It is hard to believe, but in south-west Victoria at 11 o'clock, after they put out the fires in Coleraine, people were being sent to the other end of the state to support their colleagues. To date there have been 1100 CFA members from the south-west area providing support to fight the north-east fires. Approximately 55 teams are helping there. They are also supported by two incident management teams, and currently they have three strike teams in the staging area at Whittlesea on a two to five day roster. In the Wimmera area there are currently 10 tankers, 2 forward control vehicles and 48 people. They previously had 75 people there, and tomorrow 25 people will head across to change over, so there has been enormous support.

However, we need the government's support for a couple of things and I know that council representatives are here today. The Southern Grampians shire will be

declared a disaster area and support will be provided there. In Horsham not only the golf club needs support but the town hall does as well because there has been talk of upgrading that structure. Importantly the community in the Haven area has come together and it wants to set up its own CFA brigade. There is also a Haven recreation project mooted and I have a copy of the community's submission with me today. The community would also like support for that project.

To conclude, I am very glad of the chance to support this condolence motion. It is an opportunity for us to remember and grieve for the victims of these bushfires. We also need to give thanks for the tireless work of our volunteers and emergency service personnel. We have had enormous loss of life. We have had extreme property damage and major trauma and displacement. We pray that we do not have to experience this again. As has been said earlier, I think we have had a lucky escape in western Victoria, which is due to a lot of effort and a lot of luck. We pray that we never see a day like that again.

**Mr DONNELLAN** (Narre Warren North) — I join with other members of this house today in the condolence motion for all Victorians who have been touched by these recent bushfires — the worst in the history of the state. Over the past two weeks the landscape of a large area of Victoria has been changed due to the ferocity of these devastating fires, some of which continue to burn even as of today. Apart from the many hectares of our pristine forest which have been destroyed, we have above all else sadly lost 210 of our fellow Victorians. We have all watched the daily reports on our televisions and witnessed the heartache that the families from these devastated areas are going through. I, like many other Victorians, have felt helpless, wanting to be able to help in any way I could but in reality being able to do very little except watch and pray for those involved.

I have felt immense sadness at seeing families who have lost everything. Their entire family history has turned to ashes and they have been left with only the clothes they were in when they escaped the fires — the only physical possessions saved. Worse still has been seeing the saddened faces of many family members who have suffered the ultimate heartache — losing loved ones. I cannot imagine the fear that parents caught up in the bushfires with their children must have felt as they became aware that the fire was going to hit them.

However, I have also felt immense pride in being a Victorian and witnessing how this state has pulled together to assist its own. People who are already

struggling financially have dug deep to help their affected neighbours, and numerous schools across the state have held various fundraising efforts resulting in the pocket money of thousands of schoolchildren being donated. We have watched how our state's large and small businesses, also struggling due to the current global economic situation, have donated millions of dollars and an equal value of in-kind support and services. Ultimately I am proud, too, to be an Australian and to see how the entire country has come to the assistance of our state. I acknowledge the hundreds of interstate police and firefighters who have come to the state's assistance.

These fires will emotionally affect thousands of our fellow Victorians for many years to come. It is now more necessary than ever that all community leaders rise up to afford every support to these people. Indeed many members of this house whose electorates have been attacked by fire have been touched personally; no doubt they even know people who have been devastated by the bushfires.

Three families in my electorate of Narre Warren North have lost their homes on Arranmore Crescent and Halluer Road, Harkaway, due to the severe grassfire that occurred on that day. Fortunately no deaths were involved, just the loss of houses.

At this time our state must acknowledge and thank the tremendous efforts of the emergency services men and women, especially the men and women of the Country Fire Authority and the Department of Sustainability and Environment, who have literally put their lives on the line to quell these fires and prevent further loss.

I would personally like to acknowledge the members of the Narre Warren North CFA brigade and local captain Shaun Trotter and his team, whose quick response prevented even more homes in this area being lost or, more importantly, any lives being lost. The local CFA brigades in my electorate, including Hallam, apart from sending members and vehicles to the worst affected areas around Kinglake, have been extremely busy with large fires in our backyard, including a large grassfire that occurred before 8 February at the Churchill Park golf club.

Unfortunately, as has been mentioned previously, Dave Balfour, a firefighter from the Australian Capital Territory, made the ultimate sacrifice when he was struck by a falling tree. Mr Balfour, who had recently been promoted to station chief, was no stranger to fighting bushfires, having fought in the Canberra bushfires of 2003. Mr Balfour is survived by his wife and three children, and I acknowledge the tremendous

sacrifice his family has made for this state. At these times we as a community take for granted that a vast majority of the men and women who have been and still are fighting these fires are volunteers. They leave the safety of their own homes to protect those of others. We should never forget the families of these volunteers, who for many hours, if not days, have to wait patiently at home, praying for their incredibly brave loved ones to return. Our state truly owes these men and women its sincere gratitude.

On a positive note, I have never felt that Victoria has been more at one than in dealing with this terrible tragedy. There has been very much a spiritual welding of this state. I have been at various fundraising events and seen the incredible generosity of the community. On Friday night I was with the Vietnamese community. Members of that community kept saying to everybody in the room that they just had to keep giving and giving and giving because of the incredible generosity of Australians to the Vietnamese people. I met one doctor who personally donated \$30 000 because she thought Victoria and Australia had given her community so much, and it was now time for the Vietnamese community to give something back.

Earlier on the Friday night I was with members of the Hindu community. Their attitude was much the same. They donated a large sum of money, which I need to give to the Red Cross at the moment.

I was very impressed when I was at a Sikh temple on the Hume Highway at Craigieburn on behalf of the member for Seymour. I met a gentleman called Mr Singh, who grew broccoli at Kinglake; his was a big farming exercise. He had lost everything. The Sikh community wanted to do a fundraiser for him, to get him back up again; to get his business up and going. His business was not insured, and many of his assets were not insured, but Mr Singh said, 'No, I want the fundraiser to be for the Kinglake community'. So the Sikh community was there on the day, raising money for Kinglake, not for Mr Singh. He said he would get on with it for himself. It is a tremendous attitude.

There is a local supermarket owner in Narre Warren North, a guy called Marco Civaritella. He owns the IGA. He has also given generously. The local Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has also donated incredibly generously. And I know from having spoken to BlueScope Steel that it has also donated generously.

It is amazing how this terrible tragedy has brought the community together. It has welded us back together spiritually, and I do not think Victoria has felt as one for

a long time. Out of this terrible tragedy, something marvellous has occurred.

**Mr MULDER** (Polwarth) — I rise to support the condolence motion before the house. On Saturday, 7 February, the rest of Australia and countries overseas saw Victoria at its worst, under attack by fire from one end of the state to the other. Horrendous bushfires resulted in mammoth loss of life and property. Lives were destroyed, towns were flattened and businesses were stopped in their tracks.

However, on 7 February and on the days that followed those looking on also saw something else. They saw Victorians at their best. There was a profound outpouring of grief, generosity, compassion, devotion, pride and loyalty. Never before have the people of this state been welded together with such a sense of solidarity. Victoria and Victorians stood tall in the face of adversity. A sense of disbelief and shock rocked the very foundations of the state in which we live and which we call home. Loved ones were lost, families were torn apart and many people experienced the anguish of not knowing the whereabouts of a missing loved one and the horror of realising the worst.

Black Saturday and the days that followed resembled a tug of war between the worst that nature could dish up and our emergency service staff and volunteers — the anchormen and women who stood between the remaining areas under threat and the elements. When I visited relief centres it was not hard to pick out the volunteers from the victims. The victims sat in a state of utter disbelief, trying to come to grips with the fact that their lives had changed forever.

Political parties, corporate Australia, service clubs and individual households banded together in an outpouring of generosity unseen before. Many of us felt helpless in that we wanted to do anything and everything to assist, knowing all along that it was the role of our emergency services personnel on our behalf to face the daunting task of fighting back the fires, tending to the wounded and providing the support. The commitment of police, the Country Fire Authority and State Emergency Service personnel, paramedics and staff from other departmental and government agencies as well as the caring provided by the Red Cross and other groups was never ending. There were endless hours of caring.

A single moment of consolation for my helplessness came during a Channel 9 news special covering the fires, when I found myself looking into large brown eyes I immediately recognised as belonging to my daughter Jess, a paramedic, who was cleaning out the eyes of a fire victim in the Kinglake area.

As the dust settles and families attempt to rebuild their lives, the search for answers begins. It is our obligation in memory of those 210 Victorians who lost their lives to ensure that we get it right and never have a repeat of anything like that again in our great state. The rules of growing up in the country are the same today as they have always been. They were drummed into us by my parents and by uncles who were bushmen: they were, 'Never turn your back on the sea and always respect the bush'. Life is a learning experience. We must not let the lessons learnt from this devastation be overridden by other pressing issues that may arise into the future.

On the Sunday following the devastation I visited CFA volunteers and farmers at Pomborneit, just west of Colac — the Places and the Boyds among other names and faces that are so well known throughout the area. They had fought a 1200-hectare fire in the same horrendous conditions that gripped the opposite side of the state. The fire threatened to spread into bushland to the south. If it had been the case and the wind change had not worked in their favour, I dread to think of the consequences for the south-west of the state and the Otways, an area identified as high risk at the start of the fire season.

The conditions were so bad on the Saturday that the firefighting helicopter stationed at Colac could not get off the ground due to the strong winds. Some of the CFA volunteers I spoke to on the Sunday had no knowledge of the extent of the devastation gripping other parts of the state. They had not had time to stop, lift their heads and inquire.

My constituents were the lucky ones. Not a single life was lost and not a single home was lost, all thanks to the work carried out by our CFA volunteers and career firefighters, police, farmers and other volunteer groups. Last Saturday was a clean-up day at Pomborneit, to pull down burnt fences in preparation for the fencing contractors, and such a day gives you an insight into what binds country communities together.

Thanks go out to the ever-reliable Peter and Mary Hay and those who helped pull that day together — men and women of all ages, the elderly, out there amongst the ashes working to rebuild the lives of neighbours, friends and relatives.

I refer to an article in the *Colac Herald* of 11 February headed 'Club's call for help to restore treasure'. I know the government has indicated it will provide a lot of assistance in rebuilding sporting facilities. The little cricket ground at Pomborneit is one example. The caption under a photo of Ray Place states:

Former club president and Pomborneit CFA firefighter Ray Place at Pomborneit recreation reserve yesterday. Last weekend's fires burnt most of the ground's surface rendering it unusable for the rest of the season.

The article says that they have no water, that the irrigation system is ruined, all the pumps are burnt, the fences are burnt and the ground itself has been badly damaged. I trust and hope the Pomborneit community's sporting facilities will benefit from the government's rebuilding program for country communities, because this community well and truly deserves to be taken care of.

Many thanks go to the brigades in my area for their great efforts and unselfish actions in defending lives and properties at Pomborneit and in many cases fighting the devastating fires in the north-east of the state. Brigades left our area from Barwon Downs, Beeac, Birregurra, Colac, Forrest, Gerangamete, Irrewarra, region 6 headquarters, Weering/Eurack, Wye River, Yeo, Yeodene, Bookaar, Boorcan, Camperdown, Chocolyn, Noorat, Pomborneit, Stonyford, Terang, Terang/Dixie, Tesbury, Weerite, Bostocks Creek, Carpendeit/South Purrumbete, Cobden, Cobrico, Ecklin, Elingamite/Glenfyne, Jancourt, Barongarook, Bungador, Carlisle River, Cororooke, Dreeite South, Gellibrand, Irrewillipe, Kawarren, Larpent, Nalangil, Otway, Swan Marsh, Warrion, Berrybank, Cressy, Darlington, Derrinallum, Duverney, Leslie Manor, Lismore, Mingay, Vite Vite North, Brucknell/Ayrford, Kennedys Creek, Lower Heytesbury, Port Campbell, Princetown, Scotts/Cowleys Creek, Simpson and Timboon. It just goes to show the extent of the CFA network in the electorate I represent. They are a great group of volunteers, unselfish in every single act they have undertaken over the last few weeks.

Those who are left behind will tell you that with the death of a loved one it is during the months following the service and the condolences that the full impact of the loss is realised. The loneliness sets in. Earlier the Leader of the Opposition spoke of the casserole event. We see so often in country Victoria when there is a sad loss or sad event that the mothers will rush out of their houses with a casserole to support those families. In my home I have often come to the front door and smelt the waft of something cooking coming from the kitchen only to be passed by my wife on the way out with a casserole to take to another family, and I miss out again. It is a common event in country communities. We all know that the loneliness sets in for people in the months to follow. We will find in communities such as Kinglake and others that have been badly affected that in the cold, wet winter months it will be devastating for people living in caravans and portable units. We must not forget them and must make sure that the support

continues and those casserole events continue into the future. It is so important for those people.

I understand a royal commission is under way, and we trust it will provide us with an understanding as to how we will move forward and prevent a recurrence of Black Saturday. Some of the key issues will affect my electorate and others. I know there has been a lot of discussion about the stay and defend policy and whether we should continue with it. I know conditions are very different for farmers in my electorate fighting grassfires compared to those in closely settled communities such as Forrest or Lavers Hill when 45-degree temperatures and 100-kilometre-an-hour winds occur. It is very different for farmers on the plains fighting grassfires because they are well equipped and well prepared for those circumstances. That issue has to be addressed in terms of the amount of information that is provided to people and what it actually means. I know of people who have moved into my area from the city and people who come up on weekends. I do not think they have any idea of the ferocity of a wildfire in the bush. We have to get that message out to them.

There are also issues in relation to roadside grazing permits. Farmers have come to me about roadside grazing permits that have expired, and when they have gone to renew the permit they have been put on hold for months while a botanist turns up with the local council officer to consider whether or not their stock can continue to graze on the roadside. In the meantime, if the farmer cuts the roadside grass he is up for a \$700 fine. We just cannot continue with those types of actions. I am not here today to prosecute this issue, but these matters must be dealt with because they are very important to the people in my electorate and others who live in rural communities.

There is also the issue of fuel reduction burning in the Otway Ranges. The Otways has been identified as one of the most dangerous spots in the state. Touch wood! We are all sitting on tenterhooks at the moment hoping we will not get a wildfire. It would be horrendous. I could have been standing up here telling the same sort of story as Ben Hardman, the member for Seymour, and many other members from my side of the house have told today, and I do not want that to happen. If we get through this summer, we have to do something between now and the following summer.

In closing I just say that I trust the Lord will guide the minds and hands of the policy-makers as we move forward. It is so important that we all get this right. I pass on the sympathies and condolences of all the citizens of the Polwarth electorate, who have responded

in such a generous manner to all those affected by the horrendous fires.

**Mr INGRAM** (Gippsland East) — I rise today to extend my condolences to all those impacted by the devastating fires that have swept the state and to support the motion before the house. To the families of those who lost their lives as well as to their friends, neighbours, workmates and community members who have grieved and still are grieving, I pass on my condolences and those of my constituents. To all the survivors of the fires, some of whom have lost their possessions, houses, memories and businesses, and to those still recovering from injuries received, I offer on my own behalf and on behalf of my constituents ongoing support, understanding and best wishes for the future.

To the local members of this Parliament, both in this place and the other, who represent electorates that have been impacted by the fire, I offer my understanding. I know that all members of this place have a deep passion for their electorates and the people who live in them. To have a disaster of this magnitude wreak havoc on one's electorate and constituents tears at the fabric of one's heart and at the spirit of the individual and does such damage to the community. I know that members of Parliament bear some of that pain and the grief of their constituents. The public show of resilience and spirit is strong, but my experience is that when the smoke clears, the trees regrow and the media interest and public focus shift to the next crisis, the attention to detail will wane and the support will become even more important. Affected individuals and communities will require really strong support from government, from local members and from the broader community.

Black Saturday will go down in memory like other fires before it. On Sunday, 8 February, a number of events were taking place in my electorate and I had reason to again visit the local Department of Sustainability and Environment offices for a fire briefing. The Dargo-White Timber Spur fire was in my electorate. Ben Rankin was the incident controller, and our discussions on that day centred on the devastation of other parts of the state. Many members of this place would know that two previous major fires — in 2002–03 and 2006–07 — destroyed over 1 million hectares. In each case a large portion of what was destroyed was in my electorate. Those fires destroyed houses, livestock, businesses and thousands of kilometres of fencing, and their aftermath is still being felt in my communities. The effect of those fires still traumatises many who were impacted by them, and one cannot go into those communities without recognising that there is still pain in their aftermath. These latest

fires will only bring back those memories even more strongly.

Members of Parliament representing Gippsland have already recognised the ABC Gippsland team, including Gerard Callinan and all the staff who work with him. I too pass on my thanks to the emergency services broadcaster.

While this year's fires have had only a limited impact on my electorate — as I said, at White Timber Spur — I will illustrate their effect by referring to one incident. The property of one owner in the area was impacted on by the 2002–03 fire and again by the 2006–07 fire, and although he thought he was safe this time around, I recently ran into him in the street as he was going up to repair damage to his watering systems, tank stands and other infrastructure. Three fires in a decade have impacted his property. The earlier fires were in remote, isolated, rugged country.

Thankfully the fire on Black Saturday ran into the areas burnt by the 2002–03 fires and basically was stopped in its tracks. In those two previous major fire events we were lucky, so to speak, that the outcomes that materialised on Black Saturday were not visited on my communities. In those earlier fires the tragic loss of life was limited to two: a firefighter in the north-east, who died from a flash flood in the aftermath, and one other person, who died in an accident while fighting the Seaton fire.

The loss of houses, farm buildings, stock and fencing is devastating to these communities, but all these items can be replaced. Whilst it is very tough on families and there has been difficulty, the loss of life that has occurred is a tragedy of a different proportion. These fires paint another very dark chapter in the history of fire in Victoria. Black Saturday was a day of tragic, almost unbelievable horror. I and other Victorians followed the reports on Sunday and Monday, and they still haunt me. My office, like those of most members of Parliament, is busy; the phones ring and people come in. As I sat in my office on the Monday the phones were silent and people did not come in, because their grief was focused on the rest of the state. Also I think their problems paled into insignificance compared to the problems faced by people impacted upon by these fires.

In previous fires, apart from a small number of extreme fire weather days, we really got away with it. I will explain a couple of incidents that occurred. Today people have talked about the day turning black. On Australia Day 2003 I was at Genoa, 250 kilometres from where the fire impacted at Omeo, in my

electorate. The day turned black. Cars and everything were covered with embers from 250 kilometres away. A number of towns were hit by those fires. The devastation was extreme and the fires just as intense. Places like Black Mountain, Wulgulmerang and Suggan Buggan were towelled up in one day, and Omeo and other towns burnt up on other days. We were probably lucky that the loss of life we have seen with the present fires did not also occur then.

In the 2007 fires, Bairnsdale went black at 2 o'clock in the afternoon. The potential of that fire, had the weather conditions reached what was forecast on those days, would have resulted in similar things happening. Thankfully at that time the forecast wind and temperature levels were never met, and we did not have any fires in my electorate like those experienced this time by other members of this place. I spoke to Ben Rankin of the CFA, who said that if those conditions had occurred in my area, given the timber surrounding my communities, we would have experienced similar loss of life, which would have added to the tragedy of these events.

My communities demanded change after the 2003 and 2007 fires, as some communities will do after these fires. Things can be done to better prepare our communities for fire. Unfortunately sometimes it takes an absolute disaster to force those changes. That is a debate for another day, and I will continue to add my voice to the discussion about solutions that need to be found, particularly in addressing the risk of living with and managing fire in a modern community. The fires are still going and still threatening our state. The summer fire season still has a long time to run. The risk is still great because of the extreme weather conditions we have had this year and the prolonged drought. I pray that the loss of life and the grief being felt now is limited to the current devastation and loss and that there will be no further loss of life.

To the CFA volunteers and to all local, interstate and overseas emergency services agencies, I give my thanks not just for their work fighting this summer's fires but for their great work in previous years protecting my houses and lives in my communities. One cannot think of this event without a deep and haunting sorrow.

As members of Parliament we visit halls and schools around our electorates and see the honour boards from the First World War. We lost almost an entire generation of young men. I am sure that a large number of honour boards will show the names of lives lost — loved ones, the old, the young, mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, friends, neighbours and workmates — in all the towns and communities that have felt the fury

of these fires. Even more than the 1939 and Ash Wednesday fires, these fires will be forever etched in the history of the state, and I know Victorian communities will forever remember the loss of life.

**Ms GRALEY** (Narre Warren South) — I rise in sadness and in hope to support the condolence motion on behalf of the people of the electorate of Narre Warren South. The 2009 bushfires have been the most extreme in Victoria's history. They will be recorded as the worst natural disaster known in Australia's history, and they are still about us. Over 200 people have lost their lives; my deepest sympathies go to those who have lost loved ones. It is all beyond belief but we have seen and heard the fires with our very own eyes and ears. As so many survivors and witnesses have told us, they were like something they had never seen or heard before.

What many people may not know and will find hard to believe is that on that same Black Saturday when the towns of Kinglake, Marysville and Flowerdale were ablaze, when pastures, forests and farms were erased, when country folk were fighting shoulder to shoulder and community members were fleeing their homes, people in my electorate of Narre Warren South, in the stifling heat of the outer suburbs of Melbourne, without any warning, without any preparation, found themselves combating a ferocious fire.

On 7 February 2009 the bushfires came to Langbourne Drive, Narre Warren South, in the Melbourne metropolitan area. Whilst this is hard to believe — it would be one of the worst nightmares for we urban dwellers — we must now face the fact that it is probably our new reality. It was 'the scariest bloody thing you ever saw in your life', said Narre Warren resident Janeen Cooke.

The fact that the fire raced across the power easement and roared down the quiet straight of Langbourne Drive like a bullet train was not that widely reported but the images of the distraught, disbelieving Narre Warren families did make it on to the TV news bulletins, spliced between pictures from devastated areas some way away. On TV the people suffering from the fire all looked much the same irrespective of their fire-ravaged location. Their pain and dismay was on their faces for all to see. 'We feel empty, devastated and completely numb. We have lost everything', said Narre Warren resident Karen Randall. I expect that everyone is feeling fragile enough, but now that fire has arrived on Melbourne's doorstep, we all cannot help but feel more vulnerable contemplating that near proximity.

The fires destroyed six houses and damaged eight others. Six families lost their homes, all their possessions and their pets. ‘It’s just ashes on the ground’, said Tash Miszkowicz. As Stuart Randall said:

Everything’s gone: valuables, memorabilia, kids’ trophies. We’ve pretty much walked out with nothing ... a lifetime of memories.

But we’ve still got our seven children, and at the end of the day life is more important.

We have heard something like that said so many times by people in many places in the last few weeks. It is something that each and every one of us needs to be thankful for every day — that is, the gift of life. I imagine that those who have felt the fury of the fires in their faces and are still alive to tell the tale are relieved and thankful for all they have, but the weight of their experience and the scale of the events that engulfed their lives is a heavy load.

I know in talking to my constituents that they did not know if they could return to their street. We are fortunate that in Victoria, our government and our public service, our councils, our case managers and volunteers, and our fellow community members are there to guide these people as they seek to weigh up their futures.

Narre Warren South is brimming with new home owners. It has grown like Topsy, with houses popping up everywhere and families moving in every day. I like this aspect of my electorate a lot. It is in many ways a symbol of hope, of people working hard to build a better future for their children, to have a lovely home for the kids to grow up in, to bring their friends home, to and have a party or two. I love the spicy aromas of curry, barbecues and kebabs that welcome you to a new neighbourhood.

When I visited the fire site the morning after the fire with the mayor of the City of Casey, Cr Geoff Ablett, it was just so daunting so disappointing, so alarming and so utterly unbelievable. The houses, homes so emblematic of Narre Warren South, were in ruins. They were gone in minutes, and the stench of the smoke and the debris was everywhere. Some people were sorting through what was left, looking for jewellery. I have seen this many times in news bulletins — the search for the old watch, the anniversary bracelet, mum’s rings. I have wondered how they were finding the strength to look, but I realised as I watched and talked with the family that they were searching for mementos of the past — good times, a birthday gift, a dowry piece, a congratulatory present. They were objects alive with memories of love, and I can understand those tears of

joy and some relief when they were found. All was not lost.

We must take the time to grieve for what we have lost. In Narre Warren South what we have lost, apart from homes and possessions, is our innocence, our security, our gay abandon. The belief that it could not happen to us is no longer the truth. The harsh reality of life now is that if it could happen in Narre Warren South, it could happen anywhere. We now think, as one resident said, ‘It could so easily have happened to us’. A lot of people no longer feel safe because fire has visited the suburbs.

In this harsh, dry new environment we must not delay in preparing for the challenges we face with climate change and fire. Our climate is in the process of reinventing itself, and we must respond by changing, too. We cannot be daunted, we must not delay, we cannot afford to be defeated. I applaud the establishment of the royal commission with such broad terms of reference.

The people of Narre Warren South have rallied. Firstly, I extend my appreciation for all the hard work of the local CFA (Country Fire Authority) members, the police and emergency services. It has been an outstanding effort. Five fire trucks and more than 25 firefighters fought the blaze. Four firefighters were treated for smoke-related illnesses. The group officer for the Casey group of brigades, Shane Keen, an avid and tireless worker, said last week that the police and the CFA’s fire investigation unit has not ruled out arson. Yet again, this is so hard to believe.

To the support agencies that moved in promptly to help out the survivors, I offer my heartfelt thanks. The City of Casey officers, Red Cross ladies and the Salvation Army have all worked very hard to ease the pain and make things a little easier. At the relief centre which appeared from nowhere it was the cup of tea and an arm around the shoulder, new underwear and toiletries and a few phone calls to loved ones that got it all started.

I am grateful that those working at the relief centre have done this with utmost respect for people’s individual circumstances and privacy. Lots of cotton wool combined with hard yakka have seen many families resettled, kids back to school and, with gentle guidance and generous support, making future plans. I wish them the best of luck. As I have relayed many times, we will do everything in our power to help, if needed.

Narre Warren South, as a new community, sometimes feels so busy. It has grown so fast and has been so quickly put together that members of the community

have not quite had enough time to know each other as well as they would like to. What I have witnessed since this disaster has been an overwhelming, indeed inspirational, example of a community coming together for each other.

We have seen Victorians open up their hearts, homes and purses and give generously. We have seen people work hard, work long hours and spend time away from their loved ones so that others can survive and plan for the future of their families — unconditional acts of human kindness. We have witnessed undeniable acts of courage and bravery from the men and women whose only reward is the privilege of helping others, of being there when it matters.

In Narre Warren South neighbours formed human chains with buckets and containers filled with water to stop fire engulfing the homes of people who were not at home. Russell Carvell has been hailed for his efforts. He ran to alert every resident in the street before working tirelessly for hours to protect homes. Allan Appleman was one of the neighbours who fought to save the home of Sue and Geoff Herbert, who were at a wedding when the fire tore through Narre Warren South. Mr Appleman said:

After I saw my house was safe and under control I ran to theirs, as I knew they weren't home. Instinct kicked in and I stayed there to fight off the flames.

This was not just a survival instinct coming to the fore, it was the true essence of humankind — kind-heartedness.

It must be said — and as politicians we are often sheepish about responding emotionally and are often reluctant to use the four-letter word — we have seen great outpourings of love, and we are all the better for it.

Last Saturday the Amberley Park shopping centre hosted the Langbourne Drive bushfire fundraiser organised by Linda Tomich. She thought she would make a collection and said, 'We can do better than this', and they did. She and her team of volunteers put on one big event. Mark Dickinson said, 'I am just a bloke from Hampton Park wanting to do something to help', and with a firm grip on the microphone urged us all to get involved and to give and give again. Local businesses generously supported the festa: FoodWorks, Krispy Kreme, Auscorp Entertainment, Hornet Press, Bendigo Bank, SuperSealing, Pony Music and Berwick Chrysler Jeep. Local stalwarts, the Lions Club of Narre Warren and the combined churches, helped with the catering. And the Narre Warren fire brigade were there. There were lots of pats on the back for them from the

thousands of neighbours who came out in a huge show of support.

I have never seen Narre Warren South look better. Despite the sad reason for organising such an event, the smiles on everyone's faces reflected the joy of helping others in a time of need — \$33 000 was raised, again unbelievable but true.

The state of Victoria takes its name from the stoic Queen Victoria. Victoria is the female form for Victor. They both mean victory. As Victorians we now face many challenges. We will need to work together to repair and rebuild. As our Premier has declared, we will rebuild. This will be one of our greatest victories and a lasting tribute to those who have lost everything. Together Victoria!

The survivors in Narre Warren South will have an opportunity to reconstruct their houses, go shopping at Fountain Gate to buy new things, get back to school with friends and celebrate future graduations, weddings and new births. It will never be the same again for those families, and it will take time, patience and lots of love, but they will have our support and they too will be victorious.

When I have faced my own battles I have taken great comfort when people have said to me, 'You are in my prayers'. I have heard it a lot recently too. To those suffering, especially my Narre Warren South families, I give you my favourite prayer, my comfort prayer:

Though bowed  
You are not broken  
Though stretched  
You're strong, my friend  
You are resilient like a willow  
You'll find your spring again  
Though your branches  
Now weigh heavy  
Your roots go deep and true  
This is just a change of season  
God has better plans for you.

**Mr WELLER** (Rodney) — As the member for Rodney and a 30-year veteran of the CFA, I rise today in support of a motion that reflects one of the saddest times we have ever known and to extend my support and heartfelt wishes to the men, women and children directly affected by Victoria's bushfire tragedy.

The devastation inflicted at so many beautiful places across this state, including near Redesdale on the southern end of my electorate, has been enormous, and my heart goes out to all those who have lost loved ones, their homes and their livelihoods. This is

unquestionably the greatest tragedy that our country has ever seen.

From the people of Rodney, we grieve for all those affected, and we offer our support to help in any way we can. No words can adequately describe the devastation we as a state witnessed on that dark day of 7 February and the weeks that have followed. This has been a disaster of monumental proportions, and it has rocked the very core of each and every one of us. This tragedy will have an enormous impact on so many people for many years to come, and it is important that we all support each other in any way we can through the challenges ahead.

Whilst the large majority of the Rodney electorate has been spared by these disastrous bushfires, the fire at Redesdale on the very southern end of my electorate destroyed 12 houses, burnt 10 000 hectares and killed thousands of sheep and other animals. We have been fortunate in not suffering any loss of human lives in our region, but so many of us have friends, family or colleagues who have lost loved ones in other parts of the state.

On 9 February, two days after that fateful Black Saturday, I spent some time meeting with Country Fire Authority and Department of Sustainability and Environment personnel involved in fighting the fires at Redesdale. There is no doubt that the efforts of the Country Fire Authority and the Department of Sustainability and Environment to black out the eastern flank of the fire saved the Redesdale township from direct threat when the wind changed direction on Saturday evening. Houses, land, stock and wildlife were destroyed, but had it not been for the quick thinking and courageous efforts in the most unforgiving of circumstances, the cost of the Redesdale fire would have been far greater. I cannot speak highly enough of my admiration for the amazing efforts of the many volunteer firefighters who risked their lives to battle the blaze and the many blazes burning out of control across Victoria. We will forever be indebted to them.

That same day I attended a public information meeting at the Metcalfe community hall, where I met firsthand with residents directly affected by the fire. I also attended a community barbecue at Redesdale several days later, and on both occasions I was amazed and heartened by the resilience and attitude of those people in the community who had lost so much.

I am pleased to say that the disaster plan and the response worked extremely well in the case of the Redesdale bushfire. Representatives from the Department of Sustainability and Environment, the

Country Fire Authority, the police, Telstra, the Department of Human Services, the Department of Primary Industries, the Red Cross, the Salvos, Loddon Mallee Housing and Centrelink were all present at the Metcalfe hall. They were there meeting the needs of all the people affected by the fire. The Victorian Farmers Federation was also quick to respond by arranging loads of hay for stock that no longer had any grass. They are also busy arranging fencing teams to rebuild the fences. The North Central Catchment Management Authority will be using the drought forces to help rebuild the fences in the Redesdale area.

I cannot speak highly enough of the emergency services crews and of all ancillary support agencies who have played such a crucial role in managing this terrible tragedy. The efforts by the CFA, police and DSE have been outstanding, as has the work of organisations such as the Red Cross, the Salvation Army and St Vincent de Paul.

We must not forget or underestimate the massive support shown by businesses, individuals and community, service and sporting groups right across the country. They have been tirelessly fundraising to support people through this terrible ordeal. In my electorate of Rodney people have reacted with offers of support in many ways, through donating blood, money, clothing, food and providing professional assistance. People have come together through the concerts, the fetes and other fundraising activities to support the bushfire relief appeal, and their generosity has been absolutely overwhelming.

To give some idea of the variety of support and of the generosity, businesses have been donating their entire profits from a day of trade; schools have been raising funds through fetes, casual clothes days; hotels have been running raffles; farmers have been donating hay and chaff; and transport companies have been donating trucks to cart the hay and the goods. Last week Echuca-Moama residents raised \$6500 at a variety concert. A fundraiser at Echuca's Taras Hall Hotel raised more than \$16 000. The bushfire appeal fair at Cohuna raised another \$8000. Spectators and competitors at the Echuca-Moama Southern 80 ski race, which was abandoned when ambulance and paramedic crews were called away to the fires, raised another \$20 000 to support the bushfire relief appeal.

Hann and McKenzie property group in Kyabram acted as a drop-off point for donations for residents and businesses in the town, and local transport company, Scotts Transport, delivered two semitrailer loads of goods for the relief centre at Alexandra. Next month a fire relief concert will be held in town to raise money

for the cause. In Rochester the local fire brigade has been running a donation drive and has been overwhelmed by the level of support shown by businesses and individuals in the community. Even young children are getting behind the cause, with one six-year-old boy donating his teddies to children affected by the fire so they will have something nice to sleep with at night. In Heathcote residents have rallied to support their neighbours in the fire-ravaged area of Redesdale with donations of money, clothes, toys, goods and grocery items.

The neighbourhood house in Heathcote is rounding up volunteers and equipment for its rebuilding program to help Redesdale farmers with fencing around fire-affected properties; it is distributing furniture and other goods to those who lost their homes. Despite the devastation at Redesdale following the fire which ripped through the area, the community plans to hold its own fundraising event to raise money for the bushfire appeal, with a bush dance planned for Redesdale this Friday night, 27 February.

It would be impossible to list here today every business, community group and organisation which has supported the bushfire appeal, but I take this opportunity to thank each and every one of them for their amazing generosity.

Many people have been deeply affected by the Victorian bushfire tragedy, and many have been visiting my office to offer their support to the victims and their families and friends by signing the bushfire message and condolence book. On behalf of those people and the entire Rodney electorate, I would like to pay tribute to the brave men and women of the CFA (Country Fire Authority) the Department of Sustainability and Environment, the police and all ancillary agencies for the extraordinary role they have played and continue to play in this catastrophic emergency. Let us not forget that as we speak fires are still burning in many parts of Victoria. Many courageous men and women are still out there, putting their lives on the line.

There will be many lessons to learn from this terrible tragedy. I offer my support to the Victorian bushfire royal commission in its search for answers.

**Debate adjourned on motion of Ms PIKE (Minister for Education).**

**Debate adjourned until next day.**

**House adjourned 7.02 p.m.**

